

The View From Above: Inclusion, Exclusion and Aesthetic Experience in the Luxury City

Working Draft

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Our research explores class contradictions and processes of social inclusion and exclusion generated by the development of the High Line Park and, by extension, other new forms of revitalized public spaces. Fashioned from an abandoned section of elevated railway, the HLP functions today as an urban brand designed to sell New York City in a globalized world. It was, however, constructed only after initial supporters sold the project to diverse groups of stakeholders based on appeals to both economic growth and a version of public good and community benefits that goes beyond economics. Projects like the High Line claim at the outset to resolve tensions between neoliberal urban development, with its prioritization of economic gain, and a modernist urban utopianism of democratic access to nature and aesthetic experience. Our research confirms the persistence of tensions between private profit and public good generated by development projects like the HLP. It also raises fascinating questions about the processes by which culturally driven urban revitalization reinforces class boundaries and social exclusion through aesthetic experience. We draw out and analyze these tensions and processes as we evaluate the data we have collected through participant observation, interviews, photo-documentation and from a variety of extant data sources. We consider our evidence in light of current scholarly debates on urban development, neoliberalism and the post-industrial city.

Introduction

The High Line Park and the surrounding neighborhood serve as illuminating sites from which to study the process by which culturally driven urban revitalization reinforces class boundaries and social exclusion (DeSena, 2009) and through which a range of often contradictory discourses about urban development play out. Here, enhancing the aesthetic environment is part of a development strategy that does not require the more material violence of locked gates or eviction notices. This development strategy, though market-driven in its logic and its consequences, nonetheless relies at least in part on a narrative of public good and public access to desirable resources.

An urban greenway fashioned from the ruins of an abandoned section of elevated railway which graces the Western border of New York City's West Chelsea district, the High Line has garnered international attention and serves as a model in cities throughout the world. One of the most successful economic development projects in New York City in recent times, it is a spectacular urban brand designed to sell the city in a globalized world of competitive city-regions (Greenberg, 2008, Ashworth and Voogt, 1994). While the High Line's boosters are numerous today, it was constructed only after initial supporters sold this project to diverse groups of stakeholders based on appeals to both economic growth and to a version of public good and community benefits that go far beyond economic interests (David and Hammond, 2011). For some, the High Line seems to

resolve central tension between neoliberal urban development, with its prioritization of private economic gain, and a modernist urban vision that promotes democratic access to nature and aesthetic experience. However, our preliminary investigations highlight a number of class-based contradictions generated by this project and, by extension, other new forms of urban development.

Our study draws on qualitative research that we have conducted and will continue to conduct throughout the next academic year. Our data thus far includes over a year's worth of interviews with community organizers, residents of West Chelsea, High Line visitors, Friends of the High Line staff and volunteers and local business owners. We have also collected extensive field notes on and around the High Line and at community board meetings and other public discussions concerning housing and development in West Chelsea. In addition, we have culled newspaper articles, on-line blogs and discussions, public relations material and other textual sources for the purpose of conducting a content analysis of the rhetorical strategies deployed by High Line boosters and detractors. We have also assembled a sizable data-base of found and self-generated photographic images. The semiotic analysis of these images plays an ongoing role in our study (see Harper, 2012, Shortell, T and J Krase, 2012, Pink, 2001). Finally, we consider data from a number of extant sources on real estate values, neighborhood demographic profiles and park usage.

Placing our data within the context of debates concerning neoliberal urban development and gentrification (see, i.e. Theodore, N., Peck, J. and Brenner, N. 2011, Smith, 2002) we address the following sets of questions:

- What kinds of strategies did High Line advocates and promoters deploy to convince stakeholders, including community boards, preservationists, developers and city officials, to support the development project? How were the issues framed in public discourse? What kinds of struggles took place and what sorts of compromises did stakeholders make?
- Who uses and doesn't use the High Line? Why? How is the High Line used? How do community members, especially low-income community member use other public spaces in the neighborhood?
- How does the High Line structure and frame experience? How does the High Line as a visual and social experience frame the spaces of the surrounding areas?
- What visions of urban utopianism are invoked by the High Line and surrounding spaces?

