Reclaiming the High Line: Shifts in Neoliberal Urban Policy through Landscape Urbanism

by

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This document is dedicated to the quiet observers.
The city, as the site of complex economic, political, social, and cultural relations requires a critical analysis of the diverse range of challenges that the urban scene will face as financing becomes a central question in the quality of the urban experience. Issues facing today’s city include affordable housing, unemployment rates, and education. Serious efforts to combat these social service challenges amidst dwindling resources are often given the same degree of attention as that given to public parks. Urban open space, however, is associated with leisure and recreation; and it would be assumed that the city would prioritize time, resources, and funds to projects that have the greatest social good.¹ While it is fashionable to boast artifacts of luxury, the stress placed on open space seems contradictory to the romantic ideals of democracy and the seriousness of pressing issues in the American city.

During a time of uncertainty, why is public open space vital in the discussion of the city’s future? To begin answering this question, the current context needs to be examined in what will be referred to as the process of the High Line, meaning the actions, obstacles, compromises, and resolutions that happened in the course of the High Line’s transition from a derelict railway to the green open space it is today. By examining the redevelopment process of the High Line, it can be concluded if the High Line is a model for the urban experience. This document seeks to explore the process behind the development of a new open space, the High Line, in New York City in order to understand how urban public policy is shaping the urban experience and why it affects the people who live in the city.

The High Line

Situated above the busy streets of New York City’s Lower West Side lies the High Line, an innovative, green open space. At first glance, the 1.45-mile elevated park running from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District through Thirty-fourth Street in Chelsea resembles the opposite of what one would expect of an urban park. Today, it offers a unique experience of floating twenty-five feet above ground through its boardwalk-path running along the once abandoned railway. With its heavy, black steel structure supporting an elevated rail line that once carried freight cars directly inside warehouses and factories in the Meatpacking District, the park seems more like an abandoned relic than an urban oasis when viewed from the streets below.

Until recently, the High Line was a relic of Manhattan’s industrial past. A railway that the city government left abandoned after its closing in November of 1980 because they were unsure about what to do with it, the High Line inspired a group of individuals
to save the structure from demolition in 1999. During the High Line’s period of abandonment, a self-sown landscape sprouted beneath the railway bed. Left virtually alone for twenty years, a whimsical, wild garden took root in an urban area marked by industrial infrastructure and commercial spaces. Local property owners along with New York’s mayor for much of the 1990s, Rudolph Giuliani, wanted to tear down this piece of urban decay in order to accommodate the property development potential of the gentrifying Chelsea neighborhood permeated by art galleries, upscale restaurants, and chic loft living. However, before demolition was scheduled to begin in 1999, the wild landscape inspired a group of local citizens to consider another option to bulldozing the gigantic steel structure.

Understanding the intricacies of the story behind the High Line encourages a multidisciplinary examination of New York City, as what we look for in a proper model for the city remains a critical question. An architectural structure, like the High Line, offers us something to look at when attempting to contextualize the institutional components at work. In order to better understand the social, political, and economic contexts responsible for this particular story, neoliberal urban policy and landscape design will be examined prior to the formal presentation of the High Line’s extensive history.

The arguments presented here are not intended as rhetoric, but rather serve as an organization of the dialogues present in our cities about public open space. The perspective taken on neoliberalism is not one of a naïve idealist, but rather is one of reason with hints of skepticism about the guarantee of progress as a reward for positive thinking. For our cities to move forward, we need to accept the perceived misgivings of neoliberalism (such as the recent economic recession) and formulate ways to take
responsibility for the current challenges by restructuring the components of the ideal urban experience (such as accessible transportation, recreation, and clean air) that we find necessary in our neighborhoods. Simply, this is a discussion about recycling the existing infrastructure in order to build a more accommodating society, instead of starting from scratch.

Neoliberalism

What is neoliberalism, and what does it have to do with American cities? Within contemporary social theory, the term “neoliberalism” emerges quite frequently. However, its implications are rarely defined in relation to an existing example of implemented neoliberalism in an American city. This section attempts to introduce neoliberalism in relation to the High Line in order to show the relevance of neoliberalism as an ideology, mode of city governance, and driver of urban change.

Simply defined, the term neoliberalism describes a market-driven approach to economic and social policy. It stresses the efficiency of private enterprise, liberalized trade and relatively open flexibility to maximize the role of the private sector in determining the political and economic priorities of the state. The paradigm of neoliberalism refers to a prevailing trend that neoliberal-focused policy leads to social, cultural, and political practices that place the shift of risk on the individual instead of the government by using a terminology that frames consumer choice and individual autonomy as important, even though it best serves the capitalist elite, in reality.

Articulated most clearly through private and public partnerships, neoliberalism has taken hold in the United States because of several factors. Two political and

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economic factors in particular focus the discussion of neoliberalism in relation to urban policy. First, structural constraints of a market economy cause rationally motivated individuals to act in terms of their own material self-interests instead of towards actions that contribute to state-funded social spending.\(^3\) This characteristic neoliberal approach is evident today in the common investment of public funds for private real estate development, while state funds allocated for social service amenities, such as affordable housing, continue to dwindle. Second, there has been an ideological shift in governing practices towards upholding little state intervention.\(^4\) Much of this is due to the inherent qualities of a capitalist economy, but also is a result of previous government failures to establish a centralized agenda.

Two prominent social theorists of neoliberalism, Freidrich Hayek and Milton Freidman, argue that the government should be used sparingly and only in specific circumstances, rather than interfering with the marketplace.\(^5\) Returning to classical theories on liberalism (specifically Smith, Bentham, and James Mill), they base this argument around the disturbing results of government intervention in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy, by pointing out that such political scenarios could play out again if personal political freedoms are not protected. Thus, state intervention should be avoided at all costs. By the 1990s, neoliberalism became equated with social conservatism in the United States and acted as the only natural choice for the American city in the context of expanding globalization.\(^6\)

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The neoliberal doctrine became the natural choice in the 1990s because cities
needed to be globally competitive sites for capital investment in order to compete with
international markets of production. The market could no longer sustain its activity
through the production of objects, so it shifted its reliance on the selling and producing
of goods to taxes. Because real estate brought in a huge amount of money from
property taxes, urban governments sought to make land more valuable and thus, more
profitable. This combined with the themes of classical liberalism most strongly
articulated by Hayek and Friedman, designated neoliberalism as the corrective salve
during times of economic crisis.\(^7\) This particular study of the High Line presents
evidence of a changing approach to neoliberalism.

