

Case Study:
The High Line Park, New York City
Public Space Trade-offs in the
Urban Growth Machine

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Perhaps no other early 21st century adaptive reuse project better personifies the seismic and cascading implications of redeveloping post-industrial landscapes than that of the High Line Park, a mile and a half elevated linear park located in New York City's West Chelsea neighbourhood. The transformative impact of the High Line at both the neighbourhood and city levels remains unparalleled, due in no small part to New York's premier global financial and cultural standing. The High Line Park opened in 2009, with second and third branches completed in 2012 and 2014. It quickly became iconic and has since sparked the creation of dozens of rails or roads-to-trails projects in other cities across the United States and Canada, eager to create flagship public spaces that replicate the High Line's success. The High Line's redevelopment was built on sustainable design principles which seek to balance economic growth, environmental quality and social equity. It has been heralded as a win-win model of a public-private partnership

that created a public park by repurposing a derelict industrial artifact, stimulating economic growth in an area considered by many to be run-down (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017a; Rosa & Lindner, 2017). However, who is benefitting from the High Line's economic successes has increasingly come under scrutiny, along with more critical consideration of the High Line's design and its cultural and social implications.

Origins

The High Line's origins as an industrial rail track (1934 to 1980), to its period of abandonment with an uncertain future (late 20th century), to its more recent redevelopment as a high end park (early 21st century), mirrors New York's City's own financial evolution, decline and renewal over the past century. Construction of the elevated rail track began in 1929, its primary function to move meat, dairy and produce from the portlands, along the city's western industrial waterfront's Meatpacking District, and into

Lower Manhattan (The Friends of the High Line, n.d.). By constructing the rail line 20 feet overhead, the City sought to relieve street-level congestion and remove the safety hazards of the at grade rail tracks. The rails were heralded as an engineering marvel of their day (Lopate, 2011).

During the 1960s, as New York was actively transitioning from a manufacturing to a post-industrial service economy, demand for the rail service declined. In 1980 the final trains ran. What followed was a period of almost 30 years in which the tracks stood idle, gradually becoming a wildscape, reclaimed by nature. During this interstitial period from abandonment to redevelopment, the High Line took on a new identity, that of a “left-behind” space, being used by those on the social margins, many of whom were connected with Manhattan’s queer geographies (Millington, 2015; Patrick, 2024).

Meanwhile, at ground level, debates over whether or not to demolish the elevated tracks remained active as the neighbourhood around it changed. Steady development pressure in the neighbourhood resulted in the City

removing five blocks of the elevated rails south of Gansevoort Street in 1991, despite the objections of community activists (Patrick, 2024). As manufacturing moved out, artists and professional classes moved in. Chelsea’s identity became steeped in high art and gay culture and by 1999, Chelsea housed more art galleries than any other New York neighbourhood (Loughran, 2022). The process of gentrification had begun.

As the 1990’s progressed, middle-class residents who were not protected by rent stabilization laws were priced out of the neighbourhood by wealthy professionals and a handful of luxury condos sprung up along Chelsea’s western avenues (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b). For many, the High Line was not only an eyesore but an obstacle to the neighbourhood’s continued redevelopment. Under Mayor Rudolph Guilani’s pro-development tenure, its demolition appeared imminent. However, a chance meeting by community activists Joshua David and Robert Hammond in 1999 at a Community Board meeting to save the High Line changed its fate. Within months of the meeting, the two founded the Friends of the High Line (FHL), the charitable organization that championed its

preservation and that ultimately proved catalytic for the creation of the new park. The FHL is now responsible for the High Line's operations and programming while the City of New York owns the land.

An Exponential Return on Investment

The High Line Park is promoted by the city as a sustainable project, yet at its core, it is a market-driven initiative of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial city. It exemplifies the apparatus of the urban growth machine, driven by pro-growth coalitions of place entrepreneurs that emphasize the exchange value of spaces as marketable units, over the use value by residents (Farahani, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017a; Loughran, 2022). Backers of the High Line Park placed paramountcy on aesthetics and emphasized environmental design, yet its broader function was (and is) to boost economic growth and attract global capital investment while serving as a powerful environmental branding tool that supports the City's culture-led and tourist-oriented economic strategies (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017a; Rosa & Lindner, 2017; Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b).