In addition to these specific questions, our study seeks to address several gaps in the research on gentrification and urban restructuring. Neo-Marxist urban geographers (e.g. Harvey, 2007, Smith, 2008, Peck, et.al, 2010) have described large-scale global processes of neoliberalization. However, as some scholars complain, these analyses often lack specificity and fail to address the complexity and variation of the processes on the ground

(Gilbert, 2010, Blockland, 2012). At the same time, more focused, case-based studies of urban communities often fail to adequately connect the specific case to general, global tendencies (see Blockland, 2012). Also, case studies sometimes overemphasize the degree to which creative agency is at play as actors negotiate, understand, reproduce and contest their social conditions. Our research seeks to bridge these related gaps by carefully attending to the large scale social processes, most notably the global transition to neoliberal forms of social, economic and political organization that shape culture, social interaction and development on the local level. It is through a nuanced study of these factors that we seek to understand and evaluate our rich data regarding how people interact with, appropriate, re-appropriate, understand and construct the socio/spatial environments around them in West Chelsea.

Urban Development and Public Parks in the Neoliberal Era

Increasingly, in many cities throughout the world, parks, public spaces, amenities and essential public services have been transformed by assorted privatization schemes or, as they are commonly called, “public- private partnerships.” Unlike the flagship parks build in pervious eras, the new generation of flagship parks like the High Line are almost totally dependent on private financing for their creation and survival.

In a city known for taking decades to get something built, and in many cases killing development projects before they get off the ground, the creation of the High Line Park, is a remarkable success story. In a few short years, the derelict elevated railway went from being an eyesore and an object of derision to a celebrated urban icon and public space frequented by locals and tourists from around the globe. While the High Line has been hailed as a magnificent urban park and “a work of art,” it is also regarded as an “economic development tool” by city officials responsible for rezoning the neighborhood through which the elevated park runs.

What enabled the dream of preserving the moribund railway as a public park to be realized was the use of a zoning tool known as transferable development rights (TDR). Initially, property owners who owned the land underneath the High Line wanted the structure torn down so they could build and realize a profit in gentrifying Chelsea where real estate values were soaring. After numerous legal battles, public debates and hearings, they agreed to preserve the High Line with the stipulation from the city planning department that they could sell their air rights to nearby developers..

The High Line takes the public private partnership model to a new level by allowing developers in the surrounding neighborhood to expand the size of their buildings in certain designated areas in exchange for donations to a special High Line Improvement fund. The recent rezoning document for Chelsea created the Special West Chelsea District “to provide opportunities for new residential and commercial development, facilitate the reuse of the High Line elevated rail line as a unique linear open space, and enhance the neighborhood’s thriving art gallery district.” Co- founders of the High Line Robert Hammond and Joshua David often talk about how in the days when preserving the

old elevated railway was uncertain, they had to promote the project to city officials as a way to brand the neighborhood to attract development and tourism. Their strategy clearly worked. Real Estate Developers who formerly regarded the High Line as a major obstacle to redevelopment increasingly came to regard it as a major selling point for their new projects abutting the High Line. In the recently proposed Hudson Yards mixed- used mega project, being connected to the High Line has become a key “amenity anchor.”

The marriage of historic preservation and economic development potential proved to be a great success and was soon hailed as a viable model for urban redevelopment in other cities. At a 2012 conference on the future of New York City, former Deputy Mayor for economic development Daniel Doctoroff, stood before an image of the High Line packed with tourists as they gazed upon rows of new buildings designed by renowned architects and proclaimed, “Around the world cities are relentlessly copying New York. In order to stay competitive, we must stay on edge, whether it’s Brooklyn Bridge Park or the Highline.” According to urban planning critic Witold Rycbeznsk, “American cities are always looking for quick fixes to revive their moribund downtowns. Sadly, the dismal record of failed urban design strategies is long: downtown shopping malls, pedestrianized streets, underground passages, skyways, monorails, festival marketplaces, downtown stadiums — and that most elusive fix of all, iconic cultural buildings. It appears likely that we will soon be adding elevated parks to the list.”

Community Engagement and Public Private Partnerships

The Friends of the High Line (FHL) much like other public- private partnerships, constantly stress the importance of working with and involving “the community.” According to co-founder of FHL Robert Hammond- what is different about the High Line is that it is a bottom up community- based project that was initially opposed from the top. In Hammond’s account of the HLP’s development trajectory, the appeal to market incentives was only made as a last-ditch attempt to mobilize resources for a project intended for the public good: “We had supporters from all of the city and the world. You can only fight city hall for so long if you wanted to build something. The Bloomberg admin eventually got behind the project because they saw its economic and touristic potential.”