It is a dialectical process composed of conflicting tendencies toward destruction
and creation. As a destructive process, neoliberalism entails the removal of Keynesian
artifacts (such as public housing) whereas, as a creative policy, it encourages the creation
of establishments that will reproduce future artifacts of neoliberalism. Often, the
resulting policy is segmented and uneven, strewn with concentrations of existing
neoliberalism in different places and in different stages of creation or destruction.\(^8\) The
elements of neoliberalism, considered as the trilogy of the individual, the market, and the
noninterventionist states, need to work together as three components in order to realize
an urban design.

\(^8\) Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*, 47.
Actually Existing Neoliberalism\(^9\)

Because the implementation of neoliberalism varies with specific urban circumstances, it is imperative to examine existing forms of neoliberalism in order to make fully-rounded conclusions about the ways in which public policy shapes the architectural design of city structures. The High Line, as a relic of the $175 million West Side Improvement in 1930 and today as a redeveloped park, illustrates the operation of neoliberal urban policy because the structure carries a story about compromise and negotiation between different players in the private and public sphere. The term *players* refers to individuals or groups involved in the network of people ultimately responsible for the transformation of the High Line into a successful green open space. While the close examination of a piece of architecture inevitably reveals the faults of the High Line as a model for neoliberalism, it nonetheless provides valuable insight about how neoliberalism is functioning within cities.

Landscape Urbanism

Reviewing an artifact of urbanism through a neoliberal lens easily guides a reader to a skeptical conclusion about the current state of New York City due to the powerful role that money plays in a city virtually run by the affluent elite class. Much of this is due to the market-driven nature of neoliberal urban policy. So in order to avoid an overly cynical view on the High Line, I will also explore the role landscape urbanism played in the shaping the High Line’s design. This will grant balance to the former discussion about the role of neoliberalism, but will ultimately offer insight into the evolving

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relationships between the city and nature.\textsuperscript{10} The appearance of these two converging topics in the over-arching story of the High Line is an intriguing component and will be explored further in Chapter Three.

Through a set of two design competitions, the design team (comprised of landscape architect James Corner of Field Operations and architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro) produced the winning design. The team’s proposal created an urban experience unlike any other in New York City. Listening to the original intent of the Friends of the High Line (FHL) to preserve the wild landscape on top of the railway bed, while also constructing the space into a public park, the group carefully crafted a plan that balanced the refinement of Chelsea with the rough-hewn, industrial quality of the High Line’s history as a railroad. Visitors meander through slivers of untamed landscape juxtaposed beside the refined architecture of Frank Gehry’s IAC HQ building (Figure 1), a vibrant office space located on the northwest of West Eighteenth Street in clear view from points on section I of the High Line. As will be elaborated on further in Chapter Three, an examination of the design of the High Line discusses this convergence of neoliberalism and landscape urbanism.

A park is an easy place to allow our minds to wander because parks are associated as areas for leisure and recreation. Walking the line offers the chance to participate in two vastly different environments – the fabricated (IAC HQ Building) and the organic (wild landscape sprouting from the rail bed) – at the same time. The design of the High Line plays with the tension existing between these two opposing forces through a park composition that utilizes the sturdy railway structure to foster the growth

\textsuperscript{10} The term \textit{nature} refers to the organic flora and fauna found in wild areas such as forests or mountains. Often nature is used in the construction of public spaces because of its appealing aesthetic value when juxtaposed against the manufactured, built environment.
of an untamed, organic ode to the resiliency of nature, even in the face of big modernist infrastructure. The built environment, best categorized as architecture, is comprised of inanimate materials and does not adapt to a changing natural environment. Landscape offers a unique comparison to the built environment. It affords a range of imaginative and metaphorical associations and has recently come back into fashion as a term because of society’s heightened awareness to environmentalism, a social movement focused on improving the state of the environment, and climate change. Both the surrounding architecture and the landscape of the High Line are resting in a native state, which allows visitors to quietly contemplate the role each has in the quality of the human experience, if they so desire. With the daily concerns about climate change and the economic recession looming over the city, a walk on the High Line produces a space that invites us to revise our relationship to the organic in a manner that celebrates this new urban ecology.

**Brief Outline**

**Chapter One** will be a chronological history of the High Line from its beginnings as a railroad until the early efforts to redevelop the structure into a public park. The intention of the first chapter is to establish the complete understanding of the High Line’s origins alongside an account of the players involved in moving the project forward. With this foundation established, topics beyond architectural history can be elaborated on more fully in the next two chapters.

**Chapter Two** will introduce the public policy components and arguments of the High Line discussion through an analysis of the Friends of the High Line campaign to

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save the structure, the procedure for securing adequate funding, and the eventual rezoning of West Chelsea. This chapter will allow for further insight into the intricacies of real estate development and the challenges of that market-driven emphasis in a city.

Chapter Three will discuss the design of the High Line through a critical examination of the original vision of the Friends of the High Line, the two design competitions, and a stylistic analysis of the implemented design proposal. This chapter will act as the beginnings for the dialogue about the trend of unprecedented landscape design in various cities across the globe.

The combination of these three chapters will provide the necessary evidence to prove the existence of an intersection between policy and design, as seen in the High Line as a public park. This intersection will then show how those involved in the park making process are rethinking the shape of the urban experience in New York City. This intersection results in a new type of ecology that expands from previous definitions of a public park through this interplay between neoliberal public policy and landscape design. The concluding question will attempt to answer how this intersection can aid future existing examples of neoliberal urban policy.

Intersect: Policy + Design

The acknowledgement of an intersection of policy and design, as explored through the story of the High Line, invites a broader discussion about compromises made in the urban planning process, which often jeopardize the urban experience in the American city. Urban development acts as an effective mechanism for generating economic development and expressing political interests. However, the urban planning process fails to provide local benefits at sites of redevelopment if the city government
fails to consider the interests of the neighbors and reconfigures an urban physical environment according to their own tax revenue incentives. The redevelopment of the High Line stands apart from the countless projects delayed in city hall because the project had the luxury of sufficient private funding, which allowed the Friends of the High Line to bypass continuous city approval for funding. While the City of New York needed to approve the project in general, the location and branding of the High Line project raised $500 million in private funds, which gave the players adequate flexibility to carry out their original intention of preserving the wild landscape. As a whole, the narrative behind the High Line pertains to money and how real estate values fuel that need for consistent flows of capital in the city. It is here that the story begins.
While certain forms of architecture inspire visual associations for their functions, such as the formal differences between an office building and an open space, a structure like the High Line does not define New York City solely based on its form as a pedestrian greenway. The IAC building, for example, represents the architect Frank Gehry more poignantly than it does an office building. There has been a myriad of scholarly criticisms about this ongoing battle of perspectives between the formal function of a building and an architect designing a signature building. Paul Groth, professor of architecture and geography at the University of California, Berkeley states:

Individuals in their daily individual practices mentally “construct the world” for themselves. Our individual actions (agency) and perceptions of surroundings become part of our individual identity.12

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However, a single architect did not design the High Line. So, its physical manifestation cannot be fully understood without exploring the multiple players involved in its transformation from a derelict railway to the beloved green open space that it is today. This chapter delves into the historical narrative of the various players involved in the High Line, such as Mayor Bloomberg, the Chelsea Property Owners, and Friends of the High Line.

