

**THE HIGH LINE: A “SUBURBAN SPACE” FOR AN URBAN PUBLIC**

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The dramatic physical, social, and economic transformations of contemporary post-industrial society have created new kinds of urban spaces. While some cities, such as Detroit, are experiencing large-scale disinvestment in the urban core, demolition, and abandonment of city property; other cities, like New York, are appropriating old industrial spaces as destinations for cultural and touristic consumption. Both facets of urban change can be understood as a result of the shift from a production to a service economy in the United States. The High Line, New York’s “Park in the Sky,” is one of these destinations. The park has received many accolades for being a well-designed, well-maintained, well-visited park, but is yet to be critically analyzed within a larger historical context. This thesis begins with an analysis of the High Line via the concepts of public space and the sentimentalization of nature forwarded by the critic and activist Jane Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). It then utilizes more recent theories of the privatization of urban space forwarded by urban theorists such as Gregory Smithson and Benjamin Shepard who note the appearance of “suburban space” within cities. In conclusion, this thesis posits that the High Line belongs to a new category of urban space that is created for a very specific section of the urban public who have the leisure as well as the financial means to enjoy such spaces. The thesis also reveals the manner in which the “nature” on display at the High Line bears striking resemblance to the artificially constructed and ecologically wasteful “green spaces” that were ubiquitous in the post-war United States suburbs.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

“The High Line is a happy exception, that rare New York situation in which a wonderful idea was not only realized but turned out better than anyone had imagined.” – Paul Goldberger, “Miracle Above Manhattan,” *National Geographic*, April 2011<sup>1</sup>

“The High Line has become a tourist-clogged catwalk and a catalyst for some of the most rapid gentrification in the city’s history....But the problem isn’t just the crowds. It’s that the park, which will eventually snake through more than 20 blocks, is destroying neighborhoods as it grows.” – Jeremiah Moss, “Disney World on the Hudson,” *The New York Times*, August 2012<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, the public was able to access the High Line, a park that affords unprecedented views of Manhattan and the Hudson River, immerses them in abundant plant life, provides opportunities to engage with commissioned art installations, and to enjoy high-quality food and drink. The one-and-a-half mile long High Line has been called a ‘park in the sky’ by writers and visitors because its platform once served as a rail line elevated thirty feet above street level.<sup>3</sup> For fifty years it supported freight rail traffic carrying goods into the Meatpacking District on Manhattan’s West Side, but in 1980, traffic on the tracks was suspended. At this time the fate of the structure became the subject of a vibrant debate between community members, professionals,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Goldberger, “Miracle Above Manhattan,” *New York Times*, April, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah Moss, “Disney World on the Hudson,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The term was championed by Joshua David and Robert Hammond. The two men are the cofounders of the non-profit conservancy that maintains the park, called Friends of the High Line, and co-authored the book *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky*.

Joshua David and Robert Hammond, *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).



and city officials. Those in support of protecting the High Line for reuse were outnumbered by those in opposition, but in 2002, against all odds, it became city policy to preserve and reuse the structure.<sup>4</sup> The High Line is celebrated by former architecture critic from the *New Yorker*, Paul Goldberger who has called the innovative, lively public park a “Miracle Above Manhattan” while critics such as Jeremiah Moss condemn the park for being an overly manicured and surveyed tourist attraction that has caused permanent damage to the character of the surrounding neighborhoods. This thesis situates the High Line within theories of urban development and design that consider the historical and contemporary debates concerning the varying levels and value of publicness and democracy of urban space as well as how and why nature is incorporated into cities.

Soon after the park’s inauguration, Friends of the High Line (“Friends” from now on), the nonprofit organization that now maintains the park, began to receive recognition for its efforts in urban regeneration, and in 2010, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, the cofounders of the organization, were awarded the Jane Jacobs Medal for New Ideas and Activism. The award is given annually to a person or group whose work “creates new ways of seeing and understanding New York City, challenges traditional assumptions, and creatively uses the urban environment to make New York City a place of hope and expectation.”<sup>5</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation began awarding the medal in 2007, soon after Jacobs passed away, to commemorate her influential role in advocating for the needs of common citizens and for the creation of democratic urban space.

It is true that the High Line meets several criteria of the Jane Jacobs Medal. For instance, the park is regarded as a space that matches Jacobs’ ideals, which she articulated in her book *The*

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<sup>4</sup> “High Line History,” <http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history>.

<sup>5</sup> “An Award in Honor of the Great Jane Jacobs,” <http://www.thehighline.org/blog/2010/07/20/an-award-in-honor-of-the-great-jane-jacobs>.

*Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), because it was founded by an initiative of residents of the surrounding neighborhoods as well as from business owners and other interested members of the public. Jacobs called this grass-roots process “participatory planning” and saw it as an essential precursor of democratic urban space. Furthermore, the park has been recognized by Paul Goldberger, an architecture critic and a friend and admirer of Jacobs and her legacy, as “one of the most innovative and inviting public spaces in New York City and perhaps the entire country.”<sup>6</sup> Goldberger acknowledges that even though the High Line is a major tourist attraction, it is also a freely accessible neighborhood park that Jacobs would have advocated for in her time. He recalled his experience walking on the High Line on a sunny fall day: “[A] section the designers had designated as a kind of sundeck was jammed, and there seemed to be as many locals treating the area as the equivalent of their own beach as visitors out for a promenade.”<sup>7</sup> These vibrant spaces, used equally by neighborhood residents as well as visitors, were precisely the kinds of democratic spaces that Jacobs argued that American cities needed in the 1960s.

The celebration of the High Line as a worthy example of Jacobs’ honorable legacy, however, deserves further scrutiny and this thesis serves to investigate the concepts of naturalness and publicness with regard to the park by employing and forwarding Jacobs’ modalities of the 1960s that she used to instill in her readers a sense of the fragility and importance of truly natural and truly public constructs within urban environments. To carry out this investigation it is of the utmost importance to consider the radical changes that have taken place in cities since the time of Jacobs writing so that her intentions are not misconstrued and so that the High Line can be analyzed within its proper context.

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<sup>6</sup> Goldberger was the architecture critic for the *New York Times* from 1997 to 2012. Goldberger, “Miracle Above Manhattan.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

At Jacobs' time, if nature was incorporated into urban design it took a standardized, manicured form, resembling privately owned lawns in the growing suburbs, to help create a cleaner, more ordered urban aesthetic in the midst of the dilapidated, industrial city. The industrial structure of the High Line evokes nostalgia in the midst of a now revitalized city and the landscape design of the park is far from standardized, but it too is manicured and requires constant maintenance to sustain the intended aesthetic of an urban wilderness surrounded by rapid development. Furthermore, Jacobs saw democratic urban spaces being threatened by state-funded, master-planned projects during the 1950s and 1960s, which facilitated the transportation of suburbanites to and from the city and neglected the neighborhoods and interests of urban citizens. The High Line is a free park that offers a platform for social interaction, which is requisite criteria for democratic space, but it does not succeed as one because the park is actually operating within a larger framework of social construction, economic development, and cultural politics that place the park within ongoing processes of gentrification and the increasing privatization of urban space. In recent decades, scholars in sociology and urban studies have probed the limits of public and natural space within cities while building on the pertinent ideas that Jacobs introduced over five decades ago, and in order to understand the High Line within these terms, it must be carefully situated within the appropriate context, theories, and debates.

This thesis is divided into three parts. The first, "From Industrial Railway to Public Promenade," provides the historical context necessary for further analysis of the High Line and introduces the key players involved in the evolution of uses of the structure. The second section, "The 'Nature' of the High Line," offers an in-depth look at the landscape design of the park because, while inspired by the original untamed natural growth found on the abandoned structure, the current landscape design is manicured and maintained by gardeners and

horticulturists to be perpetually pristine. The third section, “The Construction of a ‘Public’ Destination by Private Interests,” situates the High Line within the current moment in which the governance of public space has been complicated by partnerships between public sector authorities and private parties whose motives are questionably in the interest of public good. This thesis investigates why the High Line is celebrated for offering natural beauty as a respite from the city and criticized for spurring gentrification and homogenizing the surrounding neighborhoods. It also seeks to update Jacobs’ notion of truly public space and the incorporation of nature in cities while complicating the role of the High Line beyond dichotomies that limit discussion to the park’s quality, successes, or necessity rather than seeing it as a physical manifestation of the economic and cultural consumption that are shaping American cities today.

## **2.0 FROM INDUSTRIAL RAILWAY TO PUBLIC PROMENADE**

In this section, a brief history of the different uses, owners, and physical states of the High Line will be presented to set the stage for later analysis of the park. This background will serve to introduce the actors involved in the High Line's reimagining and its tumultuous history, which illustrates how New York and other cities around the world have shifted from a production to a service-based economy. Lastly, this historical context is necessary to understand how the innovatively designed High Line, while commendable, has contributed to processes of gentrification that have transformed the once dilapidated, socially diverse neighborhood of Chelsea into a lucrative district coveted by the city and frequented by tourists. In many ways the High Line has evolved in tandem with both the surrounding neighborhoods and the city as it has gone from an essential element of the production of goods, to a neglected, blighted hub for deviant, displeasing activity, to a revitalized facilitator of economic and cultural consumption.

The structure of the High Line was originally used to support four rail lines that transported goods and passengers to and from the city via Manhattan's west side.



Figure 1 – Locomotive on The High Line, 1957, photo credit: Jim Shaughnessy

In 1929 construction began on the elevated tracks, then called the New York Central Elevated Spur, and opened to train traffic in 1934.<sup>8</sup> Laborers worked to assemble the massive thirteen-mile steel structure by hand, which was built intricately around, between, and even through warehouses and factories.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2 – A Passenger Train on the High Line, circa 1950, photo credit: Ed Doyle

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<sup>8</sup> The tracks were originally street-level but, due to the dangerous traffic congestion, the city and the Hudson River Railroad Company, the owner of the rail, worked together to elevate the train traffic thirty feet above the streets. The project resulted in the removal of the one-hundred-and-five street-level crossings, which had been the cause of several fatalities.