More pragmatic than ideological, the duo behind the FHL leveraged their marketing savvy and networks to build a strong brand and raise public consciousness about the High Line, working with journalists and photographers to help people reimagine the High Line, not as a symbol of urban blight, but as a romanticized industrial ruin teeming with new potential. The FHL's emphasis on creating a "public" park fell on receptive ears across a city whose Park's Department budgets had been slashed and battered by years of public disinvestment in tandem with uneven private reinvestment (Brash, 2017). Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration, elected in 2002, proved far more receptive than Guiliani's to the idea of keeping the structure, seeing it as an opportunity to deliver on its objective of attracting the creative class by creating destination parks that in turn, spur new development and investment. The City however, wanted to see the business case that would allow it to recoup its initial investment and financing costs. In response, David and Hammond commissioned a real estate consulting firm to assess what the new park would generate in development and property tax relative to the City's upfront investment. This Initial analysis estimated that the High Line Park

would cost \$65 million and generate \$140 million in incremental tax revenue over a 20 year period (this number later increased to a \$200 million ROI) (David & Hammond, 2011).

For its part, the City used zoning to capitalize on the economic potential of the revitalized High Line, rezoning the neighbourhood from industrial to residential save for a section in the middle to remain a manufacturing zone, in order that the galleries not be priced out after rezoning (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b). The area was redesignated as the West Chelsea Special District. Through the use of a zoning tool known as transferable development rights (TDR), the City reduced local opposition to preserving the rail tracks while also raising dedicated park funds by allowing adjacent property owners to build taller than zoning allowed in exchange for contributions to the new park's capital infrastructure. The TDR also provided property owners with the option to transfer their air rights to nearby properties (Jacobs, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017a). In addition, the rezoning plan designated certain areas around the High Line for inclusionary zones that allowed larger buildings in exchange for 20 percent of

units being affordable. These rules aimed for the construction of 1,000 affordable units although as of 2017, only 348 of these were located in West Chelsea (Jacobs, 2017).

The High Line Park is estimated to have spurred nearly two billion dollars in real estate development and increased the property values within a 5-minute walk by 103% (New York City Economic Development Corporation in Patrick, 2024). Resale values on apartments adjacent to the High Line rose 10% faster than comparable apartments a few blocks away (Matthews, 2019). Ultimately, David and Hammond's initial estimate of a \$200 million return on investment has proven to be wildly underestimated. By 2038, development adjacent to the High Line is projected to have contributed \$900 million into the city's coffers (Jacobs, 2017), a sizable return on the City's initial financial investment of \$132 million towards the first phase of the park's cost of \$152 million for the first two sections. The balance of costs were paid for by high-profile city philanthropists, many of whom also had real estate interests in the neighbourhood (Loughran, 2022; Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b).

Collectively, the financial potential of the High Line, the City's West Chelsea rezoning and use of TDRs, and the support of high profile philanthropists created pressure for the High Line to succeed and meant that the project would have to focus on high design and material excellence in order to advance the area's real estate development potential (Sherman, 2019). Without the FHL's mobilization efforts, it's likely that a new public park would not have been created and that private development would have been the alternative. Yet in adopting a pro-development stance, "the High Line may also have undergirded the status quo of unequal power relations and impacts of urban development" (Sherman, 2019, p. 29).

If the High Line is a Win-Win, Who Exactly is Winning?

The popular success of the High Line has raised pertinent questions about equity, diversity and democracy, the three principles underlying Susan Fainstein's concept of the just city (Fainstein, 2010). In its first year of operations, the High Line attracted an estimated 1.3 million visitors against its initial projections of 300,000 visitors (Ganser, 2017). By 2019, this number had skyrocketed to over 8

million annual visitors (Matthews, 2019). The experience of walking the High Line today feels less like an opportunity to experience the city and its views of the Hudson River, and more like being herded through an elevated canon among high rises that conveniently links visitors directly to the gallery, foody and retail consumer destinations via the placement of the at-grade pedestrian entrances (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b).

All this begs the questions: Who is the Park ultimately for? How might its positive economic impacts be more widely shared and benefit those who may need them most? How does the park's design, engagement and identity reflect who has and has not been included in New York's post-industrial economy? To this last question, political scientist Alexander Reichl surmise:

While the SoHo aesthetic of a recycled industrial landscape has proven appeal among New Yorkers who thrive in the post-industrial economy, it is not difficult to imagine that it holds less appeal for Blacks and Latinos who have suffered disproportionately from industrial decline in their neighborhoods and employment prospects.

If this is the case, then industrial recycling is particularly concerning because it features prominently in many of the city's newest post-industrial parks (Reichl, 2016, p. 920).

Despite being located in a neighbourhood in which a third of residents are people of color, and more than one in five are Black or Latino, the vast majority of the High Line park users are white (Reichl, 2016). Within the High Line's West Chelsea neighbourhood, there are two substantial public housing developments (Fulton and Elliott-Chelsea Houses) with roughly 1,000 apartments each, housing over 5,000 residents. For most of these residents, the High Line does not feel like a welcoming, or relevant, place for them despite the immediate proximity. Further, these residents, although living in rent controlled residences, experience the displacement pressures from commercial gentrification as high end retailers have moved in (Brash, 2017).

