

# **Calvin Brown**

**Urban Planner | Cycling and Pedestrian Advocate**

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**Second Ave Subway Mapping Project**

**Department of City Planning Area Map**

**Dangerous Corridors in East Long Island City**

**Safer Streets for East Long Island City**  
General Recommendations

**33rd St. Sky Center**

Vision for an improved 33rd St. - Rawson St. 7 line station

**Visualizing Calmer Intersections**

Thomson Avenue, Van Dam Street, and Queens Boulevard

**The Death and Life of Great American Cities Revisited**

Published in the Hunter College Urban Review spring 2017 edition

# Second Ave Subway Mapping Project

## About The Project

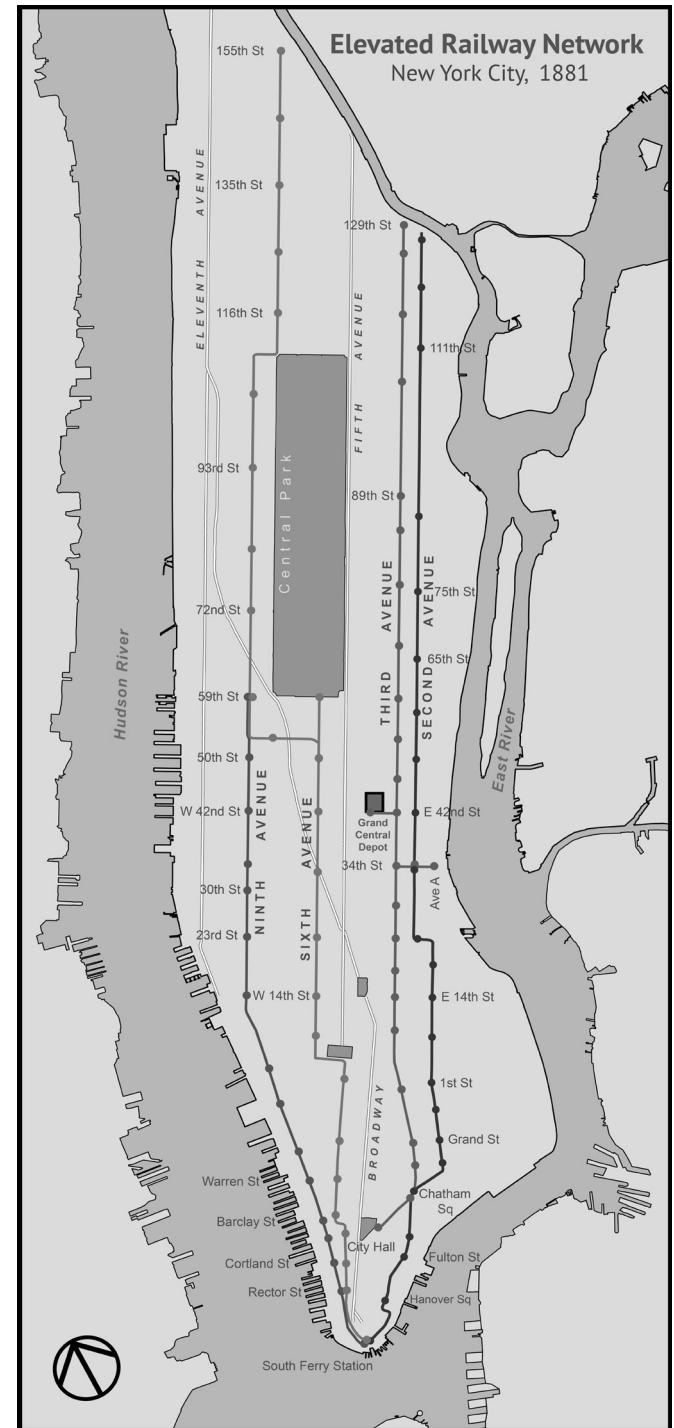
**Client:** Philip Plotch, Director of MPA Program, Saint Peter's University Commission for 10 custom maps for the client's forthcoming book about the Second Ave. Subway, to be published by Cornell University Press. Each map highlights specific aspects of the project. The map to the right shows the elevated railway network existing in 1881.