David and Hammond, *High Line*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> “High Line History,” <http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history>.

After over twenty years of essential service, such heavy traffic along the elevated rail was no longer needed due to an increase in interstate truck traffic and because of the shift in the American urban economy from production- to service-based during the 1960s. Not only was the production sector shrinking across the United States following World War II, but the growth of the suburbs led to a disinvestment of capital from the urban core. Over the course of several years, underused portions of the structure were demolished beginning with the southernmost section, which traversed about ten city blocks, and in 1980 the structure was closed to rail traffic entirely.<sup>10</sup> Conrail, the owner of the tracks, had no intention of demolishing them due, in part, to the costs the company would have had to incur as a result of such mass demolition, but, by the 1980s, the city government and private developers were vocal in their desire to rid the West Side of the rusting eyesore to make way for new development.<sup>11</sup>

During this period and especially during the post-war era, the image of the West Side was changing with the addition of large infrastructure projects. The city commissioned master planner Robert Moses, known as the “master builder,” to head large-scale civic projects such as the West Side Highway, which facilitated truck traffic and shuttled suburbanites to and from their jobs or shopping destinations in the city.<sup>12</sup> These roadways were often elevated above street level to alleviate congestion, which resulted in the neglect of many neighborhoods,

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<sup>10</sup> From 1968 to 1976 ownership of the rail line changed three times; first when Penn Central took over New York Central Railroad, and then when the federal government combined six northeastern rail carriers, including Penn Central, to operate under the name of Consolidated Rail Corporation, or Conrail.

This demolition reduced the structure to what it is today where 2 miles are still in tact but only 1.5 of those have been redesigned and opened to the public.

<sup>11</sup> The demolition and cleanup costs were estimated to be at least seven million dollars.

Thomas J. Lueck, “Up, But Not Running, on the West Side,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> From 1924 until 1968 Moses was responsible for the construction of “parks, highways, bridges, playgrounds, housing, tunnels, beaches, zoos, civic centers, exhibition halls and the 1964-65 New York World’s Fair. To do so, he held several appointive offices and once occupied 12 positions simultaneously, including that of New York City Parks Commissioner, head of the State Parks Council, head of the State Power Commission and chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority.”

Paul Goldberger, “Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92,” *New York Times*.

especially ones on the edges of the city, since automobile traffic could speed past them. Jane Jacobs, a journalist, urban activist, and vociferous critic of Moses' urban schemes, feared that the implementation of master-planned projects in the city had caused its largely middle and low-income residents to feel powerless. "White flight" had caused an erosion of the city's tax base and the tenant class that remained had little political agency to fight master planning to preserve their neighborhoods and ways of life.

Jacobs' writing and activism inspired generations of urban citizens and activists to stand up to master planners by realizing their potential to shape and take ownership of their neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> For three years, while doing research for her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs observed diverse and vital neighborhoods being sacrificed to the plans of large-scale, top-down modernist development projects in American cities. Jacobs argued that these projects systematically disenfranchised urban dwellers and she urged them to take back their city through collective participation by voting at the district level and making their voices heard. She consistently spoke and acted against large-scale civic projects, such as Moses' West Side Highway, at public meetings and protests.<sup>14</sup> Eventually Jacobs' ideals earned a reputation as the antithesis of Moses' ideology.

Greenwich Village, where Jacobs lived, set a precedent for the diverse, lively, mixed-use urban environments for which she advocated. She wrote about the diverse activities she would

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<sup>13</sup> *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was regarded as being one of "the most influential American [texts] about the inner workings and failings of cities" and reached a broad audience because of her accessible, and engaging prose.

Project for Public Spaces. "Jane Jacobs." Accessed February 8, 2014. <http://www.pps.org/reference/jjacobs-2/>.

<sup>14</sup> "In 1961, [Jacobs] and other protestors were removed from a City Planning Commission hearing on an urban renewal plan for Greenwich Village that they opposed, after they leapt from their seats and rushed the podium. In 1968, she was arrested on riot and criminal mischief charges for disrupting a public meeting on the construction of an expressway that would have sliced across Lower Manhattan and displaced hundreds of families and businesses. The police said she had tried to tear up the stenographer's transcript tape."

Douglas Martin, "Jane Jacobs, Social Critic Who Redefined and Championed, Is Dead at 89," April 26, 2006.



observe on her block and referred to it as the “sidewalk ballet.”<sup>15</sup> The block she lived on was made up of residences inhabited by economically, socially, and ethnically diverse people, as well as small business such as cafés, laundromats, and general stores. The mix of uses throughout the day and night by different individuals created a complex, spontaneous order, which people would monitor while they looked out for the safety and well being of neighbors. In a neighborhood like this the safety of the sidewalk and street was directly connected to the safety of its inhabitants. In today’s cities, however, the criteria for a such a “sidewalk ballet” are no longer present. This is, in part, because small business owners have been priced out of their neighborhoods making mixed-income communities more homogenous, and because there is now a distinct division between private businesses and residences and the public sidewalk. This can be seen in the amount of buildings with doormen or security systems, which discourage spontaneous activity outside their doors.

The Chelsea neighborhood, where most of the High Line is located, used to be an economically, socially, and racially diverse neighborhood until the 1980s when clear signs of change began to emerge. Chelsea was an area with little development going on because of its proximity to the industrial infrastructure of the Meatpacking district but many of the neighborhood residents belonged to the counterculture of the time and thrived in Chelsea as they were patrons of many gay bars, grunge culture shops, a private A.I.D.S. agency, an independent gay and lesbian bookstore, and renters of warehouses that had been converted into art galleries, apartments or studios. This low-income students and artists who lived in Chelsea could thrive because the neighborhood’s blighted aesthetic and character deterred developers and city officials from intervening, which kept rent and property values low and gave the residents a

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 65.

relative degree of autonomy over their spaces. Although the abandoned High Line contributed to the seedy character of the area as its shadows were home to prostitutes and drug dealers, and the platform above was used for homeless encampments and a place for sex and rave parties, Chelsea possessed the cultural elements, such as restaurants, art galleries, and renovated lofts, on which developers would eventually capitalize.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 3 – Debris on the High Line in Disuse, 2006, photo credit: Stephen Sherman**



**Figure 4 – The High Line in Disuse, Chelsea Market Passage, 2006, photo credit: Stephen Sherman**

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua and Hammond, *High Line*, 6.

Sociologist Sharon Zukin recognizes the urban trends of economic restructuring, such as those that took place in Chelsea in the 1980s, and describes them in her book, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (1991). She investigated the transformation of downtown Manhattan to show that the processes of gentrification are set in motion when devalued urban spaces begin to be used by new social groups and for new service activities. For example, a cultural shift in the value of urban stock occurs when artists take advantage of low-rent industrial spaces and make them their studios and/or apartments. What follows this first step of urban revaluation is a change in perspective of the area by developers and other wealthier gentrifiers who no longer see these neighborhoods as a devalued place for production but one for culture and consumption.<sup>17</sup> Artists and students are thus often the first wave of gentrifiers and they inadvertently prime the neighborhoods to be taken over by another wave of gentrifiers who have more capital, like developers and young professionals. Once this new demographic establishes itself, property values and rents rise, which eventually prices out the artists and students while private developers cash in on the cultural quotient the first wave of gentrifiers created.

Given the changing context of the Chelsea area during its early stage of gentrification, several residents began to see the potential the High Line had to be repurposed as a way to address the needs of the surrounding community. In 1981 Steven Holl, a New York City-based architect, proposed that the structure serve as a platform for mixed-use development. In his proposal he described the changing nature of the district and proposed a mix of housing types such as housing for the elderly, students, and the lower, middle, and upper classes. He also envisioned the structure serving as a public promenade that would join the courtyards he designed between each building. Holl wrote: “Re-use rather than demolition of the existing

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyworld* (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1991), 193.

bridge, [sic] would be a permanent contribution to the character of this city.”<sup>18</sup> While Holl’s design was never built, because the federal government intended to keep out-of-use railroads intact in order to support potential future rail traffic, it set a precedent for later efforts by groups like Friends which also envisioned the structure being used as a promenade. However, whereas Holl responded to the economically and socially diverse surrounding neighborhoods by proposing housing and recreation options for the community, Friends made the notion of a promenade central to the reuse. The organization hosts public programs in art, food, and education, but they fall short of serving the nearby low-income residents and the diverse New York community. These programs will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.

Peter Obletz, a Chelsea resident himself, had a different vision for the structure than Holl.<sup>19</sup> At the time the tracks closed Obletz had been living under a northern section of the High Line for nearly a decade in two train cars that he restored himself.<sup>20</sup> In 1982 he climbed to the top of the elevated rail and envisioned the space being used for light rail service as a way to preserve the structure for future public good.<sup>21</sup> In an effort to see his vision through, Obletz formed the West Side Rail Line Development Foundation in 1983.<sup>22</sup> He spent five years in courts fighting pressure from the state, the city, and private landowners to demolish the structure, but never succeeded in reopening the elevated rail. While his arduous efforts were spent trying to

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<sup>18</sup> *Pamphlet Architecture No. 7: Bridge of Houses* (New York: William Stout Books, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> During the 1980s Obletz was the chairman of Community Board 4, which represents the Clinton and Chelsea neighborhoods and the chairman of its transportation committee. He also served as a consultant for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

James Barron, “Peter E. Obletz, 50, a Lover of Old Trains, Dies,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> From 1984 to 1986, Obletz owned a two-mile section of the structure after being approved by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to purchase it from Conrail for ten dollars, but in 1986 the ICC revoked Obletz’s ownership of the rail line and in 1991 the southernmost section of the structure was demolished so that a warehouse could be converted into an apartment complex.