**History of the High Line**

The story of the High Line begins in 1929 with the West Side Improvement, a government-funded initiative. The measure established the necessary infrastructure needed to meet and eventually exceed the demands of an economy based on industrial production in New York City. The High Line opened in 1934, as a part of the West Side Improvement, after a group of local citizens of the Lower West Side formed a coalition, Mothers of Death Avenue, to protect their children’s safety in the area.\(^{13}\) The group brought the city’s attention to the numerous traffic accidents, resulting in pedestrian casualties, that occurred because cars and surface railroads shared the same spatial plane of movement. Because of the community’s concern, the West Side Cowboys, a heard of men who directed traffic while riding horses, guided the trains to avoid more accidents (Figure 2). However, this forced the train to inch along at a leisurely ten miles-per-hour. The Mothers of Death Avenue persuaded city officials to elevate the train above the street in order to best serve the interests of the city because if removed, the train could run at a pace appropriate to meet the persistent demands of the numerous factories in

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\(^{13}\) Friends of the High Line, *Designing the High Line: Gansevoort Street to 30th Street* (New York, NY: Finlay Printing LLC, 2008), 16.
the area. This benefited the city because shipping became more efficient and production increased, which lead to greater revenues from sales of products produced from the factories on the Lower West Side. It also helped the citizens by making the streets safer for pedestrians.

The project brought together more than forty years of planning and negotiations between New York City and the New York Central Railroad Company. The New York Central Railroad built the St. John’s Park Terminal, along with new industrial and warehouse spaces in the Starrett-Lehigh Building and the Port Authority’s Union Inland Terminal No. 1. The High Line, an elevated railway that ran through the industrial West Side of Manhattan, was built according to the zoning regulations established in 1916. During construction, the railroad company owned around ninety-five percent of the surrounding land, allowing them to best utilize the land according to industry in order to increase their efficiency and profits related to the increased production that was predicted as a result of building the elevated railway.

When the High Line was running as a freight railway, the industrial zoning category fit well into the character of the Lower West Side. However, by the 1960s, industrial production was in decline and the demand for freight shipping decreased. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the High Line no longer served a crucial role in the economy of New York City. By the 1980s, the government had built an extensive network of highways and commercial trucks became a more efficient form of moving cargo. The trucks also used gasoline, which unlike coal did not add tremendous amounts of visible pollution to the environment, in the short-run. The city tried to improve air

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quality by transferring the majority of transportation to trucking in order to decrease the
amount of coal burned by trains.

As the middle class fled to the suburbs on the highways built by Robert Moses
from the 1930s to the 1970s, the city no longer offered as many opportunities for
employment as it once did during the height of industrial production. By 1980, the last
train ran across the High Line. Commercial activity, programmed around industrial
production, waned as activity ceased on the railway. Many industrial factories closed,
which made room for the increasing demands the automobile brought on New York
City through the use of manufacturing spaces for car repair and parking.

Because industry could no longer support New York City’s economy, the city
needed a new source of consistent capital that shifted away from industry and towards a
new, potentially more lucrative market. The new focus revolved around the revenues
earned from real estate, such as taxes and monthly rents. Real estate development
outweighed the relevance of local industrial production of objects for consumption. So
the city focused on restoring the Lower West Side in order to attract more people who
desired the residential urban experience to return to Manhattan.

Chelsea Property Owners (CPO)

While the industrial future of the West Side looked bleak, the city was shifting its
focus by supporting its urban economy through the revenues produced from tourism
and real estate values. Areas in Manhattan, such as the East Village, began to gentrify in
the 1990s because of the housing surplus and the potential for an area to provide
commercial districts. Chelsea, once a less attractive place, became a prominent art
gallery district after the rents rose too high in neighboring SoHo forcing small galleries to
relocate to the north. As mentioned earlier, the highest percentage of the government’s budget comes from property tax revenues. So, for entrepreneurs to make the greatest profit in Manhattan, the land needed to be developed in a manner that would derive competitive demand, a trend in economics observing that when more people desire to rent certain spaces owners can charge a higher rate. Many real estate developers considered areas of the Lower West Side valuable as some of the last remaining, undeveloped space in Manhattan. Because of the aesthetically unattractive industrial architecture in areas like the Meatpacking District and the Hudson Rail Yards, many spaces kept their industrial zoning and could not be easily developed into a new program, such as housing. Challenged by how extensive rehabilitating industrial architecture would be, real estate developers questioned how to approach these areas for nearly twenty-years after the last train ran along the High Line. Private real estate developers feared that because the land was not valued enough to make a substantial contribution to the city’s economy through taxes, the public sector would assume imminent domain and develop it according to how they saw fit.

The High Line challenged real estate owners in a similar same way. As an abandoned structure, many of the property owners felt the line prohibited the development that would realize the financial potential of the land value underneath the railway. The added pressure of corporate real estate developers to build in the area lead the Chelsea Property Owners (CPO), a group of individuals who owned land underneath the High Line, to band together in order to protect their private property rights. Founded in 1989, the group crafted a demolition proposal for the structure to be

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submitted to the Surface Transportation Board (STB), a federal board that has jurisdiction over the nation’s railroads. Douglas Sarini, president of the CPO, told the Surface Transportation Board, that the structure jeopardized their development rights because the High Line had made it impossible to develop and realize the value of their property.\textsuperscript{18} To the CPO, the High Line no longer served its intended function as a transit for manufacturing goods, between the different industrial buildings, and thus was a symbol of urban blight and the city’s failure to maintain industrial production.