Nonetheless, even early on, the FHL realized that garnering community support for a project that was sure to intensify the gentrification of the neighborhood was a precarious endeavor. While supporters from the surrounding community were initially enthusiastic about the idea of a park in the sky, it wasn’t too long before many became disenchanted as the High Line became successful. Many began to accuse the FHL of complying with the gentrifying forces that they felt were destroying the character of the neighborhood. Co- founders of the High Line Robert Hammond and Joshua David are simultaneously celebrated and championed by city elites in the government and private sphere and castigated by neighborhood groups and organizations for selling out the community to real estate interests.

The notion that parks and public spaces help to increase property values and serve as economic catalysts has become conventional wisdom for both park advocates and city planning officials. At the opening ceremony for the second section of the High Line, Mayor Bloomberg proclaimed that preserving the High Line as a public park revitalized a swath of the city and generated over 2 billion in private investment in areas surrounding the park. However, public-private partnership schemes that have helped to preserve the High Line are being questioned by many who are asking if it is still possible to imagine that the High Line is a public commons which isn't tightly scripted by regimes of capital accumulation and real estate development. As Harvey has pointed out in *Rebel Cities*, "Much of the corruption that attaches to urban politics relates to how public investments are allocated to produce something that looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners." Even the popular press has begun to note that not everyone is sharing in the benefits of the so-called "High Line Effect". A recent headline in the local papers reflects a common neighborhood sentiment: "High Line: Too Much of a Good Thing?"

While FHL are proud of the fact that they didn't create a "mall on stilts," their cozy relationship with developers has many of their supporters worried. One resident who used to volunteered with the FHL during the rezoning process which helped to preserve the High Line has come to regard the success of their lobbying efforts as a "pyrrhic victory." As a professional tour guide and life long Chelsea resident with a detailed knowledge of local history, she was going to lead tours for the FHL but changed her mind after seeing what the new park was doing to her community.

By preserving the High Line we made a devil's bargain. I was beginning to feel that our success was turning into a pyrrhic victory- this wonderful feeling would be lost with the rezoning. The High Line that we initially imagined as a unique public space was fast becoming a canyon through a wall of luxury high rise condos. It was becoming clear to me that the views of the river that we thought the High Line would offer were disappearing. We gave up so much with that High Line deal.

In a similar vein, another community activist and initial advocate for the High Line has referred to the park as "the backyard of the rich." The president of the tenant's association for one of the public housing complexes that are located in the shadow of the High Line feels that the establishment of the park didn't do anything for the many low-income residents of the community. "The High Line didn't create any new affordable housing, only condominiums for the rich, and the park itself has no open spaces for kids, but is more something for tourists to walk through."

Despite the High Line's role in accelerating gentrification and despite their reliance on money from developers, the FHL still proclaim that they are working for the benefit of the community. According to Joshua David, "We care passionately about this being a place for all people in the neighborhood and all New Yorkers. And if there are some expensive buildings in the High Line neighborhood, then that's true of neighborhoods throughout Manhattan. But this remains an incredibly diverse neighborhood, and we're

committed to its diversity.” For Amanda Burden, the head of the City Planning Department who made the preservation of the High Line her main mission, gentrification is the path to revitalization and rejuvenation. “[G]ood design is good economic development” she has argued “What I have tried to do, and think I have done is help to create value for these developers, every single day of my term.” In terms of gentrification, she echoes many in the planning profession who argue that, “Gentrification is merely a pejorative term for necessary growth.” When pressed by critics who claim that she has been at the forefront of the cities recent turbo charged gentrification, she has argued that “...improvement of neighborhoods — some people call it gentrification — provides more jobs, provides housing, much of it affordable, and private investment, which is tax revenue for the city.” In terms of the High Line, for her the positive benefits from gentrified development clearly outweigh any adverse effects.

The FHL have been criticized by some community activist for not reaching out to the poor and working class residents residing in the public housing projects located along the High Line. According to a community resident who was involved in the early battles to preserve the High Line, “When they (FHL) were holding public meetings trying to get people from the public housing sites to come to the meetings they soon realized many of them had no interests in the park. Since they don’t have a lot of money they were more interested in putting food on the table- they wanted to know if there were jobs involved... The Friends of the High Line were adamant that they couldn’t promise jobs.”