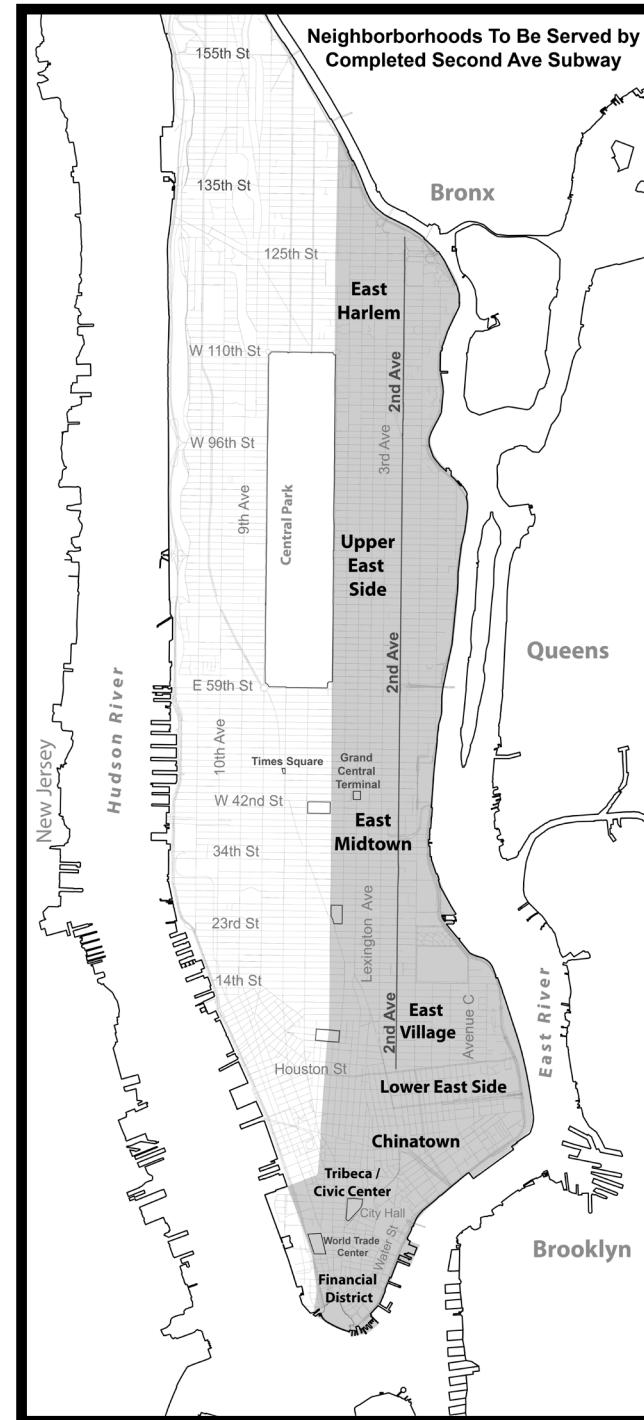
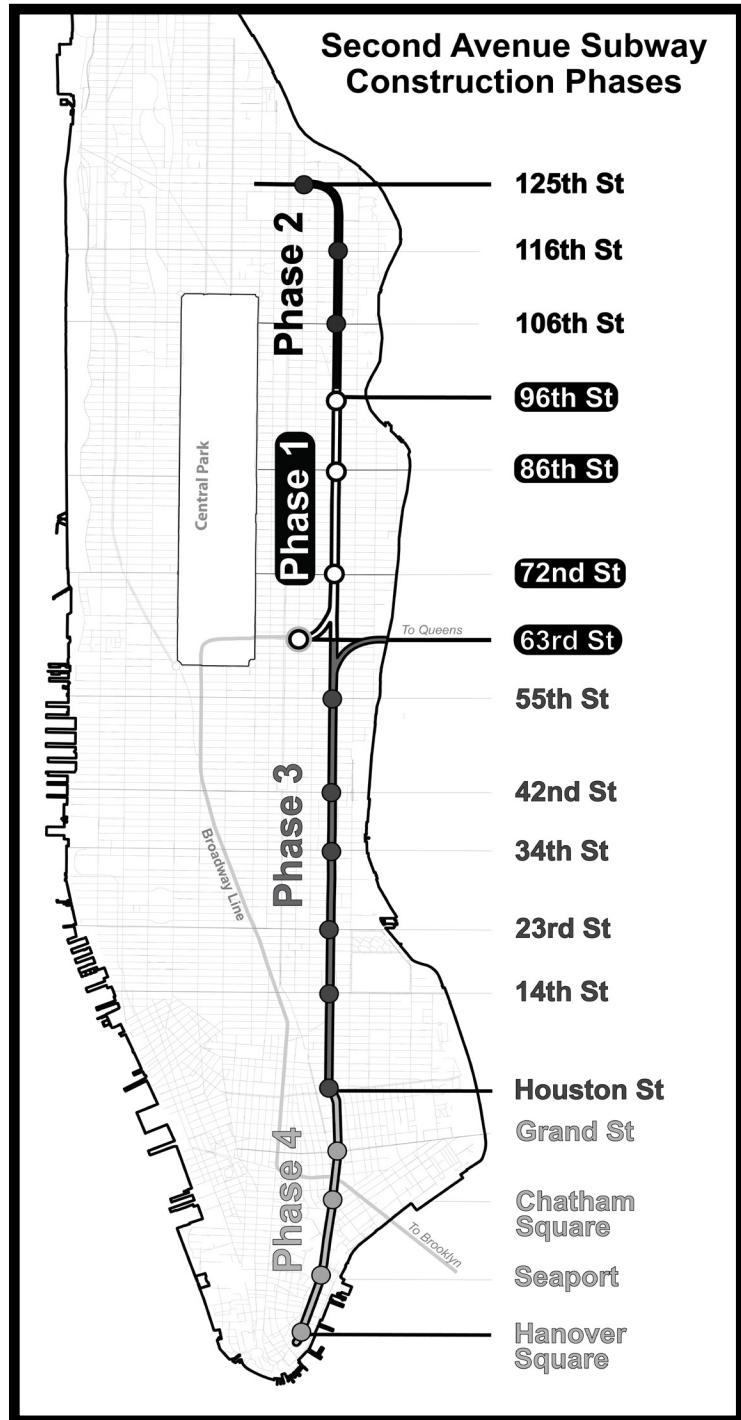
## Process