**Peter Obletz fights the CPO**

In the 1980s, the late Peter Obletz, a neighborhood visionary, proposed to save the High Line stretch from Thirtieth Street to Thirty-Forth Street, where the railway loops around parts of the Hudson Rail Yards between Tenth Avenue and Twelfth Avenue.\textsuperscript{19} The derelict wasteland on the western fringe of Hell’s Kitchen was his backyard, and one day in the 1980s he climbed the long, rusting overhead structure, known today as the High Line, to find an astonishing space. Obletz recounts in a 1984 *New York Times* article: “It was a terra incognita up there. Unrestricted space. Unimaginable tranquility.”\textsuperscript{20} As a railroad enthusiast, Obletz proposed reinstating the structure to freight service and eventually, opening service for passengers to experience the views along the Hudson River (Figure 3). He opposed the CPO in a hotly contested debate about the development opportunity of the railyards west of Penn Station. The Consolidate Rail Corporation (Conrail), owned the elevated structure, and had begun to take steps to abandon it in 1984. In an early attempt, Conrail offered to

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
sell the High Line to any group willing to reinstate freight operation. Obletz seized this opportunity and bought the structure for ten dollars. However, the CPO and New York State’s Department of Transportation vehemently attacked this purchase and fought him in court until they bankrupted Obletz of all his personal funds. Jerold Nadler, an early supporter of Obletz noted that, “the entire power structure in the city, except for a couple of council members and Assembly members and Peter Obletz, wanted to destroy it.”

By 1987, the Interstate Commerce Commission reversed the sale and Conrail withdraw its request for abandonment in order to avoid paying for the line’s demolition, as there were no other interested buyers.

While Obletz’s efforts to reinstate freight service along the line fell short in the 1980s, his actions delayed the demolition of the High Line after Conrail withdrew its abandonment request. Without Conrail to pay for the demolition costs, the railway remained abandoned.

**Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the CPO**

“I’m the reformer. If we keep going merrily along, this city’s going down.”

– Rudolph Giuliani, 1993 campaign debates

Mayor Giuliani consistently opposed the High Line redevelopment proposals, such as allowing artists to paint it or turn it into a promenade, by supporting the Chelsea Property Owners desire to demolish the railway. He remained convinced that the High Line was an urban blight and only limited the real estate potential of the area. For Mayor Giuliani, creating new development would bring greater value to the existing and underutilized property surrounding the High Line. Assuming that this neoliberal,

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21 Ibid.
market-driven approach to policy would bring about an increased value in real estate, Mayor Giuliani favored the CPO’s request.

During his time as Mayor of New York City, Giuliani focused on spurring development through tourism. Partially this reflected his efforts to combine development with social control. In 1992, the Mayor’s Office acted as the Lead Agency on the demolition application, through the Office of Environmental Coordination.\textsuperscript{23} His largest, most central project for turning development towards tourism was Times Square.\textsuperscript{24} However, as Kim Moody has written about his administration, “Giuliani’s own personal gift to development involved the tying together of competition for tourism, increased tax giveaways, and a massive police crackdown on quality-of-life crimes and on the homeless in Manhattan.”\textsuperscript{25} Like Robert Moses, urban transformer in the 1970s, Mayor Giuliani sought to bring people to Manhattan through clearance of the unmentionable aspects of the urban experience, such as homelessness, that drove away tourists and potential real estate developers.

The High Line, like homelessness, appeared as another symbol of urban blight and something that needed to be cleared in order for New York City to survive property tax depreciation and the City’s ever-presented economic woes. According to John Pettit, West 3rd director of planning for residential real estate firm Rockrose Development,

\begin{quote}
The High Line creates a lot of problems. It places our buildings on the wrong side of the tracks from the West Village and the West Village on the wrong side of the tracks from the waterfront.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid, p. 133.
Giuliani’s stance on the High Line reflected the city’s position on the real estate development debate on the Lower West Side in the 1990s, which encouraged property owners to develop their land. Giuliani adopted the neoliberal model for his analysis of the CPO’s demolition order because he reasonably found a reuse scenario a very remote option.\textsuperscript{27} Despite Mayor Giuliani’s emphasis on development for tourism, which might have inspired him to consider the potential of the High Line as a site for recreation, he remained on the side of the Chelsea Property Owners concerning the future of the High Line. The idea of transforming the High Line into an open space had not yet been conceived of fully, and to him, this was a distant, idealistic dream. Joseph B. Rose, then chairman of the City Planning Commission commented: “there are significant financial, maintenance, operation and liability issues, as well as the structure’s blighting effects on multiple properties.”\textsuperscript{28} Giuliani based his decision – about the High Line’s demolition versus reusing the structure – on the profound practical obstacles that would have to be achieved in order to realize the theoretical and romantic concepts of redeveloping the High Line into a greenway. With the Hudson River Park (Figure 4) project underway and located along the West Side Highway, he noted that it was unrealistic to expect another restoration project, like the High Line, to be publicly financed. Without adequate funds, such an ambitious project could never be realized.

**Friends of the High Line (FHL)**

On a summer morning in 1999, Robert Hammond, a thirty-one year old entrepreneur and former consultant with Times Square Alliance, Alliance for the Arts and National Cooperative Bank (NCB), read an article about the High Line in the New


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
York Times chronicling Giuliani’s recent acceptance of the CPO’s demolition proposal.²⁹ As a resident of the local community of Chelsea, he felt a sense of ownership of the line and wondered how this demolition proposal would affect the neighborhood. With the support of Mayor Giuliani, the demolition seemed like a probability. The points made in the article were persuasive. For example, Irwin Corwin, the director ATC Management, the corporation responsible for the redevelopment of the former Nabisco plant at Tenth Avenue and Fifteenth Street into the Chelsea Market, stated about reusing the High Line: “We don’t benefit by it anymore. That [Promenade Plantée in Paris, France] (Figure 5) sounds very good but this is not the center of Paris. This is not near an opera house. What are they going to see?”³⁰ Still, Hammond wondered if the city should reconsider this before they went ahead and began tearing down a huge steal structure, causing more construction in the city and affecting the businesses near the High Line. Having seen the elevated structure in passing, he faintly knew the character of the High Line. Three stories above the busy streets of Chelsea and the Meatpacking District rested a wild landscape left untouched for nearly twenty years and scarcely known to the majority of the passers bys. While the line was abandoned private property, Hammond wondered if there was an alternative to tearing it down. So he attended the next Chelsea community meeting to join a group with the same goal of reconsidering the demolition efforts of the Chelsea Property Owners, but he found that such a group did not yet then exist.