To bridge the gap in enthusiasm of the neighborhood’s poorer residents for the park, in 2012 the FHL hired Erycka Montoya Pérez, to serve as a Community Engagement Manager . Her role is to focus on community based initiatives that would reach out to the 5,000 residents of the Elliott-Chelsea and Fulton Houses, the public housing complexes that contain the park’s largest group of immediate neighbors. In 2011, after surveying more that 800 people from both housing complexes and the FHL found that many residents were unfamiliar with the park and did not make frequent visits or feel engaged with it. Results of the survey showed that residents expressed a sense of not belonging; feeling like the population of visitors on the High Line was not representative of the diverse demographics that make up the neighboring communities or New York City as a whole. The survey also revealed that High Line did not fit into many people’s ideas of a “park.” The High Line has space constraints that make it impossible to allow traditional park activities like biking, barbequing, and dog-walking. But even so, the survey showed that residents were interested in gardening programs, collaborating on cultural events on the High Line, and employment opportunities. According to Ms Perez:

I’m focused on building and strengthening relationships between the communities that surround the High Line, and ultimately maintaining a vibrant community around the High Line, which is an integral part of the mission of Friends of the High Line. My role is centered on getting to know the diverse communities that the High Line intersects. First and foremost, the High Line is a public space, and, as such, we want to ensure that people feel a sense of ownership and take pride in it. For that to be the case, the programming we offer

needs to serve the needs of the public, especially our most immediate neighbors.

With the hiring of Community Engagement Manager, The FHL claims to have strengthened their ties with the residents in the public housing complexes. During a 2012 annual benefit, a FHL board member spoke about the importance of reaching out to the public housing community:

New York City is a most fortunate place because we have a legacy of public housing in this city that is unlike anywhere else. The reason it matters to the High Line is that these are our neighbors. They are integral and central to our mission.

Our research shows that despite the community engagement efforts on the part of the FHL, the majority of residents from the public housing complexes still feel disconnected from the High Line and rarely use it.

The Win -Win Discourse and its Discontents

In an interesting twist to the High Line development saga, some residents from the public housing units have begun to rethink their negative stance about real estate development tied to the High Line. While many initial supporters and “friends” of the High Line have become bitter about the pro development stance on the part of the FHL, activists from the public housing units have begun to strategize about working with developers on different types of “community benefit agreements.” The recent controversy over Chelsea Market, an old factory that has been repurposed as an upscale retail food market frequented by residents and tourists alike is a case in point. When the owners of the market, which is connected to the High Line, wanted to expand and heighten the “historic structure,” many angry residents cried foul. To hard-core historic preservationists, such a move was almost “sacrilegious.” While the majority of local residents were against the expansion, the FHL were supportive of it because the developers would have to contribute to the High Line fund. In the struggle to “Save the Chelsea Market,” it became clear to many that increased development was a too high a price to be paid for a so-called public amenity like the High Line. While the proposed expansion caused many residents to view their beloved High Line in an unfavorable light, community activists working on behalf of public housing residents, who were never enthusiastic about the park in the first place, began to view it as an opportunity that gives low-income people a bargaining chip to negotiate for possible benefits such as jobs. While not outright cheerleaders for the High Line as an economic development tool, they have become its reluctant but willing partners. In short, the win-win discourse used to legitimate private development on the grounds that it benefits the public good has become hegemonic. Nevertheless it is clear that contradictions implicit in this discourse have not been resolved.

Inclusion and Exclusion by Symbolic Means

West Chelsea has undergone rapid gentrification over the past decade or so (Molotch, and Treskon, 2009, Rothenberg 2012), driven, in part, by an influx of art galleries (Halle and Tiso, 2005, Rothenberg, 2012), creative industries, high-end food retail shops and hotels,

world-class architectural projects and, most recently, the development of the High Line. New York's emergence as a paradigmatic "luxury city" in the 21st century (see Brash, 2011:101) is no more apparent than in this neighborhood where children of residents who work in New York's financial and media industries play in local playgrounds alongside Katie Holms and Suri Cruise, and high profile celebrities share the streets and restaurants with well-heeled tourists. At the same time, because of the existence of a number of middle and low-income housing projects protected by New York City's strong tenants rights laws (see Angotti, 2008, Moody, 2007, Freeman, 2001) West Chelsea is home to perhaps the most economically polarized populations in one of the most economically polarized cities (Liu, 2012) in the United States.