The maps were made using open data created by New York City, and custom data digitized using historical maps and maps found in transit planning documents. Subway planning documents. Data is reviewed and modified in QGIS. Next, they're exported to SVG format using the "svgis" command line tool. I then use Adobe Illustrator to style the data to create clear, aesthetically-pleasing maps that adhere to the needs and limitations of the publisher and printer, and to convey the author's narrative.

## Challenges

Creating high-quality maps involves many technical and design decisions. This project was challenging in two noteworthy ways: Producing vector drawings from the geodata, and preserving integrity regardless of how they are printed. The first challenge was that QGIS insufficiently converts geodata to vector drawings. After consulting with other map makers, I used "svgis" on the command line to quickly and perfectly convert the data. Secondly, the publisher has been advising me on how to prepare maps that print well under a variety of printing methods.

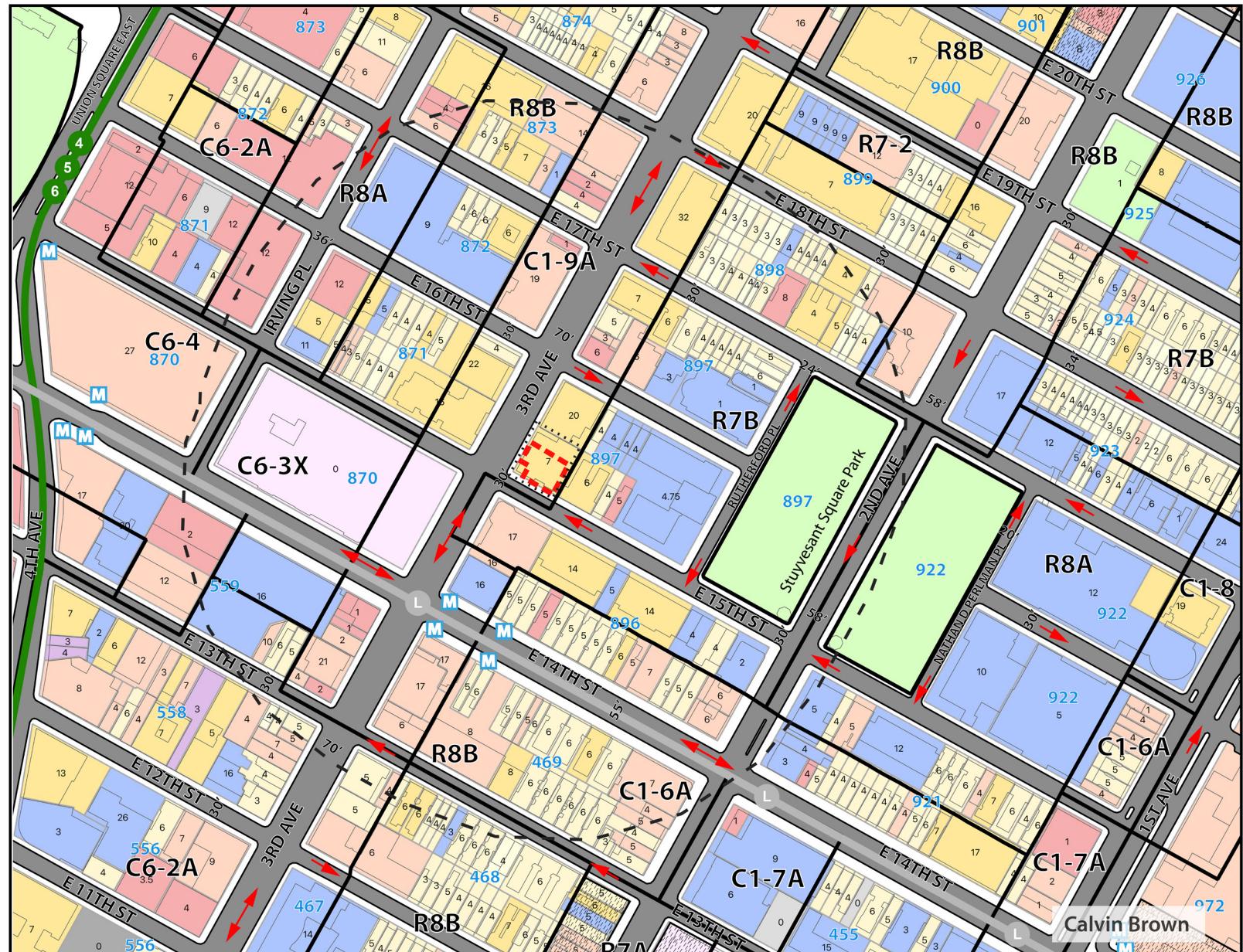




# Area Map

## Borough Block, Lot

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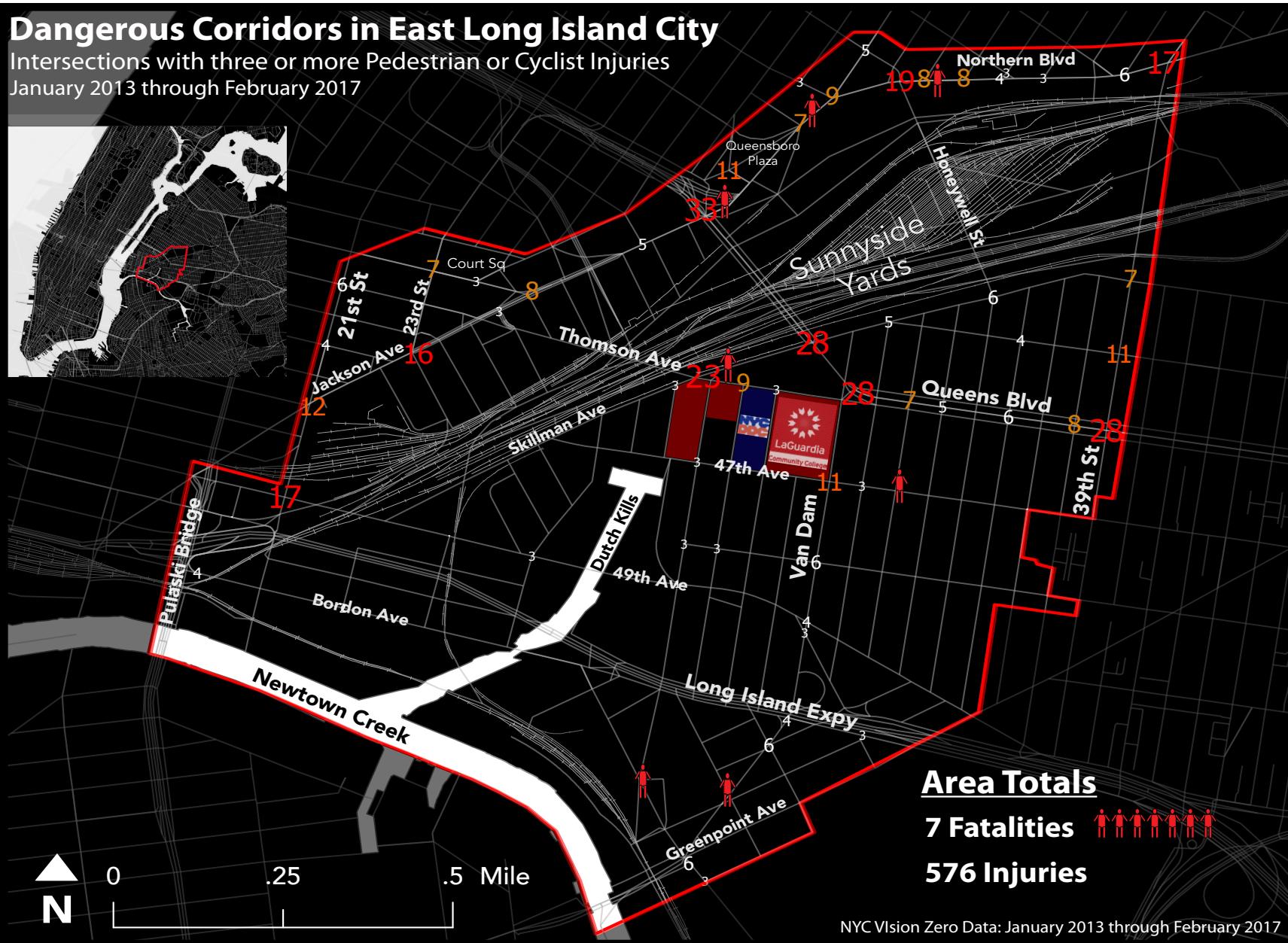
## QGIS, Illustrator

This is a DCP area map I made using open data and following the standards set forth by the NYC Department of City Planning.