Joshua David, a thirty-seven year old freelance travel, food, and design writer from Chelsea, also attended the same meeting. Like Hammond, he hoped to join a local

group working to save the railway — so the two joined together and created Friends of the High Line (FHL). An ally of Hammond and David, Lynden B. Miller, a well-known designer of park gardens, stated that the Friends of the High Line’s project was pursuing a worthwhile civic objective. She observed: “every time you walk on the High Line, you can’t help but say ‘My God, we have to stop demolition and look at what the alternatives are’.”31 While neither Hammond nor David possessed any experience in city government, the two men felt that reconsidering alternatives to the demolition proposal would be valuable for the community.

Joel Sternfeld

By 2000, the Friends of the High Line was beginning to craft the narrative of the unique space. In their minds, the strongest selling point for saving the High Line was the wild garden on this elevated railway. However, most people did not know about this aspect of the High Line. Hammond and David were confident that if more residents in Chelsea knew about the unplanned green open space above the streets, then they would help the cause or donate money in order to help the FHL’s efforts. So the group searched for a photographer to document the scenes of a walk on the High Line that would tantalize the viewer enough to ask: “Are those views really up there?”

A friend of Hammond and David’s recommended they contact Joel Sternfeld, an American photographer originally from Belle Harbor in Queens, NY. Sternfeld taught (and still teaches) photography at Sarah Lawrence in New York and prior to meeting the FHL had shot ruins in Rome. His work (Figure 6), Stranger Passing (1998) and American Prospect (2003), capture a moment in a place at the right time; so powerfully that, it is

unclear if the slices-of-reality scenes are staged or not. His attention to the changing quality of light on the land and his careful observation of his surroundings convinced the FHL that Sternfeld had the point of view that the group needed in order to tell others about the High Line through a series of images.

Beginning in March 2000, Joel Sternfeld shot a series of photographs documenting the untamed landscape of the High Line. The series of photographs set during different seasons and times of the day presented a systematic chronicling of the High Line walking experience. Sternfeld describes entering the elevated plane:

> All of a sudden it’s like ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ through the keyhole and you’re in a magical place. There’s New York City all around you and there you are – it’s the wheat fields of Kansas, it’s an alpine meadow, it’s magic.\(^{32}\)

By systematically documenting the space, he recreated the experience of walking the High Line by examining each organic landmark (Figure 7) as well as the way-finding paths (Figure 8) that extended the viewer’s imagination about where the endless path leads. This guided an intricate narrative of denial and accommodation, which appears in his other series *American Prospects* (2003), by allowing the public into this magical pathway, but also acknowledging that it would need to be transformed into a public park for it to be saved; and this would disrupt the beloved landscape by stripping the space of its untamed essence.

Recognizing the importance of bringing awareness to the community about the landscape on the High Line Robert Hammond stated, “We needed people to see what was up there.”\(^{33}\) In July 2001, the FHL hosted a benefit at the Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea and exhibited Sternfeld’s series *High Line*. The benefit was poorly attended,


except for various Chelsea residents, and many of the original prints did not sell. Later in 2001 Pace/MacGill Gallery published the series as *Walking the High Line*, along with several essays about the unique urban conditions of the derelict space.\(^{34}\) Despite, the disappointing turn out for the exhibition of Sternfeld’s photographs of the High Line, the FHL continued on and in 2002 used the photos in the Design Trust for Public Space’s publication of *Reclaiming the High Line*, which will be discussed in the next section.

The exhibition expanded the discussion in the Chelsea community about the future of the High Line. The stunning photographs directed the FHL’s public relations campaign in a new direction. No longer could the discussion solely be about saving this piece of industrial New York’s history. Rather, for it to be convincing, the narrative would have to revolve around preserving the space of the railway in order to create a new green public park. In the debate over city planning, imagery matters. Peg Breen, then president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, emphasized this important detail in a city redevelopment project: “people who aren’t devotees – as we are – of fixing up old buildings, you could tell that they couldn’t see it. We’re not saying this is the only thing to do there, but it really helps to see it.”\(^{35}\) In many ways, the photos held the FHL accountable for following through on creating a green space according to the mood of Sternfeld’s photos. With more people aware of the existing landscape, the Friends claimed this redevelopment project in the Chelsea community.

Because of the rebuilt High Line’s widespread popularity, today Sternfeld’s prints are priced much higher and Pac/MacGill gallery published a second edition of the forgotten *Walking the High Line*. Sternfeld, reflecting in 2008 on his one-year process of documenting the site comments on the mournful passing of the natural fields: “It was

\(^{34}\) Gottingen Steidl, *Walking the High Line* (Germany: Gerhard Steidl, 2001).

beautiful. It was perfect. It was authentic. I wish everyone could have the experience that
I had. But you can’t have 14 million people on a ruin.”

**Design Trust for Public Space**

In its founding year, the Friends of the High Line focused on preserving the Eden-like garden that had sprouted naturally in one of the unlikeliest of places in the city. The Friends of the High Line began with the two men exchanging occasional e-mails. The organization eventually became a legally recognized 501(c)(3) non-profit in 1999. Both Hammond and David lived busy lives, but when they found the Design Trust for Public Space, a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement of New York City’s public built environment, they quickly jumped on the opportunity to partner with them. In 2000, the Friends of the High Line submitted a proposal for a comprehensive planning study and eventually partnered with the Trust. This proposal was the first successful outreach by the group and helped to form the dialogue about the group’s vision, as well as develop methods for working with the other groups involved in the discussion about the future of the High Line.

The Friends of the High Line gained support from the Design Trust for Public Space based on the Trust’s recognition that the High Line held great potential as a public open space and could be a precedent for the rehabilitation of derelict industrial infrastructure in a post-industrial world. As partners, the first report of the Friends of the High Line and the Design Trust for Public Space entitled – *Future of the High Line* (2001) – outlined the various arguments about the High Line as a space. The document shaped a dialogue by melding design expertise in planning, finance, and policy at early

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stages of the project’s development to identify challenges such as ownership, funding, and zoning that would need to be addressed if the redevelopment scenario moved forward. Friends of the High Line did not have a clear vision for what the focus of the reuse design would be. The partnership with the Design Trust for Public Space utilized the FHL’s enthusiasm by developing a design direction for the space. Casey Jones, fellow for the Design Trust for Public Space and responsible for producing the *Future of the High Line*, conducted research and outreach on the railway by identifying the determining factors in the argument about the High Line. With a clear sense of the components that would need to be addressed if the High Line were to be preserved, the report then articulated the possible plan for how the Friends of the High Line would preserve the High Line.