David and Hammond, *High Line*, x.

preserve the original function of the structure, they foreshadow the complicated and time-consuming process that Friends went through to transform the structure into what it is today.

Holl's and Obletz's efforts in the 1980s matched Jacobs' idealism for a more educated and proactive approach by urban dwellers to lay claim to the spaces they valued. And her call for community discussion and engagement was in response to the imposition of large-scale infrastructure projects headed by planners like Moses who were empowered and given autonomy by New Deal era policies. By 1999, when Joshua David and Robert Hammond entered community discussion regarding reuse of the High Line, the authority of the state in urban development had been compromised by private developers. While David and Hammond were undoubtedly involved in revitalizing the appearance of their neighborhood, the political awareness that Jacobs advocated for was not a component of their vision. Zukin offers a critique of contemporary community engagement that turned Jacobs' at first radical vision of diverse, small-scale, autonomous neighborhood communities into the "popular vision of both gentrifiers and contemporary city planning commissioners" and is now "an aesthetic ideal of authenticity that consumes both the neighborhood and its longtime residents."<sup>23</sup> It is important to distinguish between Jacobs' vision and its contemporary appropriated version because the latter is in fact only a representation of the neighborhood communities Jacobs valued. These contemporary spaces appear to be vibrant and offer a range of services, but their privatization works to stymie the ideals of political empowerment and collective action that were present in Jacobs' vision of democratic public space. The contemporary role of the state and the notion of citizen

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<sup>23</sup> Sharon Zukin, "Sharon Zukin on her book *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*," December 16, 2009, accessed March 13, 2014, [http://rorotoko.com/interview/20091216\\_zukin\\_sharon\\_on\\_naked\\_city\\_death\\_life\\_authentic\\_urban\\_places/?page=2](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20091216_zukin_sharon_on_naked_city_death_life_authentic_urban_places/?page=2).

participation regarding the High Line will be discussed in more detail in the Section 3, and the New Deal era policies will be discussed further in Sections 2 and 3.

After trains stopped running on the High Line in 1980, the city and a group called the Chelsea Property Owners sought to have the High Line demolished to make way for new development,t but efforts from Obletz and resistance from Conrail, the corporation that owned the rail structure, delayed the slated demolition. In 1991, the Chelsea Property Owners submitted an application to the Interstate Commerce Commission that, if approved, would force Conrail to involuntarily abandon the northern portion of the structure.<sup>24</sup> The application, which was supported by City Hall, was denied by the judge at the Commission because there was “credible evidence of potential traffic for movement on the High Line.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Conrail refused to give up rights to the tracks or its rights of way to government regulators so that the valuable infrastructure could be preserved for future use if rail traffic would again become feasible.<sup>26</sup> Conrail intended to reestablish traffic for freight shipments or possibly to transport parcels for the United State Postal Service or the United Parcel Service, and community boards of the surrounding neighborhoods requested the High Line be preserved to examine ways to use it for freight shipments, mass transit, or as a recreational route. The City Planning Department, however, still saw no future in the case to preserve the structure because it did not consider the market for new transit service to be lucrative.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Conrail’s rights of ownership prevailed and inadvertently kept the structure intact making its later reuse as a park possible.

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<sup>24</sup> David W. Dunlap, “Commercial Property: The West Side Viaduct; Conrail Looking To A Revival Of Its Freight Traffic,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Dunlap, “Commercial Property.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

In 1999, the CSX Railroad Corporation took over Conrail's properties and continued efforts to preserve the structure.<sup>28</sup> CSX proposed to the city or any interested private organization that the platform be used as a park, a bike trail, or a promenade with shops and outdoor cafés during its interim state.<sup>29</sup> The public learned of the new usage proposal for the High Line when the *New York Times* published an article in July 1999 reporting that CSX “insists that the 65-year-old platform must be retained, possibly for future rail service as development of the West Side continues.”<sup>30</sup> CSX intended to gain support from the Federal Government for reuse of the rail line as a part of its “Rails to Trails” program, which allows for interim recreational use of out-of-use rail lines.<sup>31</sup> This proposal for the High Line was, however, unlike any other Rails-to-Trails project because no other *elevated* portion of a rail line had yet been repurposed in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

In 1999, both Community Board 2 and Community Board 4, which represent Greenwich Village and Chelsea respectively, held community hearings where the future of the High Line was discussed. Most people who attended meetings were in opposition to preserving it and actively sought ways to legally ensure that the structure would be demolished.<sup>33</sup> In August of the same year, after reading the recent *New York Times* article about the state of the High Line, Hammond and David, then strangers to one another, attended a community hearing to discover

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<sup>28</sup> CSX Corporation and Norfolk Southern Corporation took over Conrail's properties but in the division of assets the High Line was allocated to CSX.

David W. Dunlap, “Which Track for the High Line?” *New York Times*, December 31, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Lueck, “Up, But Not Running.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Federal guidelines, [which took effect in 1982, allowed] railroad companies to sell or donate their tracks to local governments or civic groups, which in turn clear away old tracks to make way for recreational corridors. But the guidelines also enable the rail companies to reclaim their rights of way far into the future if they elect to restore rail service.”

Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The High Line is a unique, highly visible, ambitious, urban rails-to-trails project unlike most others that are implemented in rural, less populated areas.

Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> David and Hammond, *High Line*, 7.

what, if anything, was being done to save the structure. Both men shared an interest in the grandeur and the history of the High Line that had been a constant element of Chelsea and the Greenwich Village as their neighborhoods evolved.

At that meeting, a representative of the Regional Plan Association, which had been commissioned by CSX to do a study of the possible uses/outcomes for the High Line, presented several different options including demolition, reuse for freight traffic, and use as a park.<sup>34</sup> After the presentation several of the approximately twenty people at the meeting, most of which opposed reuse of the High Line, spoke vehemently against the proposals. One of the attendees was the president of the Chelsea Property Owners, Doug Sarini, and spoke of the blight of the High Line on the neighborhood, the potential danger due to its unknown structural stability, and its role in hampering the economic development of the neighborhood. David and Hammond were the only two people at that meeting not opposed to the proposal of reuse, and, in a matter of months, the two men cofounded Friends of the High Line in an attempt to save the elevated rail line from being destroyed.

Efforts to prevent demolition lasted for the next five years while Friends of the High Line raised money from private donors and gained support from local residents by hosting a number of presentations, parties, events, and design competitions. In 2002, the organization gained enough funding to conduct a study that showed that reuse of the High Line as a public amenity would be economically fruitful considering the tax revenue that it would introduce to the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>35</sup> The city then changed its stance after learning of the outcome of the study and filed for railbanking with the federal Surface Transportation Board and made it

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<sup>34</sup> David and Hammond, *High Line*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> “High Line History,” accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history>.



City policy to preserve and reuse the High Line.<sup>36</sup> The changing ownership of the High Line is indicative of the evolving role of the city and state government in the ownership of public spaces. Ownership of the High Line is now divided between the NGO Friends of the High Line, state government, the city government, and the federal government, which classifies as a public-private partnership.<sup>37</sup> The history of the High Line, the changing social and economic contexts in the city, especially Chelsea, and the multiple actors and positions involved are representative of the complexity of the current debate surrounding the structure's reuse and also the evolution of urban space since Jacobs' writing.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

"Railbanking is a method by which corridors that would otherwise be abandoned can be preserved for future rail use through interim conversion to a trail. Established in 1983 as an amendment to Section 8(d) of the National Trails System Act the railbanking statute allows a railroad to remove all of its equipment, with the exception of bridges, tunnels and culverts, from a corridor, and to turn the corridor over to any qualified private organization or public agency that has agreed to maintain it for future rail use."

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, "Railbanking: What is Railbanking?" accessed April 15, 2014, [http://www.railstotrails.org/ourwork/trailbuilding/toolbox/informationsummaries/railbanking\\_whatandwhy.html](http://www.railstotrails.org/ourwork/trailbuilding/toolbox/informationsummaries/railbanking_whatandwhy.html).

<sup>37</sup> David Rockefeller discussed public-private partnerships, specifically in New York City, at length in his 1986 essay "Ingredients for Successful Partnerships: The New York City Case."

David Rockefeller, "Ingredients for Successful Partnerships: The New York City Case," (remarks presented at the conference "Public Private Partnerships," New York, New York, June 13, 1986).

### **3.0 THE “NATURE” OF THE HIGH LINE**

In this section, the landscape design on the High Line will be critically analyzed by situating it within the history of natural design in cities and by comparing it to the specific moment in this history of the 1950s and 1960s. At this time the most common vision or use of nature was either in the suburbs, where it took the form of a privately owned and maintained parcel of lawn, or as an expanse of grass surrounding new master-planned development, such as public housing projects. These tracts of grass were technically owned by the city, and thus belonged to everyone, but in reality they were too vast to be taken by the ownership of anyone. Whereas the well-kept suburban lawn was a symbol of proper and respectable middle-class status, the “green spaces” inserted by master planners were impractical and unsafe spaces providing only vulnerability for the people living in the nearby, standardized residential towers. Jacobs decried these gratuitous, artificial constructs and saw them as exemplary of the American sentimental desire to toy with or have control over nature for his or her aesthetic pleasure. The landscape design of the High Line appears to be more sophisticated than the lawns and “green spaces” Jacobs condemned because it was inspired by the wild, self-seeded landscape that took root on the structure in its 25 years of abandonment. However, its aesthetic requires incessant maintenance to uphold and visitors are not permitted to engage with any of the plant life or lay claim to any of the “natural” spaces other than a small patch of grass. This comparison begs the

question: Is the nature on the High Line being represented any differently than in the extreme cases of Jacobs' time?