# Dangerous Corridors in East Long Island City

Intersections with three or more Pedestrian or Cyclist Injuries

January 2013 through February 2017



## Area Totals

7 Fatalities



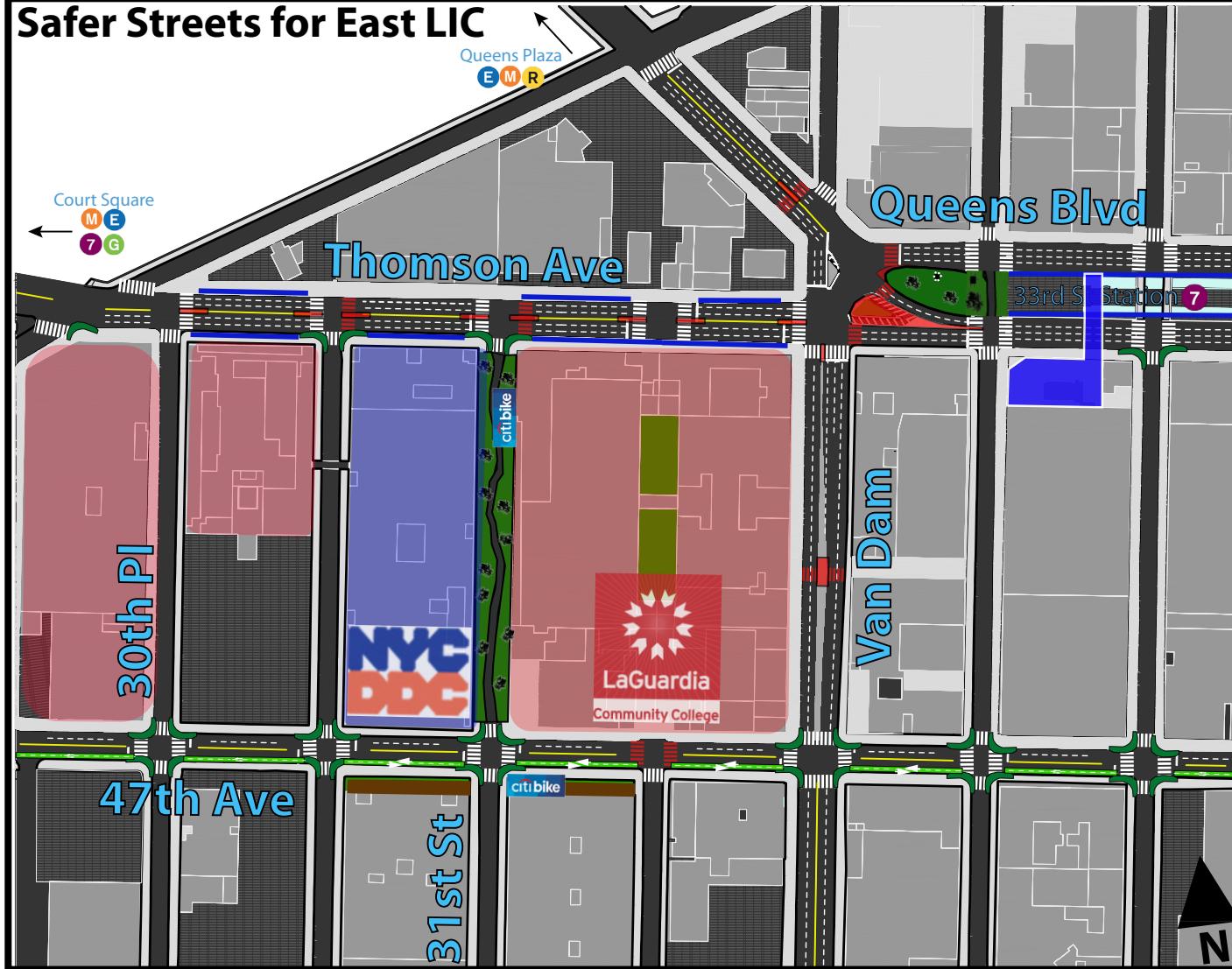
576 Injuries

NYC Vision Zero Data: January 2013 through February 2017

## GIS, Illustrator

In this project I used NYC Vision Zero data and ArcGIS to map pedestrian and cyclist injuries and deaths throughout the city. I am confident in working with large datasets to tell compelling stories and answer complex questions. I am also capable of developing spatial decision support systems to help prioritize projects based on a set of weighted criteria.