West Chelsea is not characterized by any of the concrete physical strategies of exclusion deployed in gated communities or heavily guarded shopping malls characteristic of Los Angeles, Orlando or the suburbs of Connecticut (see Davis, 2006, Zukin, 1993). Low and middle-income residents of West Chelsea's NYCHA housing projects are in little danger of imminent displacement through rising rents or landlord harassment. The Highline Park, like the art galleries to the West (see Halle and Tiso, 2009), is free to visitors who enjoy views of the river and the built gems, people-watching, public art and the latest trends in landscaping [images 4-5]. According to data collected by the non-profit group Friends of the High Line (FHL) the park hosted more than 3.7 visitors in 2011, half of who were New Yorkers (FHL blog, 2012). It remains open from early morning until 11 at night in the summer, and there have been no public reports of racial profiling or excessive harassment of minorities by security and very little crime (Chung, 2011). In addition, the FHL offers educational programs targeted for Chelsea area families. However, despite the absence of obvious deterrents, Chelsea public housing residents do not use the High Line much. While it is almost always crowded, volunteers, docents and security guards whom we interviewed consistently pointed to a lack of visible presence of low-income Chelsea residents on the High Line. This perception (thus far FHL has not made public any data they may have generated that addresses socioeconomic class or other demographic details regarding visitors (unpublished interview, Rothenberg, 2012) was also reaffirmed through interviews with public housing residents and community leaders (unpublished interviews, Rothenberg and Rothenberg and Lang, 2012).

At the same time, despite the fact that the housing projects are in plain site from most eastward views from the High Line, these dwellings and their residents are invisible to many High Line visitors. In this image, [image 6] taken from the High Line at 25th street, a surreal frame captures the view of NYCHA's Elliot Houses. In front of the frame sit bleachers from which viewers can contemplate the eastward view. On one afternoon, we asked several visitors if they knew what they were looking at, and none were aware that they were viewing public housing (Rothenberg, unpublished interview, 2012). Had they descended the stairs and wandered through the playgrounds, picnic areas, black-tops and benches nestled within and between the residential buildings of the NYCHA housing, they would have found urban spaces teeming with community life. Indeed, the active usage of the public spaces that we observed below contradicts the criticisms of modernist tower in the park models of development (see Harvey, 1989, p. 70-98)) that have been

used, in part, to legitimate more glamorous public private partnerships projects like the High Line.

Culture and Aesthetic Experience

Urban sociologists have explored use of art and culture as economic engines in the post-industrial urban economy for decades (eg. Zukin, 1982; Smith 1996; Smith and Fillipas, 1999; Peck, 2005, Deutsch et. al. 1984; Ley 2003; Lloyd, 2005; Hackworth 2002; Mele, 2000). We draw on these studies to help understand how aesthetic disposition and visual display structure reinforce class identity, inclusion and exclusion in the spaces on and around the High line. We also draw on the work of cultural theorists who have focused more exclusively on social practices, culture, class and aesthetic experience. Along with Bourdieu, the French theorist Guy Debord (2006) helps to explain how spectacle and the aesthetic gaze reinforce class power and serves to tame and objectify potentially threatening forces, natural and human. This perspective raises questions about how High Line engages and organizes aesthetic experience. Does the spectacle that is the High Line construct a discourse and ideology, which neutralizes, normalizes and legitimizes the extreme forms of social inequality that accompany new urban transformation?

In contrast, urban and cultural theorists working from a production of space perspective (e.g. de Certeau, 1984, Lefebvre, 1991) shed light on the processes through which actors construct and reconstruct social space through cultural and aesthetic practices. These insights help counter the tendency to interpret the social practices of excluded groups solely as responses to exclusion. Instead, we ask whether low-income Chelsea residents' apparent lack of interest in the High Line might be understood as resistance to the class polarization accompanying developments like the High Line. And, the manner in which public housing residents make use the spaces connected to their public housing units might reflect an ideological commitment to the values of equity and redistribution that at least in part drove urban development in the post-war city (Moody, 2007, Harvey, 1989).

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