In 1980, after the last train traversed the High Line, the city and the owner of the elevated rail, the CSX Corporation, neglected the structure. But the resulting inactivity on the platform, which lasted for 25 years, allowed for abundant natural growth to claim the industrial relic that stretched through two miles of Manhattan's west side. Birds and breezes would drop seeds and soil onto the platform making growth possible, but the sustainability of that growth was dependent on the architecture of the surrounding urban environment. As soil accumulated and growth began, certain areas that were, for example, sheltered from the harsh winds coming off of the Hudson River yet exposed to sunlight, fostered ample growth of certain plant species. Other areas that were more exposed to wind and kept in shade were relatively barren compared to the rest of the High Line but still conducive to the growth of hardy grasses and weeds.



**Figure 5 – Trees in the Unopened Third Section of the High Line, 2009, photo credit: Jim Henderson**



**Figure 6 – Barren Landscape of the Unopened Third Section of the High Line, 2011, photo credit: Jim Henderson**

When seen from street level, the growth on the High Line added to the dilapidated, unkempt character of the structure. The size and quantity of the overgrown invasive weeds and vines were a testament to the amount of time the rail line had been out of use and their aesthetic symbolized the neglect of the surrounding neighborhood by the city and developers.



**Figure 7 – Natural Growth on the High Line Before Renovation, 2006, photo credit: Stephen Sherman**

When seen from the level of the High Line, though, the landscape could be viewed in its entirety and appreciated as an instance of rare inner city growth. For some, the self-seeded landscape on the High Line was treated as a back yard, if only aesthetically, and for others the ribbon of green cutting through buildings and dodging others enhanced the view from their office windows.<sup>38</sup>

In 1982 when Obeltz's climbed to the top of the High Line, it had been devoid of train traffic for only two years and had not had the time to evolve into the platform for the inner-city wild landscape that it eventually would. In contrast, when David and Hammond ventured to the top of the High Line in 1999 to assess its condition, they were both entranced by the natural environment that they found. The views of Manhattan and the Hudson River were unlike any other in the city, but the landscape was even more exceptional. Hammond recalled: "This was not a few blades of grass growing up through gravel. The wildflowers and plants had taken over. We had to wade through waist-high Queen Anne's lace. It was another world, right in the middle of Manhattan."<sup>39</sup> David, too, was shocked to see how beautiful the landscape was and baffled at the sense of expansiveness it offered.<sup>40</sup> Neither could believe that for so many years the beauty of the High Line had been hidden away in plain sight.<sup>41</sup> David recalled that "[t]here was a powerful sense of the passing of time. You could see what the High Line was built for, and feel that its moment had slipped away."<sup>42</sup> This passage of time is important to consider because as the function and aesthetic of the High Line were changing, so too was the valuation of nature by society and its perception of naturalness.

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<sup>38</sup> The architect Stephen Holl's New York City office overlooked the High Line. David and Hammond, *High Line*, 74.

<sup>39</sup> David and Hammond, *High Line*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

David and Hammond intended to repurpose the High Line in an effort to preserve a part of the city's industrial past and to galvanize their neighborhoods. The two men were aware of the options for reuse of the structure, with a park being the most viable, but it was not until they stood on the platform, experienced the city from a unique vantage point, and walked through the wild landscape that they wished to give the public the same experience and envisioned the High Line as a park.<sup>43</sup> David and Hammond considered the precedent of the Promenade Plantée in Paris because this project, completed in 1994, had transformed a nineteenth-century rail line and viaduct into a public walkway, which incorporated abundant nature and features for rest, play, and social interaction.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the intention to repurpose the High Line, Friends needed to gain support from the city and local residents that would prevent demolition of the structure. To this end, the organization used photos of the self-seeded landscape by photographer Joel Sternfeld who was asked to try to capture the expansiveness of the natural landscape amidst the dense urban surroundings.<sup>45</sup> Immediately after his first visit to the High Line, Sternfeld agreed to do the project on the condition that no one else be allowed on the structure for one year.<sup>46</sup> This was a wise proposition because if the rail bed would have been heavily trafficked, the grandeur of the natural landscape would have been destroyed. Without the work of photographers like Sternfeld, who also captured the High Line in its years of abandonment, the original state of the self-seeded

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<sup>43</sup> A representative guided David and Hammond on a tour of the structure as it was technically illegal for anyone to be on the structure.

<sup>44</sup> The viaduct was in use from 1859 and used for passenger trains until 1969 when some of the route, including the viaduct portion, was no longer needed for train service. It was abandoned for ten years until planners began to consider reuse options for the structure.

Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "Promenade Plantée."

<sup>45</sup> David and Hammond were interested in Sternfeld because he had been known for having taken pictures of aqueducts outside of Rome and other industrial-landscape photographs.

David and Hammond, *High Line*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

landscape would not have been preserved in any form. Sternfeld photographed the High Line in all seasons, from April 2000 to July 2001, and his photos became such an important tool for Friends to promote its campaign that Hammond considers Sternfeld a third cofounder of the organization.<sup>47</sup>

In 2003, Friends held an Open Ideas Competition and received 720 entries from 36 different countries. The competition was held to inspire the public to think creatively about how to repurpose the structure. Many of the ideas submitted were conceptual, like the proposal to turn the platform of the High Line into a mile-and-a-half-long swimming pool, while others were more realistic and found creative ways to embrace the existing landscape.<sup>48</sup> Following the Competition, Friends moved forward in establishing the High Line as a park, and in 2004, the organization issued a request for qualifications that asked design firms to collaborate by forming teams of architects, landscape architects, planners, and engineers.<sup>49</sup> In the same year, representatives from the City of New York and Friends selected the team of James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro along with planting designer Piet Oudolf from a pool of 52 proposals.<sup>50</sup>

David and Hammond originally envisioned converting the structure into a park and preserving the landscape, but they learned that this would not be possible because repairs were

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<sup>47</sup> In May 2001 Friends of the High Line got attention from the press when the New Yorker published an article that showcased Sternfeld's photographs of the High Line.

Ibid, 32.

<sup>48</sup> "Designing the High Line: Winners," accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.thehighline.org/competition/winners.php>.

<sup>49</sup> David and Hammond, *High Line*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Holl Architects headed the runner up team, which proposed adding built forms to the structure, removing sections to let light shine through to the streets, and featuring a waterfall to cascade through the girders. David said the team treated the High Line as if it were "A suspended green valley in Manhattan's Alps." Ibid, 77.

necessary to make the structure safe and sustainable.<sup>51</sup> This allowed the design teams to work from a blank slate, and the winning proposal was selected because it paid respect to the history of the structure as a rail line and used the self-seeded natural growth as inspiration for the landscape design of the park. For example, in some areas of the design, and now the park, the original tracks are embedded in the walkway reminding visitors of the original use of the structure. In other areas the tracks can be seen peeking through dense foliage, as they did before renovation. Another feature of the design responds to the complicated topography of the High Line and facilitates the growth of trees, whereas the rest of the park's terrain supports the growth of various mosses and shade groundcover. This area, called the "Woodland Flyover," elevates the pedestrian walkway above the platform of the structure to allow dense foliage to fill in below. David and Hammond believe that Piet Oudolf, the design team's planting designer, and the landscape architects at James Corner Field Operations successfully composed an idealized version of the landscape that could not be preserved.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 8 – Dense Foliage on the High Line, 2013, photo by author**

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<sup>51</sup> Everything on the structure was removed, including the steel rails, gravel ballast, soil, debris and a layer of concrete so that a new drainage system could be installed and environmental contaminants could be removed. "Construction: Removals," accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.thehighline.org/design/construction>.

<sup>52</sup> David and Hammond, *High Line*, 77.



To accomplish this, the designers selected over three hundred species of perennials, grasses, shrubs, and trees to be arranged throughout the park.<sup>53</sup> When planting began, truckloads of soil and potted plants were lifted onto the structure and the foliage was arranged by a team of horticulturists according to detailed plans created by the designers.<sup>54</sup> According to Friends, “[the plants in the park] were chosen for their hardiness, sustainability, and textural and color variation, with a focus on native species, [and] many of the species that originally grew on the High Line's rail bed are incorporated into the park's landscape.”<sup>55</sup> This careful attention to the biodiversity of the region suggests that there has been development in urban design and that there is a concern for the sustainability of native species, but the longstanding history of how and why nature has been designed in cities suggests otherwise.

During the late nineteenth century, before the High Line was built, cities were expanding due to the emergence of railroads and factories, which resulted in the emergence of the working class in the United States, many of whom were foreign immigrants. Constant production and transportation in the city led to high levels of pollution while insufficient infrastructure and housing forced the working class to live in squalor. The urban elite were threatened by changing social hierarchies, including the rise of the middle class, and appalled by urban conditions that forced them to confront the working class in a role other than as their hired hands.<sup>56</sup> The dramatic changes in urbanization due to the industrialization of American cities caused the urban elite to romanticize the countryside and to portray it as morally and culturally superior to the city.

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<sup>53</sup> “High Line Self-Guided Visit,” <http://www.thehighline.org/pdf/high-line-self-guide-winter.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> “Southern Spur: 2008 – Planting Section 1,” <http://www.thehighline.org/galleries/images/planting?splash=>.

<sup>55</sup> “Planting,” <http://www.thehighline.org/design/planting>.

<sup>56</sup> The anxiety of the American middle class towards the working classes was captured in the work of Jacob Riis in his book *How the Other Half Lives* (1903).

Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011).