## Safer Streets for East LIC



## Redesign Elements



**Standardize** Van Dam St, Thomson Ave, and Queens Blvd. The complex geometry of the intersection is confusing and dangerous for all users.



**Create curb extensions.** Curb extensions extend pedestrian space into the parking lane, shortening crossing distances and making vehicles and people more visible to each other.



**Create a campus** and quality public space by creating shared streets that prioritize people.



**Widen** narrow, high-traffic sidewalks. **Remove** awkward barriers.



**Calm Traffic** and **improve access and safety** at dangerous intersections by lowering crossing distances and adding pedestrian islands and crosswalks.



**Connect** the area to the existing bicycle network. **Implement** robust, dedicated bicycle infrastructure.

## AutoCAD, GIS, Illustrator

I developed a set of recommendations that address the traffic and pedestrian safety issues in the area surrounding LaGuardia Community College. To create the graphic I imported DolTT planimetric street geometries into AutoCAD before drawing all of the missing elements and road markings, which I measured and recorded in a survey of the area.

## 33rd St. Sky Center

A Vision for the Boulevard of Life

Transit Center | Rooftop Park | Office Space  
Cafe and Bar | Commercial | Social Space...



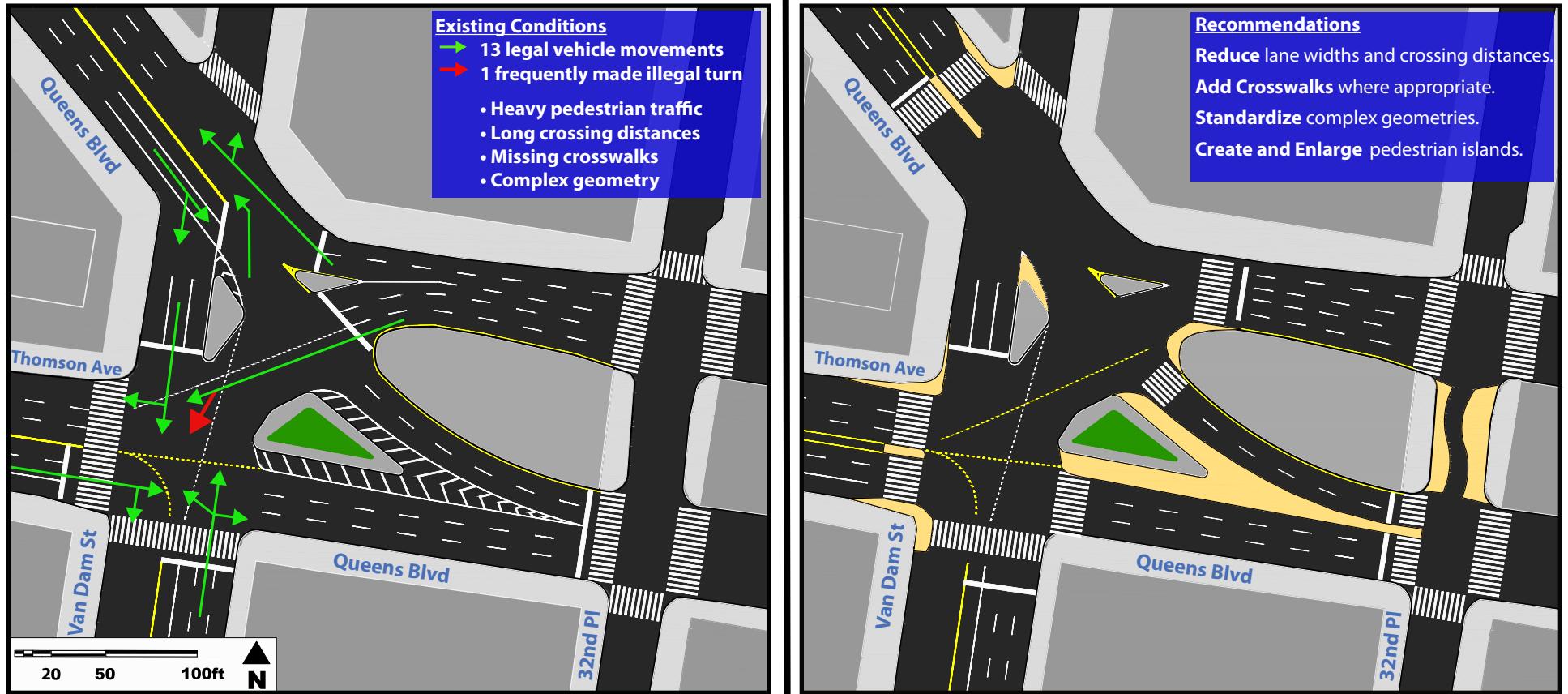
Photo by Daniel Hollister

## Sketchup, Photoshop, Illustrator

Responding to a number of issues in the area surrounding the 33rd St. - Rawson St. 7 line stop, including long pedestrian wait times, dangerous crossing conditions at Queens Blvd, a lack of green space (which comprises less than .2% of the total area), and a lack of commercial amenities, I envisioned a public-private transit-oriented development that mitigates all of these problems. I built the model of the structure and matched it to the photo using Sketchup. I then used photoshop to add greater detail to the model and scene.

# Visualizing Calmer Intersections

## Thomson Avenue, Van Dam Street, and Queens Boulevard



## AutoCAD, GIS, Illustrator

Over thirty pedestrians and cyclists have been injured in crashes at this complex juncture since January 2013. In this project I envisioned small, pragmatic adjustments and calming measures to mitigate the severe safety issues and pedestrian unfriendliness of the intersection. I referenced NACTO design guides and was careful to ensure that the number of travel lanes was not reduced. To make the graphics I exported DolTT planimetric road geometries to CAD and drafted missing pedestrian islands and road markings using measurements that I took on-site.

# The Death and Life of Great American Cities Revisited

By Calvin Brown

I first read *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* when I was living in the historic center of Madrid. I picked up the book, translated into Spanish, at a nearby library, and I stopped at a street cafe on my way home to begin reading. Occasionally glancing beyond the paperback as I read, I quickly recognized the intimate urbanism that Jacobs describes so vividly within Madrid's human-scale, pedestrian oriented streets, much more so than in my hometown of Chicago. While every page of Jacobs' book carefully deconstructs the many social components and mechanics of traditional city streets, I began to wonder how applicable her principles were to the car-dominated, violence-plagued streets I had left behind in Chicago.