In 2001, the future of the High Line remained contested between those who wished to demolish it and those who wished to reuse it in a new way. Returning to the space to think, Robert remembered his initial reaction to the High Line, with its spectacular views and wild landscape left to grow spontaneously. Lyden B. Miller, mentioned earlier, commented on the unique landscape conditions: “Can’t you see how wonderful it would be to have this landscape that people would move through?” They followed this image inspired by Joel Sternfeld’s photographs, hoping that a future plan could incorporate these unique components.

In line with neoliberal urban policy, the “Public Space Makers,” a forum that helps move New York’s worthy public space projects forward for the benefit of all its...
citizens, took place in June 2001 at the Hudson River Guild (funded by the Design Trust) hosted an event to fully discuss the current public and private positions on the High Line debate, with an analysis of the costs and benefits of a redevelopment project.42

Audience members, as panelists and stakeholders, addressed the legal, political, financial, and design issues that would have to be resolved if the High Line’s recreation as a public space were to become a feasible project. The forum also hosted a panel of experts in the development of politics, financing and physical design in public sector infrastructure. The experts included: John N. Lieber, senior vice president of Lawrence Ruben Co. and former Assistant Secretary of Transportation, to represent politics; Charles Shorter, principal of real estate advisory services group at Ernst & Young, for finance; and Marilyn Jordan Taylor, partner and chair-elect of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, for design.43

As the Friends of the High Line opened the discussion of what the High Line could be to a broader audience through the partnership with the Design Trust for Public Space, visions of what the greenway could become remained in a nascent phase with its idealistic images of a romantic greenway hovering above the city street. Hammond and David did recognize that whatever the plan, it would have to be both feasible enough to satisfy the city’s political and financial leadership, and also one that the Chelsea community could take ownership in.

September 11, 2001

After the Public Space Makers forum, the Chelsea Property Owners and the City of New York continued forward by finalizing a demolition agreement before the end of the Giuliani administration. While the forum sponsored by the Design Trust was informative and interesting, for a brief time, all activities ceased on September 11, 2001 after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. As the Design Trust and the Friends of the High Line formulated the second report projected to be published in 2002, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 occurred. The future was uncertain and the process slowed its pace, but after September 11, the High Line was seen in a new light. The Friends of the High Line, with the Design Trust partnership, recognized the potential for the High Line to become a progressive precedent as the city moved towards recovery. In moving redevelopment efforts forward, the Friends expanded their argument towards recharging the urban economy. In recognizing this, they noted that a successful project must attract new business, residents, and visitors, while also initiating financial activity, raising property values, and generating tax revenues. How could the High Line plan be shaped into a proposal that addressed these policy components, but also appealed as a community space?

By October 2001, the demolition advocates and the Giuliani administration pressed forward in hopes of beginning demolition before the end of Giuliani’s term as Mayor of New York City, which ended in December. To counter this movement, the Friends of the High Line secured the support of all six pending mayoral candidates, in preparation for challenging the city’s participation in the demolition agreement. With the

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new elected mayor potentially in favor of the project, the Friends continued to expand
the discussion and challenge the city’s intent to demolish the structure. This required
them to focus the High Line brand, as a bucolic image of untouched pasture in the sky,
towards its possibilities of whatever idyllic vision of New York City its political officials
endorsed.46

**Michael Bloomberg**

“The construction of political forces to engage in such dialogues within some adequate
institutional frame then becomes the crucial mediating step in bringing the dialectic of
particularities and universalities into play on a world stage characterized by uneven
geographical developments. And that, presumably, is what ‘the proper bringing together
of particular interests’ is all about.”

– David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*

City government plays an important role in the examination of neoliberal urban
policy. Following the trends of neoliberalism, Mayor Michael Bloomberg focused on the
value of real estate and how policy could steer development towards increasing real
estate on the Lower West Side. In regard to the High Line, Bloomberg, in the foreword
of *Reclaiming the High Line* (2002), stated: “Today, on the West Side of Manhattan, we
have an opportunity to create a great new public promenade on top of an out-of-use
elevated rail viaduct called the High Line.”47

New York City’s post-industrial transformation, which accelerated after the
1970s fiscal crisis, affected the quality of social welfare services because the government
no longer held as much power over the market than before. Due to this shift towards an
individualistic, market-driven regulatory system, executives and high-level professionals
became the new dominant, corporate elite in Manhattan. This ruling class alliance began

to supersede the city’s older traditional growth coalition. The political rise of billionaire, Michael Bloomberg, epitomizes this trend. An analysis of Bloomberg's role in the process of the High Line allows for an understanding of urban neoliberalism and governance, especially in cities where corporate elites assume positions of political leadership and draw on their corporate experience to govern. While Giuliani also followed a neoliberal policy agenda, he did not approach the city like a business, in quite the manner that Bloomberg did.

The election of Michael Bloomberg in November 2001 as Mayor of New York City marked a notable step in the High Line process. Bloomberg was a key player in the redevelopment of the High Line because he helped the project move forward tremendously through his giving and public announcements of support for the project. The Bloomberg administration envisioned the High Line as an engine for economic growth in the three communities it passes through: the Meatpacking District, Chelsea, and Hell’s Kitchen. To have the mayor support this project brought more awareness to the High Line. This step is one of luck and strategy. With the support of Mayor Bloomberg, Friends of the High Line successfully overcame a huge hurdle in their process of saving the High Line.

As a successful businessman who had founded Bloomberg LP, a financial firm in Manhattan, Mayor Bloomberg understood the politics of capitalism and the intricacies of how capitalism functions in a democratic state, as he worked his way through the ranks of New York City’s business hierarchy. In *From Welfare State to Real Estate* (2007), Kim Moody comments that, “even before becoming a billionaire, Bloomberg began to view

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49 Ibid, 124.
the city through financial-sector lenses.”  

New Yorkers quickly recognized that “Bloomberg was no Giuliani.”  

Giuliani, a self-made man, based his reasoning in the structure of traditional neoliberalism, in that he believed that the raw power of autonomous governing would produce the greatest good for the city. Bloomberg, however, approached the city according to the economic components of neoliberalism, most poignantly through private and public partnerships. This skill allowed him to guide city officials in favor of the redevelopment project for the High Line. He originally did not commit to the High Line project because the reports commissioned by the Design Trust only proposed a redevelopment scenario as potentially feasible. Without any solid data to back up the concepts articulated in the reports, Bloomberg could not commit to the project. Therefore, a project that facilitated these types of partnerships and in turn increased the city’s gross domestic product epitomized his vision of Manhattan as a macrocosm of business.