This elite construction of the countryside must, however, be recognized as incongruent to the manner in which lower classes would have depicted it. For example, impoverished serfs who had worked for subsistence wages for landowners before the Industrial Revolution would have likely associated the countryside with hard labor. Therefore, for the lower classes, modern cities offered an opportunity to escape a life of indentured servitude and to transcend their low class. Despite the disparity of these two representations, the elite had the capital and the leisure time to escape the ills of the city, and to spend time in urban parks that consisted of a controlled nature and served the purpose of evoking feelings of nostalgia in them for their notion of the pristine and superior countryside. New York City's Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1857, was reminiscent of the parks and estates that Olmsted saw in England's pastoral countryside, but the landscape of the park was also meant to act unconsciously on its viewers, both upper- and lower-class. Olmsted employed design principles that would heighten certain qualities of nature so that the landscape could have a psychological affect that would provide elites with a momentary escape from the ills of the city and also non-elites with an opportunity to be educated and moralized by the "natural" environment.<sup>57</sup> This set the precedent for future urban designers and decisions makers, like those involved in the design of the High Line, who now incorporate nature and amenities such as art and food into public spaces to enhance the cultural awareness of the lower classes who might visit and to provide all visitors an escape from the city with a "natural" environment. (These aforementioned cultural amenities will be discussed further in Section 3.) Future generations of urban elite, and eventually the middle class, inherited their predecessor's discontentment with the city as a place to dwell and after World War II were given the opportunity to flee to the growing suburbs.

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<sup>57</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *Description of a Plan for the Improvement of the Central Park*, "Greensward." New York: The Aldine Press, 1868.

In his book on the history of American suburbanization during the 1950s and 1960s, Kenneth Jackson identified this shift in middle-class attitudes towards the non-urban environment.<sup>58</sup> Following World War II, returning service-men and their families were given the opportunity to move to the suburbs and establish a life in a house on a plot of land of their own. This mass exodus from the city was possible because of New Deal policies and agencies such as the United States Housing Authority, the Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal Highway Act of 1956. Even as they populated the suburbs, the newly established American middle class perpetuated social norms that romanticized the countryside and vilified the unclean, disordered city. Indeed, as Jackson rightly points out, the post-war suburban boom conflated homeownership with a nostalgia for the American history of homesteading and a patriotic impulse to own and assign new value to the land through individual development.

The middle-class's nostalgic idealization of homesteading, however, manifested differently in the age of standardization. To accommodate the needs of the rising middle class, the processes of mass-production used during World War II were adapted to produce tract homes, and by extension, the suburbs. Instead of owning and cultivating several acres of land, homeowners owned a home on a large patch of grass. And instead of truly escaping the ills of the city, they commuted between its chaotic, unclean environment and the ordered, sanitary suburbs. Suburban lawns became a marker of middle-class status and identity because a well-manicured lawn represented that the corresponding family had the resources, both time and money, to spend on the way they represented themselves to their middle-class neighbors. Suburbanites sought to find respite from the industrial city by seeking a more natural landscape but destroyed any

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<sup>58</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

semblance of the natural with these yards and their subdivisions, parking lots, and shopping malls.

This notion of a manicured aesthetic was translated to urban environments when master planners surrounded their large-scale housing projects, for example, with an expanse of grass. These planners brought a controlled and simulated version of nature into the city only as an attempt to civilize and reform the urban proletariat, whom the elite, including master planners, viewed as amoral and unclean. These “green spaces” looked good in models and drawings, but when built it was clear they were not scaled to the human body and were thus impractical for use and difficult to maintain or monitor.

In *Death and Life*, Jacobs criticized both urban master planning and suburbanization for perpetuating the sentimentalization of nature and for causing ecological damage. She argues that while Americans were sentimentalizing nature they were participating in an unacknowledged “voracious and disrespectful [destruction] of wild and rural countryside.”<sup>59</sup> She suggested that

[i]t is neither love for nature nor respect for nature that leads to this schizophrenic attitude. Instead, it is a sentimental desire to toy, rather patronizingly, with some insipid, standardized, suburbanized shadow on nature—apparently in sheer disbelief that we and our cities, just by virtue of being, are a legitimate part of nature too, and involved with it in much deeper and more inescapable ways than grass trimming, sunbathing, and contemplative uplift.<sup>60</sup>

In both the suburbs and master-planned cities, nature had been merely represented as an image that had been emptied of its natural content.

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<sup>59</sup> Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 580.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 581.

Jacobs did not see the city as a place to be improved upon by natural aesthetic elements because it was already a natural setting and its inhabitants could exercise their agency to shape and improve the city in more practical ways if need be. In *Death and Life* she wrote, “The cities of human beings are as natural, being a product of one form of nature, as are the colonies of prairie dogs or the beds of oysters.”<sup>61</sup> Jacobs recognized the dangers of suburbanization, spurred in part by a sentimental attitude towards nature, and its impact on large-scale environmental degradation, but her warnings in the 1960s were not heeded by the policy makers, planners, and developers who were responsible for the rise of the suburbs and for bringing a fabricated version of nature into cities.

The stage of urbanization that followed suburbanization, re-urbanization, refers to the movement of the middle and upper classes back into some American cities beginning in the 1980s. The urban environment began to be valued for its business, cultural, and entertainment opportunities, and around the same time knowledge of an environmental crisis was entering public consciousness and sentimental interpretations of nature began to be represented in the city in new ways. New York City in particular faced aggressive gentrification following the 1980s as well as the “cleaning” up of public spaces such as Times Square and Bryant Park through public-private initiatives.<sup>62</sup> These examples are important to note as they set the tone and context for the revitalization of the Chelsea neighborhood and the repurposing of the High Line.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 579.

<sup>62</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1994).

Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996). During the 1970s, Bryant Park was a hub for drug traffickers, but after a master plan was implemented in the early 1980s, which increased maintenance of the park, incorporated public events, and temporary kiosks, the park improved to the point where, by the late 1990s, there would be close to 4,000 individuals in the park during the lunch hour alone.

“Bryant Park today: The modern Bryant Park,” <http://www.bryantpark.org/about-us/today.html>.

Although the design by Oudolf and James Corner Field Operations sustains an image reminiscent of the preceding landscape, the incessant human intervention leaves little room for the spontaneity and unpredictability inherent in natural growth that David and Hammond valued when they discovered the growth on the High Line. The designers employed a sophisticated understanding of the High Line's topography and microclimate, but only to give the park a clean, stylish appearance that contrasted the inorganic urban environment yet the matched the increasingly chic, rich surrounding neighborhoods. Despite the difference in aesthetic between the High Line and the suburban and urban "nature" that Jacobs criticized, each instance has in fact exploited, constructed, manicured, and fetishized nature.

This is can be recognized when considering the overgrown appearance of the landscape throughout the High Line. Despite the misleading image of the park's landscape, the effort necessary to maintain each seasonal aesthetic intended for the park is tedious and labor intensive. For example, at the end of each growing season, the High Line gardeners inventory every single species to know how much of each is growing and where.<sup>63</sup> Friends has its gardeners constantly weeding and pruning and also enlists hundreds of volunteers every Spring to help cut back the dead foliage and prepare the landscape for the blooming season.

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<sup>63</sup> "Ask a Gardener: What are the flags in the ground for?" <http://www.thehighline.org/about/ask-a-gardener>.



**Figure 9 – Spring Cutbacks on the High Line, 2012, photo by author**

In some areas of the park, such as the Northern Spur, plant life is sustained only with constant intervention by High Line staff.<sup>64</sup> This is an instance where natural growth did not flourish in the years of disuse because of the relative exposure to wind and sun the Spur has. The designers, however, ignored these environmental conditions when they designed the Spur to be an area of abundant, lush plant life. As a result, the landscape requires extra attention and resources to maintain as the designers intended.

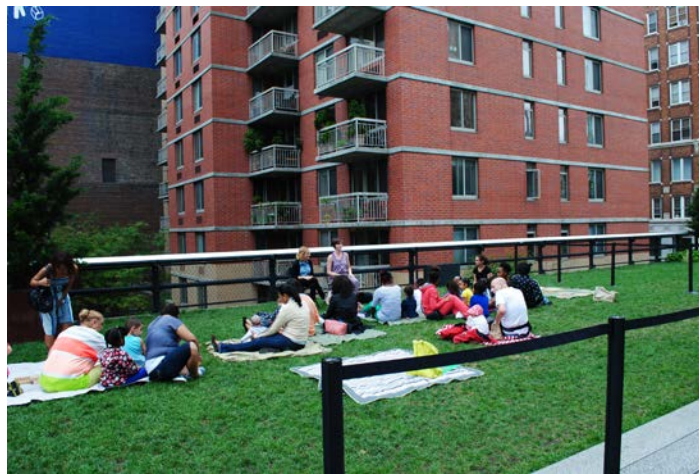


**Figure 10 – Northern Spur (left) and High Line Gardener (center), 2013, photo by author**

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<sup>64</sup> Images of the Northern Spur taken in the period of disuse show only sparse grass growing between the tracks, which signifies the area is not conducive to sustained natural growth.

Throughout the High Line, visitors are not permitted to step or reach beyond the path that extends the length of the park, but there is one place where they can engage with the vegetation. This is the 23rd Street Lawn where people can walk, sit, or lie on the 4,900 square foot patch of grass.<sup>65</sup> However, if visitors want to spend time on the Lawn they must remember that it is only open during the summer months and that they must go between Wednesday and Sunday when the Lawn is open. This is because the lawn sees such a high volume of traffic over the weekend that two days are required for the grass to be nursed back to healthy aesthetic condition.