Danya Sherman, the founding Director of Public Programs, Education and Community Engagement for FHL, acknowledges that the FHL's campaign and design processes lacked ownership and engagement from the

broader diversity of residents in the neighbourhood and that this may have contributed to the low levels of engagement among local public housing residents in the High Line, particularly in its early years (Sherman, 2019). In response, the FHL undertook a range of measures to better consider what it might look like to intentionally develop equitable public spaces. Sherman's team focused on creating a more collaborative, less extractive model of community engagement through deeper listening and by partnering with public housing residents in the neighborhood and other individuals and groups that are typically marginalized by urban development investments. This helped the FHL to develop programs that better met local needs and priorities (Sherman, 2019). These efforts, along with the FHL's refocused commitment to create a more equitable park may be bearing some fruit. The Friends of the High Line visitor tracking data indicate an increased diversity range among visitors since the park's early days. In the 2009–2010 survey, 19% of survey respondents identified as non-white. By 2015, this number had grown to 34%. More non-white New Yorkers are also visiting the High Line, 24% in 2009–2010 compared with 44% in 2015

(Ganser, 2017). Data on the socio-economic status of visitors is not available.

The High Line Park's relationship to its industrial past and its former identity as a left-behind place are also called into question. The High Line's "aestheticization of industrial chic" design that blends industrial ruination with nostalgia and natural processes, foregrounds the critique of post-industrial landscapes as commodifying contemporary uses while depoliticizing and ignoring the impact and experiences of those who created, lived and worked there (High, 2013; Mah, 2012; Stanton, 2006).

The HLP design enlists surface elements of New York City's manufacturing history - structural and design elements of the tracks and the views of the warehouses, factory buildings and waterfront below - in a nostalgic gesture devoid of a meaningful connection to the actual use value of these objects and the social relations in which they were embedded (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b, p. 9).

As Millington writes, the High Line is a highly manicured park that has ultimately rejected the original site's pre-renovation transgressive spirit and contributed to the privileging of high profile parks over the broader provisioning of green space across the city (Millington, 2015). Further, created to be more than "just" a park and instead being a work of art unto itself, the High Line Park has encapsulated the late 20th century's shift towards aesthetic concerns being integral to the growth of urban capital. This shift has drained art of its utopian ideals and degree of independence from the market (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b). The High Line is a passive aesthetic landscape for class-based cultural consumption whose design and aesthetics neither challenges the socio-economic and politics of the elite, nor connect with the stories and experiences of the nearby working class neighbourhoods. Ultimately, the High Line Park set a new bar for the intentional intertwining of passive aesthetic apprehension, landscapes of exchange value, and conspicuous consumption in urban design, collectively utilized as a development strategy of the creative city, postindustrial neoliberal city.

The spectacle that has become the High Line has sparked critical debate about the ways public and private investments in prominent parks have come at the expense of park equity across the city as a whole wherein wealthy communities of self-interest invest in their neighbouring parks while parks in poorer neighbourhoods go without (Brash, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017a; Loughran, 2022). The visibility of this growing contrast made glaringly evident by the High Line opened up new discussion about park equity with growing political focus on both the amount and distribution of resources. In 2014, Mayor Bloomberg's successor Mayor Bill Blasio launched his \$130 million Community Parks Initiative, focusing on the city's parks as a system to which all New Yorkers should have equal access, rather than one in which individual parks benefit from local self-interest (Brash, 2017). Park equity advocates have leveraged the FHL's claim that the High Line is a public park in order to question why other public parks have not also received relative public investments. If the response is that it is because the High Line attracts private investment, then is it truly a public park?

Conclusion

In a city and neighbourhood that has become marked by post-industrial symbolism (Zukin, 1991), the High Line has become the poster child for landscapes of post-industrial consumption. Inevitably the gentrification of the Chelsea neighbourhood would have continued in the absence of a marquee high end park, yet it is also undeniable that the High Line acted as a catalyst for hyper-gentrification (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b). Realized through a pro-development agenda, the High Line Park has served as a jewel in the City's luxury branding crown. From a park equity perspective, the High Line is viewed as a "paradigm of exclusion, privatization and elitism" (Brash, 2017, p. 13). Yet its impact has also contributed to important discussions that have resulted in shifts in policy, resource allocation, community engagement and program design in public parks and brought clearer focus to the need for greater social equity and distribution of wealth in cities driven by market-based economics. These shifts, including an awareness of the importance of institutionalizing inclusion by embedding equity at the beginning of the

design process and more specifically, as it pertains to park equity and the distribution of public resources in parks have occurred at the organizational and neighbourhood levels as well as across the city of New York as a whole. As the High Line Park has become emblematic for those embarking on culture-led strategies that involve the adaptive reuse of former industrial landscapes, influencing the approach to redevelopment in cities beyond New York. The High Line story and an understanding of its impact continues to unfold and its final chapters are far from written.

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