Because of Bloomberg’s great financial success in New York City, he possessed the power to give back a great sum of what he earned, while working in the financial industry. He adamantly believed that the wealthy had a responsibility to participate in philanthropy. Because allocating funds to save and then build the High Line served a key role in the project’s ability to become a reality, the High Line would not have been achieved so quickly if it were not for Bloomberg’s generous philanthropic donations. In 2004, the FHL sponsored an economic study (which will be discussed in Chapter Two) that convinced Bloomberg of High Line project’s feasibility as an open space and lead

52 Ibid, 43.
him to donate $43.25 million to establish the proposed park. However, Bloomberg’s role entailed more than providing financial support for a New York landmark. Mayor Bloomberg understood the value that parks play in the urban experience. In the FHL’s and the Design Trust’s second report of 2002, entitled *Reclaiming the High Line*, he stated, 

New York would be unlivable without its parks, trees, and open spaces. They provide aesthetic relief, enhance our health, add to our enjoyment, and increase our property values. Where parks have been revitalized, the neighborhoods have blossomed with new life. Where public open spaces have been renovated, the surrounding areas have become cleaner and more secure. With new plantings, our City has become more exciting and more tranquil.

When the Design Trust for Public Space issued this report on the High Line in 2002, it was noted that while the Mayor’s Office was the lead agency for the demolition application, all four Democratic mayoral candidates for the 2001 election as well as the one Republican candidate Michael Bloomberg, came out in favor of preserving the High Line. He continued his support for the idea of the High Line, through his leadership as the Mayor of New York City. Unique as a Republican candidate, Bloomberg personally financed his 2001 mayoral campaign. While categorized as a Republican, he followed a liberal agenda in approaching the High Line because he granted the FHL crucial defining decisions, as long as those components were paid for with private funds.

The High Line and Bloomberg’s support reflects a broader movement in the attitudes about industrial landscapes. Bloomberg saw that government funds and the current real estate market would never again have the capabilities of building enormous industrial structures like the High Line because little to no money today remains in the

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city’s budget to build public parks.\textsuperscript{55} Like the West Side Improvement in 1929, which brought together forty years of compromise among the city, the redevelopment of the High Line incorporated a compromise between the political and economic contexts of that time in order to reach the best scenario for the space.

In the same manner as politicians before him, Bloomberg knew how to sell an idea. He understood the vision and commitment of Friends of the High Line and followed through on his duties to create a more livable city. Bloomberg stepped into a political position that required him to rebuild the city and inspire its people to experience that city after the September 11 attacks. The High Line, as an optimistic vision of what the city could be, offered a unique opportunity for Bloomberg to execute his public announcements of rebuilding the city by reminding New Yorkers of its inherent greatness. By developing a feasible reuse scenario, the Friends of the High Line possessed a great, yet rare opportunity to revolutionize the definition of a public space along a new spatial plane. After Mayor Bloomberg’s election, and with the assurance of his support, the High Line’s advocates could advance their cause through a systematic and well publicized effort to innovate through design scenarios.

**Design Scenarios**

In analyzing the process of the High Line’s recreation, we can trace the narrative of the design to understand crucial insight into how and why the High Line succeeded as an innovative and progressive green open space. This section describes how the design evolved over the ten years it took the Friends of the High Line to preserve and build this open space. As noted earlier, the Design Trust for Public Space commissioned a second


When Joshua David and Robert Hammond decided to save the High Line they did not have a specific vision for what the High Line could become. At times, the future design visions for the High Line seemed limitless. They did know, however, that the unexpected wild landscape on top of the High Line bed was what had motivated them and other local residents to save the structure.

The Design Trust offered the argument of reusing the High Line for transit because of the High Line’s history as a railway to carry freight trains down the West Side of Manhattan. Also, participants at public panel discussions regularly proposed that the railway’s future reuse could be directed towards a subway line or a light-rail line.

The Friends of the High Line and the Design Trust for Public Space jointly developed their vision and that of the Chelsea community for the railway into a written study. *Reclaiming the High Line* (2002) reported several directions – in form and function – that the design could take. The written discussions ranged from a light-rail transit system to a landscaped pedestrian pathway. Since Friends of the High Line had asked the Design Trust for Public Space to conduct the design study, the study closely reflected the vision of FHL, which included: incorporation of the economic policy necessary to make it a viable project, and the resulting space as a reflection of the surrounding community’s interests. Because of this, the study focused on incorporating views of the West Side community in all of the approaches of what to do with the structure, if it could be saved from demolition. To avoid adversarial rhetoric, neither Friends of the High Line nor the Chelsea Property Owners participated in the forums. However,

57 Ibid, 76.
because the FHL introduced the Design Trust to the High Line project, the report heavily favored the FHL’s perspective on the argument of whether to tear down the structure or not. Nonetheless, the arguments laid out by the Design Trust followed in line with the Friends desire to incorporate the wishes of the community. As such, the study focused on certain arguments for reuse. They based this focus on the most intriguing and feasible scenarios that were brought up in the public discussions about the High Line’s future.

**Alternative Redevelopment Forms**

*Reclaiming the High Line* (2002) excluded the transportation system scenario, similar to the original idea in 1980 to reuse the High Line for light-rail service, by arguing that it was not the most beneficial reuse.58 This argument was based on several components. First, the community vehemently opposed reinstating freight service or initiating passenger rail service on the line because of the adverse consequences (such as noise, congestion, and grime) associated with elevated transportation structures. The High Line had been built across intersections and weaved within streets to avoid crossing over the large avenues, so it would not lower the aesthetic perception of the area’s safety. Creating a transit line also contained the possibility that the property nearest the line would decrease in value, which would discourage developers who wanted to build housing. The Friends of the High Line wanted to establish something positive for the West Chelsea community near the High Line, so creating another transit line in close proximity to the Farley-Penn Station, located a block from the High Line, would have been detrimental to the group’s overarching mission of saving the railway. While

the study proved the High Line disadvantageous as a rail line, subway reuse, or bicycle lane, the Design Trust did note that reuse of the High Line as a pedestrian corridor served as the strongest transportation scenario for the site’s future. The Design Trust, however, offered the argument of using the High Line for light-rail transit due to the line’s history as a railway for freight. Yet, the study also found that reusing the line as a pedestrian public open space would create various benefits to store owners, property developers, and residents on the Lower West Side. In addition, reusing the line as a walkable open space offered an aesthetic benefit to the community that would increase open space in an area where property developers kept putting pressure on the government to allow them to build a more attractive residential district.