**Figure 11 – 23rd Street Lawn, 2013, photo by author**

The Northern Spur and the 23rd Street Lawn are representative of the way that nature on the High Line is treated. In the former case nature is an object on display for visitors to observe and appreciate. In the latter case nature is seen and used as comfortable, inviting turf for people watching, picnicking, or sunbathing. Furthermore, both the Northern Spur and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Lawn are kept in pristine, lush condition as a display of prosperity for the surrounding newly-developed luxury apartment buildings. The High Line is frequented by a middle-class and upper-

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<sup>65</sup> “Section 2: Seating Steps and Lawn Come Together,” Accessed April 17, 2014.  
<http://www.thehighline.org/blog/2010/12/09/section-2-seating-steps-and-lawn-come-together>.



class demographic, which portrays their status with the leisure time they spend visiting the park and by consuming the nature incorporated into its design, and by lounging in places like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Lawn.

In 2007, Mayor Bloomberg implemented a plan, PlaNYC, to “prepare the city for one million more residents, strengthen [its] economy, combat climate change, and enhance the quality of life for all New Yorkers [by 2030].”<sup>66</sup> Regarding parks and public spaces the goal of PlaNYC is to “ensure that all New Yorker’s live within a 10-minute walk of a park.”<sup>67</sup> The Plan’s initiatives are to “target high impact projects in neighborhoods underserved by parks, create *destination-level spaces* for all types of recreation, re-imagine the public realm, *promote and protect nature*, and to ensure the long-term health of parks and public space [emphasis added].”<sup>68</sup> The motives for implementing such a plan are commendable and so are its initiatives because they demonstrate an awareness for contemporary urban issues. But the ways in which the Plan has manifested only appear to meet the initiatives. For example, the High Line is considered by the city to be one of its successful destination-level parks that promotes and protects nature.

The version of nature that David and Hammond discovered on the High Line was treated as a precious instance of wilderness that found its way into the city, but instead of respecting its uniqueness and preserving the natural design of the landscape, it was replaced by a replica of that landscape designed by the human hand that requires massive amounts of labor to sustain. The High Line may be a destination for many New Yorkers and tourists, but naturalness is nowhere to be found in its landscape. This is because the designers used their knowledge of how natural

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<sup>66</sup> “The Plan,” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/theplan/the-plan.shtml>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

processes work to create an impressive illusion of an overgrown wilderness. Jacobs saw suburban and master-planned urban forms of nature as an example of the sentimentalization of nature, but what we see on the High Line is hyper-sentimentalization.

#### 4.0 THE CONSTRUCTION OF A “PUBLIC” DESTINATION BY PRIVATE INTERESTS

The High Line is valued by the city as a new destination that draws nearly four million visitors every year to the still growing Chelsea neighborhood. Friends reports that half of the park’s visitors are New Yorkers, while the other half is divided between American and foreign tourists.<sup>69</sup> In 2012, *Travel + Leisure* magazine even named the High Line the world’s tenth Most Popular Landmark.<sup>70</sup> The aesthetic of the High Line is not only a draw for visitors but also developers who have capitalized on the new amenity in an increasingly exclusive, gentrified neighborhood. When Jacobs saw diverse urban space being threatened it was clear that the state, and its commissioned planners, were to blame, but in the case of the High Line, governance has been complicated by public-private partnerships and the prevalence of programs, institutions, and commercial destinations surrounding the High Line that primarily cater to a demographic who has money and leisure. This urban element has experienced a complicated evolution as it was once essential to New York’s production economy but is now being capitalized on by businesses owners, developers, tourists, and New Yorkers who value the park for its chic aesthetic and as an escape from the city. The High Line deserves investigation in the ongoing

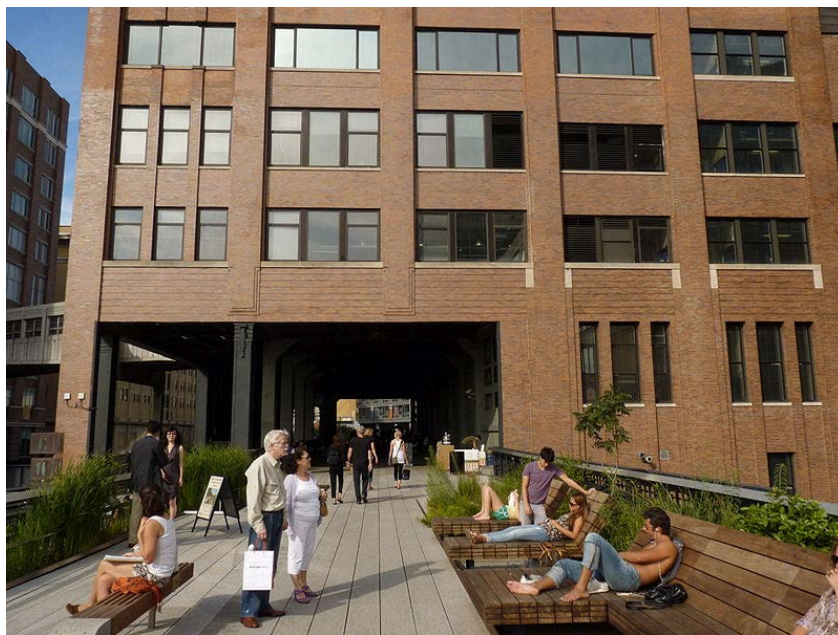
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<sup>69</sup> Kate Lindquist, “Destination High Line: What It Means to Be One of the World’s Top Landmarks,” February 22, 2012, <http://www.thehighline.org/blog/2012/02/22/destination-high-line-what-it-means-to-be-one-of-the-worlds-top-landmarks>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

discourse regarding the limits and levels of publicness in public space in an increasingly privatized urban realm.

The High Line is freely accessible to public and it accommodates many different activities such as sunbathing on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Lawn or on the lounge chairs in an area called the Sundeck Preserve. There are also various opportunities to purchase snacks, desserts, and drinks from food vendors throughout the park.



**Figure 12 – The Sundeck Preserve, 2009, photo credit: Ikbonset**

On any given day at the High Line, one might see school children on a field trip or participating in an afterschool program in which they learn about the original use of the High Line, its flora and fauna, or the history of the surrounding neighborhoods. There also might be joggers in the morning when the park is not crowded, business people on their lunch break in the afternoon, or couples in the evening enjoying a night out.



**Figure 13 – Jogger on the High Line, 2012, photo by author**

The mix of possible uses at the High Line serves the needs of New Yorkers and tourists while Friends presents programs in food and art as a means to entertain and nourish its visitors.

As a part of the High Line Food program, which is “inspired by the idea that food is one of our best connections to community and to the environment,” Friends has given the opportunity for seven food vendors to conduct business on the High Line.<sup>71</sup> In selecting the vendors, the organization is guided by its desire to have “food and beverage offerings [that] will enhance the High Line experience, [and] like the plantings on the Line itself, should reflect seasonality...[Friends] aims for food and beverage [in the park] to be a model for public spaces by providing options that are interesting, high quality, sustainable, and fairly priced.”<sup>72</sup> Also, High Line Food hosts the annual “High Line Soup Experiment,” which is intended to foster a collective, communal experience, and to promote social interaction within the High Line community.

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<sup>71</sup> “High Line Food Programs,” <http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-food>.

<sup>72</sup> “High Line Food RFP,” <http://www.thehighline.org/high-line-food-rfp>.

Friends presents the High Line Art program as well, which “invites artists to think of creative ways to engage with the uniqueness of the architecture, history, and design of the High Line and to foster a productive dialogue with the surrounding neighborhood and urban landscape.”<sup>73</sup> Artwork can be seen throughout the park in the form of site-specific installations, exhibitions, performances, video programs, and billboard interventions.<sup>74</sup>



Figure 14 – “Lying Figure” by Thomas Housago, 2012, photo by author

One of the High Line’s past commissions was Carol Bove’s *Caterpillar* series that occupied the unopened Rail Yards section of the High Line. Bove’s series consisted of seven sculptures installed along a three hundred-yard stretch of the structure. Several of the sculptures were made of steel I-beams welded together at right angles to create a range of angular forms. Others were made of white powder-coated tubular steel twisted into spring-like forms. According to the description of the series, the artworks “reveal themselves among the unruly vegetation, like

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<sup>73</sup> “About High Line Art,” <http://art.thehighline.org/about/>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

mysteriously pristine ruins of a lost civilization or a contemporary version of a Zen garden.”<sup>75</sup>

The presence of commissioned art throughout the High Line extends the limits of the park to match the ambiance, management, and behavior associated with a gallery or museum setting.

The High Line was designed as a platform for free, leisurely, social, and cultural activity and is used as just that. But by its very nature as a place designed for these activities, it can only be enjoyed by those who have the leisure and the means to take pleasure in the amenities offered there. The High Line’s Art and Food programs were designed to foster community discussion and engagement, but they actually contribute to and perpetuate the carefully choreographed experience of the High Line and limit the users of the space. Considering the example of the Soup Experiment, the first event took place in 2012 and welcomed 250 “neighbors” of the High Line to join in the experience, but the attendees, who came from all over North America and not just New York, represented only a facet of the public and created an illusion of community.<sup>76</sup> This is because the seven-dollar, advanced-purchase ticket and ample leisure time requisite for entry only cater to a community with the means to spend on such an experience.

Furthermore, the standards of the food program both assume and perpetuate a demand for “interesting” food options only by subsets of the public who can afford to see their food as a means to uphold a cultural image for itself rather than mere sustenance. Zukin refers to food as “the new ‘art’ in the urban cultural experience” in her book *Naked City: The Death and Life of*

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> After the 2012 Soup Experiment there was a write up about event on the High Line Blog. It read: “This year’s “neighbors” came from all over the country and the continent, as far as Canada and as close as West 20th Street at 9th Avenue. Seven visitors from Montreal stopped by before heading out to see an off-Broadway play. An Ohio photojournalist with a shy, yet charming smile passed by while conducting research on urban green rooftops. Two lawyers traveled downtown from Harlem, and other New Yorkers living in Brooklyn and Queens braved the weekend subway schedule to help themselves to a bowl of soup.”

