

IBO BALTON COMMUNITY PLANNER AWARD

SYLVIA XIAOMENG LI

DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING

Sylvia Xiaomeng Li, AICP is a Senior Planner and Team Leader at the Manhattan Office of the New York City Department of City Planning (DCP). Sylvia has dedicated over eight years to the Department, serving as a leader in agency efforts to build more equitable and thriving neighborhoods. Sylvia's work spans across Manhattan but is particularly focused on SoHo/NoHo and the West Side. Sylvia led and supervised the planning efforts of the SoHo/NoHo Neighborhood Plan, which made history in late 2021 as one of the first neighborhood rezonings for affordable housing in a predominately white, amenity-rich, high-income neighborhood. The plan is expected to bring 900 new permanently affordable homes to area, along with substantial investment in local business and the arts. Sylvia was instrumental in the passing of the plan – leading community engagement, zoning proposal development, research and communications since the idea was first introduced over six years ago. Sylvia's fierce commitment to inclusive community engagement was demonstrated by the 40 community meetings she helped plan and facilitate, along with the engagement platform, Envision SoHo/NoHo.

If facilitating a neighborhood comprehensive plan wasn't difficult enough, Sylvia took on the momentous task of transferring community engagement to a virtual setting during the height of the COVID-19 crisis. Her commitment to the plan and her work as a community planner held steadfast through some of the most difficult periods of the pandemic, developing a whole new format for engagement practically overnight. With her leadership, the SoHo/NoHo plan moved forward through the pandemic – engaging a larger, more diverse audience through a series of dynamic virtual engagement sessions. These sessions directly informed the plan and were catalytic for the development of a plan that represented diverse stakeholders and needs. With its passing, the plan created inroads for future rezoning in the city's most economically and racially segregated neighborhoods. According to Sylvia, the SoHo/NoHo neighborhood plan demonstrated a "strong narrative of equity," and helps meet the city's greater housing and economic needs.

SYLVIA'S FIERCE COMMITMENT TO INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WAS DEMONSTRATED BY THE 40 COMMUNITY MEETINGS SHE HELPED PLAN AND FACILITATE, ALONG WITH THE ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM, ENVISION SOHO/NOHO.



Sylvia credits the support of DCP leadership and her “city family” when asked about the difficulties faced throughout the rezoning. She also celebrates the diverse community body that engaged in the planning process for the ultimate success of the neighborhood plan.

Sylvia’s experience as a community planner may have been solidified at DCP, but her commitment to working in partnership with communities and fighting for more healthy neighborhoods started before her time in city government. A graduate of Cornell University with a Master of Regional Planning, Sylvia has worked across the planning sector on a city-wide and global scale. In her role as a planner/policy researcher with the New York Academy of Medicine she provided planning and design expertise to Age-friendly NYC – an advocacy initiative to better support aging and elderly residents in the design of cities. She also studied housing quality in Indonesia’s squatter communities in her role as a graduate student.

Sylvia’s career fully encapsulates the mission of the community planner. She has long emphasized the importance of integrity, deep listening and commitment to learning from area stakeholders in the planning process, while ensuring a greater mission of equity and access is achieved in the neighborhood and city as a whole.