Jane Jacobs was a brilliant urban thinker who not only produced powerful, controversial, and lucid interpretations of city design, life, and economics, but also successfully organized her community against large-scale, destructive urban projects and altered the path of urban planning. Upon further investigation, however, it becomes clear that her interpretations of the city – and her prescriptive cures for the ills that New York City faced – are not as well-founded or practical as one would expect given the prominent stature her work enjoys in the field of urban planning.

In this essay, I discuss two problems inherent to Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and challenge its conclusions as applied to both Jacobs' era and the present. First, I argue that Jacobs' work fundamentally misunderstands the social forces underpinning the landscape-changing mega-projects that the author so despised and rallied against. I also argue that Jacobs' conclusions are premised on the existence of a cooperative community of individuals

sharing similar values, when in fact the modern city is often mired in pervasive contention, distrust, and institutionalized racism.<sup>1</sup>

## SHAPING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

In the introduction to *The Death and Life*, Jacobs states that the book "is an attack on the principles and aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding."<sup>2</sup> The focus of her attack is on the government planning apparatuses of American cities, which she believes were responsible for the urban renewal projects that razed old sections of cities and replaced them with dull modernist towers that "sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of city life."<sup>3</sup> For Jacobs, urban vitality resides on a bustling street, an essential element in a thriving neighborhood. In her view, it is traditional, smaller-scale, mixed-use buildings that foster such urban vitality, while virtually any other urban form – government high-rise or otherwise – will inevitably sap it.

In *Death and Life*, Jacobs focuses much of her criticism on the government planners responsible for large-scale public housing projects, arguing that free market solutions can better improve the lives of urban slum dwellers than the government's towers-in-the-park. In lieu of new construction, Jacobs proposes the government instead subsidize private market construction and housing for the needy, arguing that rent subsidies would encourage the gradual rebuilding and rehabilitation of the city's overcrowded slum districts. Government housing construction, in contrast, requires cataclysmic slum clearance that shreds the urban fabric, and its new high-rises push out the community's most-successful residents with income limits, ensuring continued neighborhood

poverty. Jacobs believes that a rent subsidization program would foster organic, gradual community improvement on the community's own terms, which she saw as the most viable means of "unslumming" an area.<sup>3</sup> Preserving the existing built environment, meanwhile, would also preserve the existing community in the neighborhood and allow for vibrant street life.