Ana Nicole Rodriguez, “Celebrating Community and Soup at the High Line,”

<http://www.thehighline.org/blog/2012/10/24/celebrating-community-and-soup-at-the-high-line>.

*Authentic Urban Places*.<sup>77</sup> She writes, “[t]his is true not only because of the enormous growth in the number of restaurants during the past thirty years—from standardized fast-food franchises to the luxurious lairs of high-class chefs and diners—but also because of the dramatic rise of food preparation as a pole of cultural creativity in the urban economy.”<sup>78</sup> The heightened cultural role of food in today’s cities is an especially pertinent example of the fact that the city has become a place of consumption.

In the case of High Line Art, the program offers an uncommon experience in which visitors can engage with art in a unique context, but operates within the assumption that the art will be viewed by a public that has the time and interest to experience the artwork throughout the park but also the education to understand and appreciate it. There are also opportunities for the public to buy art from vendors in a designated area of the park.

These destinations to consume art, food, and entertainment on the High Line mirror those in the surrounding Chelsea neighborhood because it is home to many art galleries, restaurants, retail stores, cafés, and nightclubs. With the High Line at the center of all of this, it has become the physical manifestation of cultural consumption. The artwork showcased and the food available for purchase exemplify this, but also, at the southern end of the park is the future location of the Whitney Museum and towards the middle of the High Line is Chelsea Market, an old factory that now houses the headquarters for the television network The Food Network and boutiques that sell mostly food.

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<sup>77</sup> Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>78</sup> “Sharon Zukin on her Book *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*.”





**Figure 15 – Chelsea Market, 2007, photo credit: mishmoshimoshi**

The park is also surrounded by new architecture designed by world-renowned architects. For example, the new High Line headquarters, which are located adjacent to the Whitney were designed by Renzo Piano, and the nearby headquarters for IAC/InterActiveCorp were designed by Frank Gehry.



**Figure 16 – IAC Headquarters, 2013, photo by author**

Many of the aforementioned businesses, institutions, and amenities in the Chelsea neighborhood were established during the early stages of the High Line's development, but others have been added to the gentrifying neighborhood more recently. For example, as of 2012, there were over thirty built or in-construction developments and ten proposed in close proximity to the park. It is estimated that in less than twenty years the High Line will be responsible for a half of a billion dollars in tax revenue for the city.<sup>79</sup>

Sharon Zukin responds to the rapid development in Chelsea when she identifies the High Line as an "elite park" that has been used as a city-branding tool and has been financially backed by private investors whose businesses are either headquartered in the surrounding neighborhoods or who live in the luxury apartments surrounding the High Line.<sup>80</sup> Two notable investors are Diane von-Furstenberg and her husband Barry Diller. Diller is the Chairman and Senior executive of IAC/InterActiveCorp and Expedia Inc. while von-Furstenberg owns the eponymous fashion label, which is headquartered close to the High Line.<sup>81</sup> Since 2005 the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation has given \$35 million to Friends of the High Line, and in order to honor the role the family has had in making the High Line what it is today, Friends has named its new headquarters the Diller-von Furstenberg Building.<sup>82</sup> Though, since these private investments are made through Friends, a NGO, there is a resulting ambiguity of who actually owns and controls the space.

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Hammond, "Building a park in the sky," TED Talk, 5:41, March 2011, [http://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_hammond\\_building\\_a\\_park\\_in\\_the\\_sky](http://www.ted.com/talks/robert_hammond_building_a_park_in_the_sky).

<sup>80</sup> Sharon Zukin, "Memo from Manhattan: The High Line at Dusk," <https://blog.oup.com/2010/09/high-line/>.

<sup>81</sup> "Leadership," <http://iac.com/about/leadership/iac-senior-management/barry-diller>.

The building was designed by Amale Andraos and Dan Wood of WORK AC and was completed in 2007. "Diane von Furstenberg Studio Headquarters," <http://work.ac/diane-von-furstenberg-studio-headquarters/>.

<sup>82</sup> Jennette Mullaney, "High Line Headquarters to Be Named the Diller-von Furstenberg Building," <http://www.thehighline.org/blog/2013/08/22/high-line-headquarters-to-be-named-the-diller-von-furstenberg-building>.

Zukin has written about cities losing their distinctiveness to private interests and capitalist development because they consist of the same elements in every city. She also argues that the richness of the urban social fabric deteriorates due to gentrification, which undermines urban diversity in terms of class and cultures. Benjamin Shepard and Gregory Smithsimon have written about urban public space in a similar manner by considering the influence that varying levels of exclusion, control, and play (truly free activity, such as spontaneous public performance) have on the politics of public space. The authors identify elites, such as developers, politicians, and bankers, as having disproportionate power in shaping and directing the uses of space for their benefit.<sup>83</sup> All of the aforementioned scholars believe that urban dwellers must organize to establish or reestablish the individual character of their neighborhoods and to lay claim to the public spaces that are most meaningful and useful to them. If the public is not active and does not communicate its needs and desires to decision makers and other members of the public, it risks becoming voiceless and submissive to the power of capitalist corporations. These contemporary analyses of urban culture and public space build on what Jacobs postulated in *Death and Life* about the political agency of citizens. Whereas Zukin and Shepard and Smithsimon's criticisms are in reference to developers and the corporate and private interests that are currently shaping and eroding truly public space, Jacobs' are in reference to master planners who worked for the state.

The political agency of urban citizens was compromised by master-planning practices that began in Europe when modernist architects, such as Le Corbusier, assumed the role of master city planner and sought to recreate cities as modernist utopias. Le Corbusier's famous dictum that the "modern house is a machine for living" also translated into his rational,

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<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Shepard and Gregory Smithsimon, *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City's Public Spaces* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 6.

standardized, and gridded plans for large cities.<sup>84</sup> Le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine, designed in 1922, utilized his modern architectural forms as a tool to organize and accommodate three million people.<sup>85</sup> Le Corbusier proposed a group of sixty-story skyscrapers at the center of the plan to be surrounded by large tracts of grass. This grouping of buildings would also serve as a central hub for all forms of transportation. Throughout the city pedestrian pathways and highways were separated so that automobile traffic could be given precedence and working class residents would live at the edges of the city situated among green space in large, homogenized apartment blocks. Very few of these utopian city plans were built as the urban citizens of Europe voiced their opposition to being subjected to such an oppressive and dehumanizing environment.

The utopian city planning movement was brought to the United States at a late stage in Modernism, specifically during the New Deal era when the government supported projects that could renew and redevelop cities in the wake of the Great Depression. The New Deal empowered modernist master planners to build infrastructure, such as highways, public housing projects, and parks, with autonomy. These projects destroyed the character of neighborhoods and inhibited residents' ability to take ownership of the space around them. While Jacobs lived in the city with her family by choice, many other urban dwellers (particularly African American and low-income workers) were relegated to the city because of their ineligibility to apply for a mortgage loan for a house in the suburbs. As more middle-class Americans fled to the suburbs, cities lost their tax-base and were inhabited by a population of renters. Urban dwellers were eventually taken advantage of by the state, as it permitted master planners to implement projects

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<sup>84</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1986), 95.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Serenyi, "Le Corbusier's Changing Attitude Toward Form. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Mar., 1965), pp. 15-23. Accessed April 18, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/988274>. His modernist, mechanistic designs were inspired by the age of modernization and manifested as simplistic, modular forms.

for the “public good,” when in reality, New Deal era projects such as the building of highways disproportionately catered to suburbanites thereby only making *their* lives more convenient. Meanwhile, urban dwellers faced the effects of displacement, ghettoization, and community fragmentation that came in the wake of these projects. The only way for urbanites to avoid the effects of these projects was to prevent them from being realized. Jacobs urged urban dwellers to take back their city through collective participation in voting at the district level and making their voices heard.

Jacobs criticized the suburbs for lacking spaces that could facilitate public assembly and discourse, and she valued city spaces for having the potential to support public assembly and collective action. Suburban public spaces were rarely independent from consumption and the users of the space were of a relatively homogenous and hegemonic collective. Suburbanites were also more invested in protecting their real estate values than effecting political or social change. Urban spaces, on the other hand, were occupied by a diverse public, which assembled and responded to the state’s oppressive processes. This was seen in the cases of the riots that followed the raid of the Stonewall Inn in 1969 and the sit-ins in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, where Jacobs lived, that were in protest of infrastructure projects that would have destroyed the park and the character of the neighborhood.

Jacobs observed and contributed to this collective action that was prevalent during the 1960s, but it is important to consider how the urban environment changed in the years that followed. It is questionable whether or not Jacobs’ idealism would have survived the oppressive processes of privatization in the city during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>86</sup> In recent decades, the

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<sup>86</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 226.

During the mid- to late-1990s Mayor Giuliani’s administration was pushing for redevelopment as a means to increase revenue and used the reverse migration of people into the city to its advantage. An example of Giuliani’s

aggressive claiming of the urban public sphere by private capital has transformed the once blighted neighborhoods into either commercially branded, low-income, or gentrified communities.<sup>87</sup> Given the economic and political realities of the moment, we might ask if it is possible to realize a truly Jacobsian community today because Jacobs' vision of a racially diverse, culturally vibrant and entrepreneurial city has been appropriated by gentrifiers and contemporary urban planners as an aesthetic ideal.

Considering the remaking of urban space by privatized interests in recent decades, Shepard and Smithsimon have identified a category called "suburban space" under which the High Line falls and can be used to situate the park within the current moment where old industrial spaces are now being used to drive consumption in the service economy. They define these "suburban spaces" as located within cities yet "lushly appointed, well-maintained spaces [that are often] artfully designed by architects, landscape architects, and interior designers who can make the best of these urban spaces seem startlingly chic, rich, clean, and stylish."<sup>88</sup> While there are no explicit restrictions about who can use or occupy the High Line, its ambience excludes those who do not have the leisure time or the means to traverse the socio-economic divide for a visit.

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privatization efforts is his implementation of Business Improvement Districts. "A Business Improvement District is a formal organization made up of property owners and commercial tenants who are dedicated to promoting business development and improving an area's quality of life. BIDs deliver supplemental services such as sanitation and maintenance, public safety and visitor services, marketing and promotional programs, capital improvements, and beautification for the area - all funded by a special assessment paid by property owners within the district."

"What is a BID?" accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.nycbidassociation.org/>.

The people moving to the city often represented a demographic of young suburbanites who saw the city a place where they could express their individuality and be a part of a larger cultural collective, both things they longed for in the sterilized, standardized suburbs. These were often the people who would move into undervalued neighborhoods like Chelsea and inadvertently catalyze gentrification.

<sup>87</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 226.

<sup>88</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, *Beach Beneath the Streets*, 34.

The authors reemploy the term “suburban” as a way to explain this very phenomenon as it is now manifesting in cities. The strategy of development that was first used in the suburbs to segregate economically and racially different neighborhoods and communities through geographical distance is now reshaping downtown and urban areas. As a result, low-income urban communities are being excluded from certain parts of cities in the same manner that they were once excluded from the suburbs.<sup>89</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon suggest, however, that the new “suburban spaces” have the potential of becoming public because of a “spatial revolution.” Regular users of the space would lead this revolution through action and public performance to serve a broader, more diverse public.<sup>90</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon clarify that it will not be a revolt to “tear down the old order, but to productively, creatively reappropriate it, reshape it, and imagine alternate ways of using space.”<sup>91</sup> This surreptitious appropriation of space would cause the public to have to discern how the space was being used differently, which could inspire discourse or action.

During the 1960s, philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas contributed to the discussion surrounding public space with his theory of the public sphere. He defined the public sphere as existing in free, democratic, inclusive space in which common citizens could gather to discuss social and political issues that were affecting their lives.<sup>92</sup> It is important to distinguish between public space and the public sphere because while a space, like the High Line, might be considered public because it is free from taxation, it cannot overlap with the public sphere if it

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<sup>89</sup> The authors of the book *The Suburbanization of New York* also claim that New York City is becoming suburbanized.

Kingsley Hammett, Jerilou Hammett, eds., *The Suburbanization of New York* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, *Beach Beneath the Streets*, 209.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox. “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964).” *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49-55. Accessed April 17, 2014.<http://www.jstor.org/stable/487737>.

does not have the potential of being activated by discourse over which the state or capitalists do not have full control.

Whereas Habermas theorized the public sphere based on his observations of how state and capital control shaped public space and public discourse, Jacobs spoke and acted against the hegemonic plans controlled by the state and realized by master planners. Both Habermas and Jacobs brought attention to the importance of democratic public space for the free expression and articulation of ideas. But as an activist, Jacobs addressed these problems with urgency and took action to empower ordinary people with political agency in the interest of sustaining vibrant, diverse, and democratic urban neighborhoods.

Shepard and Smithsimon suggest what action should take place in this new kind of urban space, “suburban space” to so that they can be democratic and foster public discourse. They do so by identifying the opportunity for and action of play and public performance as requisite for liberating public space.<sup>93</sup> They write, “[t]he ludic, joyful, temporarily uninhibited physical engagement with the space itself is both an opportunity to act out one’s identity and life and a means to expand the boundaries of accepted behavior. It is an opportunity to explore and experiment with reality, identity, and possibility.”<sup>94</sup>

At the High Line there are “invisible” rules that regulate the space, and we can consider the following example of an impromptu, citizen-initiated performance that was staged near the public park to better understand its limitations. In 2009, soon after the park opened, a woman named Patty Heffley began to use her fourth-story fire escape adjacent to the High Line as a performance stage. At the beginning of one performance, she announced, “This is in response to

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<sup>93</sup> Benjamin Shepard and Gregory Smithsimon, *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City’s Public Spaces* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>94</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, *Beach Beneath the Streets*, 18.



31 years of obscurity. Now, every day there are thousands of people looking in my window. We're not here to celebrate, we're here to exploit. Welcome to the Renegade Cabaret.”<sup>95</sup> Her spontaneous performances were well received and visitors began to look to see if the lanterns on the fire escape were on during the day, which would indicate that a performance would take place after dark. After two years of performances, however, Heffley's landlord informed her that she was not permitted to use the fire escape in the way that she was and the performances stopped.

The unique circumstance of the Renegade Cabaret reveals the limits of the High Line as public space. During Heffley's unplanned performances, the High Line became a place where visitors could reflect on their position as individuals within a collective audience. It also unexpectedly empowered Heffley to use the High Line to her advantage. The park's visitors would watch and appreciate the performances, which the High Line authorities could not control, rather than enjoying the activities for which the park was designed. When these performances stopped, members of the transient public that use the High Line did not question the discontinuation of performance nor did they take an active role in replacing it. The public did not experiment with the possibilities of the space or examine and engage in discourse about its limitations. As Shepard and Smithson argue, the spontaneous appropriations of place and space, such as those of Heffley's performance, are vital to thriving communities and the public sphere, and without them we lose the dynamic interchanges that make up a democratic urban society. Instead, in spaces such as the High Line, we see an erosion of the public sphere and a complacent public that perpetuates a cosmetic representation of public space without the political essence of a public sphere.

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<sup>95</sup> Penelope Green, “West Side Story Amid the Laundry,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/garden/25seen.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/garden/25seen.html?_r=0).

When the High Line is recognized as resembling a Jacobsian space, one that promotes inclusive, mixed-use, community-oriented space, its contrived façade is all that is considered. This aesthetic ideal is sustained and perpetuated by the management of the public behavior of those who visit the High Line who agree to an unwritten social contract to behave cordially and appropriately given its luxurious environment. The written rules of the park are clearly posted at its entrances and prohibit “[w]alking on rail tracks, gravel or plants, amplified sound, except by permit, obstructing entrances or paths, and events or gatherings greater than 20 persons, except by permit.”<sup>96</sup> These restrictions conveniently discourage large spontaneous gatherings such as protests that would generate from and foster discourse about the space, how it is used, and its gentrified surroundings.

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<sup>96</sup> “Park Rules.” Accessed April 18, 2014. <http://www.thehighline.org/about/park-information>.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The introductory epigraphs of this thesis serve to illustrate two extreme interpretations of the High Line. Whereas one hails the park as a “Miracle Above Manhattan,” the other condemns it for being a catalyst of rampant gentrification. It was necessary to perform careful analysis of the history of uses, owners, and physical states of the structure over the course of its 80 years existence to illustrate that the High Line is a contested space that cannot be reduced to labels regarding quality, success, or necessity. Models of skepticism originally employed by Jane Jacobs were adapted to the current moment and applied to the High Line because they address ways in which nature has been sentimentalized in cities and the varying levels of publicness found in urban public spaces. The current state of the High Line is, however, a product of the radical changes that have taken place in cities since the time of Jacobs’ writing and must be investigated through the purview of contemporary theories of urban design such as Shepard and Smithsimon’s notion of “suburban space.”

The most radical changes can be seen manifested in the increasing number of “suburban spaces,” gentrified neighborhoods, and spaces that are owned by both public and private parties, also known as public-private partnerships. In the case of the High Line, ownership is shared between the NGO Friends of the High Line and the City of New York. Friends receives many small donations from its members to provide over 90 percent of the annual operating budget for the park, but also receives large donations from local business owners and developers who

prosper if the neighborhood prospers. Given this imbalance of investment, it is worth questioning whether or not the motives of the investors are in the interest of the public good.

The High Line is valued by business people who own local property or companies because the high quality of the park's design has set the precedent for equally lavish buildings and spaces in the area. The parks also adds value to every neighboring building. Luckily for the residents of these buildings, which are often luxury condos, their expectation that the views of the High Line will match the quality of their dwelling is always met.

Nature has been exploited in the landscape design of the High Line so that Chelsea can continue to attract investors, wealthy residents, tourists, and consequently revenue. The perpetually pristine nature of the park is what mystifies the portion of the public who has the leisure time and means to visit the park and causes them to wholeheartedly praise it without considering the hegemonic processes of homogenization and privatization that have made the High Line what it is today.

The park is valued and celebrated by its visitors because it as a free destination where they can experience unique views of the city, walk amidst a lush landscape of foliage, engage with commissioned artwork, and relax in a cleaner, quieter environment than the city below. What has been veiled is that this portion of the public, or this portion of consumers, has been targeted by the investors and decision makers involved in the recent transformation of the High Line. Whether a New Yorker or a foreign tourist, the visitor is equipped to consume all of the food, culture, and goods that they might find on the High Line or in the surrounding neighborhoods.

The High Line cannot be considered a "*Miracle Above Manhattan*" [emphasis added] because no part of the High Line has been left to chance. Once it was decided that the structure

would be transformed into a park in the already-gentrifying Chelsea neighborhood, the High Line became a victim of the power of private-sector interests and its middle- and upper class-visitors began to be distracted by the allure of an urban space that seemed to meet their needs. These conditions have lead to the emergence of a passive public that does not question their role in the creation and perpetuation of a seemingly flawless space such as the High Line, and pays no regard to the ramifications it might have on diverse urban population. If it is not possible or practical to challenge the hegemonic processes surrounding spaces like the High Line through collective action such as protest, we must critically analyze the complexities of these spaces and engage in discourse to discover our role, as individuals and as a collective, in their implementation and impact.

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