Herbert Gans, the prominent sociologist and a contemporary of Jacobs', highlights some major flaws in the causality and assumptions of Jacobs' arguments in his essay, "Urban Vitality and the Fallacy of Physical Determinism." Gans argues that the robust street life Jacobs attributes to the physical form of neighborhood has little to do with urban design; rather, it's the product of the working-class culture of residents in the area, who reserve their homes for the family and socialize outdoors. Middle-class socializing, in contrast, happens within the home, and built environments informed by middle-class attitudes (whether occupied by the middle class or not) often reflect this. According to Gans, "new forms of residential building ... are not products of orthodox planning theory, but expressions of the middle-class culture which guides the housing market and which planners also serve."<sup>4</sup> Ironically, it was the free market that Jacobs lionized – one dictated by middle-class tastes, land values, construction costs, and profit-driven developers – that helped create the modernist superblocks she spent her later years rallying against.

## QUESTIONS OF COMMUNITY

While Jacobs' misplaced faith in free-market solutions to urban social problems is troubling,

perhaps the greater shortcoming of *The Death and Life* is the author's narrow and unrealistic concept of community. In Jacobs' view, crime and public safety have been reduced to issues of urban design, which ignores the structural social problems underpinning these issues. In his essay, "Jane Jacobs, Andy Warhol, and the Kind of Problem a Community Is," Timothy Mennel interrogates Jacobs' simplistic conception of community with a pointed rhetorical question: "Where in [Jacobs'] idealized neighborhoods do sad and angry men hover in bars and get into fights?"<sup>5</sup>

Jacobs also fails to acknowledge the reality of fragmented urban societies, those in which different communities come into conflict with each other, often in violent ways. In the ever-contested city, one often divided geographically along racial and class lines, injustice and violence has always been commonplace. In the Italians of Greenwich Village, Donald Tricarico chronicles the culture and life of Greenwich Village in the mid to late 1900s, when the area maintained a strong Italian identity and presence. Tricarico describes how, during the 1960s, the area's demographics began to shift as Portuguese immigrants took advantage of cheap vacant apartments and a growing number of artists began moving from SoHo into the Village. In the chapter, "Neighborhood of Changes," every new demographic that enters the waning Italian enclave is met with hostility, and occasionally violence.<sup>6</sup>

Jacobs either was oblivious to, or chose not to discuss, the aggressively contended nature of our cities, where interactions between some communities are more prone to violence than cooperation. This failure to observe and account for fragmentation in urban communities is especially alarming considering that she was writing the book in the middle of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, when competing community priorities and violent social conflict were at the forefront of the national consciousness.

## JANE JACOBS' LEGACY

Visiting Jane Jacobs' house at 555 Hudson Street, I observed a smaller-scale community conflict in the Village: one over Jacobs' legacy. On the Hudson Street sidewalk, I found a group of older people sitting and chatting outside of a small Italian cafe. Sure enough, they were old time residents of the neighborhood, and they knew who Jane Jacobs was! It wasn't clear if they knew her personally or from the media, but it soon became apparent that she disgusted them. "They were draft dodgers," one of the men said of Jacobs and her family. Another woman shook her head in disapproval and said she knew Jacobs – that she could tell me the whole story – but that she didn't want to get into it. Jacobs didn't save the neighborhood, they all attested, and she didn't deserve an honorary street sign, either.

For the social sphere beyond that Hudson Street sidewalk, Jane Jacobs' legacy has been shaped not only by her writing but also by her community activism, most notably the cancellation of Robert Moses' plan to pierce through Greenwich Village with the Lower Manhattan Expressway in 1968. Jacobs' success in this area contributes to her stature in urban planning circles, but it obscures the underlying problems within her work. Jacobs' victory against Moses also raises larger questions about the power structure in this country. While Jacobs and other educated white groups were able to shut down urban expressway plans, the same was not often true for communities of color facing an impending freeway project. According to Eric Avila, a scholar of similar highway conflicts across the country at that time, "the freeway revolt, as we know it, did not address, let alone alleviate, the increasingly separate and unequal geography of race in postwar America."

Many, if not most, urban renewal projects were destructive forces that uprooted minority communities and largely replaced these areas with infrastructure and new buildings that primarily benefited the

white middle-class. While Jane Jacobs was heroic for her steadfast fight against these destructive projects, her criticism of the urban planners and social programs also working to better urban communities reveals a failure to understand the larger American social structure. Jacobs' focus on questions of the built environment draws attention away from the powerful influence of white, middle-class taste and capital, and an America rigidly split along racial and class lines. In essence, Jane Jacobs made urban planning the scapegoat for much larger societal problems, and to great effect.

As the years roll by, and as Jacobs' work assumes a more central position in the urban planning canon, it becomes ever more important to view her work with skepticism and call attention to the areas where she was mistaken. Today, planners must face the destructive realities of racism and inequality that Jacobs, despite being such a keen observer and thinker, somehow never fully grasped, and which continue to divide our cities today.