The Design Trust’s recommendation of reusing the structure as a public open space and pedestrian transportation corridor led the Friends of the High Line to sponsor an international ideas competition in 2002. The first phase, an open design competition, expanded the dialogue about what the people in the design community saw as potential reuse scenarios for the High Line, in consideration of the Design Trust’s recommendation for the use of the railway as an open space and pedestrian corridor. Chapter Three will go into further detail about this design competition.

Because the High Line once acted as the economic engine for the city by delivering raw goods to manufacturers in the Meatpacking District, the Design Trust considered the commercial reuse of the High Line. However, because the structure is elevated, reuse as a single commercial operation proved to be neither practical nor desirable. Such a use would have compromised “its contemplative quality, its ability to

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60 Ibid, 79.
61 Ibid, 78.
convey its history of transportation use, and its sense of a place apart from the city as we commonly experience it.”

Besides appealing to the community, the Friends of the High Line sought to preserve what had drawn them to save the High Line in the first place – its surprising, wild landscape. To replace it with a generic commercial space would have been too great a compromise as to what the space’s reuse could be.

Because the FHL spearheaded the High Line project, they were able to encourage a higher level of design and innovation. If the municipal or state government were to initiate this project or had taken it over, the High Line would most likely not be what the type of space it is today because of the political bureaucracy and roadblocks that hinder projects from moving forward in city government, which is typically limited in its scope of imagination about the potential form of public space. New York is known for its slow pace in getting projects done because of all of the rigid rules that have hindered innovation and stopped projects that could have potentially changed the city, as the High Line did because it was a community initiated project.

Ultimately, the two innovators saw the potential of the wild landscape on top of the High Line. As soon as they introduced others to this unique space, more people became convinced that saving the structure could benefit the community. The design process of reusing the High Line parallels the process involved in the railway’s original construction from 1929 – 1931, in that the residents partnered with the municipal government in order to enhance the community for the benefit of its residents and the city as a whole. Friends of the High Line heeded the advice given by the Design Trust to allow for an evolutionary progression of the project in order to ensure that the vision and mission statement be fully carried out.

Ownership

The political context of discussions about the High Line’s future converged with pre-election initiatives that had favored its redevelopment as a pedestrian open space after the mayoral election of Michael Bloomberg. Yet the success of these initiatives depended on resolving questions of ownership that had been ongoing before the 2001 election. For more than two decades, City Hall partnered with private developers on the Lower West Side to force Conrail, the owner of the High Line, to tear down the structure to clear the way for new development. By 1990, Conrail transferred ownership to the CSX Corporation, an international transportation company. In 1999 the new owner of the High Line, CSX Corporation, proposed that the city or a private organization restructure the platform into an elevated path. Michael Brimmer, CSX’s regional vice president for government relations, said of the new direction: “We are trying to avoid tearing it down, and would consider turning it over to a public entity or entrepreneurs.” However, the Giuliani administration dismissed these early idle fantasies.

In 2000, CSX declared themselves amenable to considering reuse proposals for the line. In response, City Planning Commissioner Joseph Rose said, “that the platform has no right to be there except for transportation, and that use is long gone. This has become the Vietnam of old railroad trestles.” The federal government (specifically, the Surface Transportation Board) ordered the CSX Corporation to work with the opposing parties (the CPO and the FHL) in order to determine the CSX’s most efficient exit

64 Ibid.
strategy. The federal government hoped that the Chelsea Property Owners, the Friends of the High Line, and the CSX Corporation might solve the lingering question of what to do with the High Line within the year.

The report of 2002, *Reclaiming the High Line* issued by the Design Trust for Public Space acknowledged that the federal government held the ultimate governmental authority, in terms of the High Line’s future. More specifically, the Surface Transportation Board, the department of government focused on transportation infrastructure, discussed and ultimately determined the fate of the High Line. The board could choose to follow in line with the underlying property owners’ desires to demolish the High Line or they could support the Friends of the High Line in their efforts to save the structure.

In order to negotiate ownership of the High Line, the Friends worked with the CSX and Mayor Bloomberg in writing a formal application to the Surface Transportation Board to transfer ownership from the CSX over to the city, which would allow the structure to be preserved under the federal rail-banking program. The partnership between the railroad company and the state (the largest owner of property along the High Line) resulted in preserving the High Line through the federal *Rails-to-Trails* program on June 13, 2005, through a certificate of interim trail use for the rail bank. *Rails-to-Trails* will be discussed in more depth in the upcoming section. This allowed the city to claim the rail corridor and preserve it for public use. It also assumed the city would henceforth be responsible for managing right-of-way claims and any other legal

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67 Ibid, 1.
69 Ibid.
liability.\textsuperscript{70} This certificate maintained the High Line’s usefulness as a rail corridor, which addressed Commissioner Rose’s concern about the railways use as a transportation structure. Once the structure was preserved, the Friends of the High Line could focus on redevelopment strategies. What the High Line could be had not yet been fully realized because of the looming threat of demolition by Mayor Giuliani and the Chelsea Property Owners.

In order to compromise with the real estate developers and urban planners in New York City, it was recognized that if they were to save the High Line, then some crucial profitable aspects such as air rights and development possibilities needed to be addressed. The city, they argued, needed to address these issues through zoning. However, zoning needed to favor economic development near the High Line, in order to ensure that the city’s investment in the High Line remained a lucrative one. So, the city began writing proposals to create a special district in West Chelsea, in order to address this community concern and to protect their investment in the High Line. This process of rezoning would culminate in 2005, yet for such an effort at rezoning to succeed politically, it had to be predicated on a campaign to effectively fund the High Line in the public’s mind, and this campaign followed Bloomberg’s election.

**Funding the Redevelopment**

The *Future of the High Line* estimated that restoring the High Line would cost $65 million.\textsuperscript{71} When the Design Trust published this first report in 2001, the petitioners still had not secured the full amount of demolition costs, estimated at $11 million. This


\textsuperscript{71}“Future of the High Line,” *Design Trust for Public Space* (2001), 17.
included the cost of indemnifying the rail owner against liability during demolition, on top of the millions of dollars it would require to tear down the massive, elevated steel structure. The slow pace of allocating funds worked in favor of the Friends of the High Line. By 2002, property owners and the rail bed’s owner, CSX had not secured the $11 million cost needed to dismantle the High Line. While property owners had signed the agreement to pay for the costs of demolition, the CSX and the city still had not. Taking note of the Chelsea Property Owners failure to move the demolition order forward, the Friends focused on securing a sufficient amount of money in order to preserve the High Line.

Because the FHL was not proposing to demolish the line, they were not responsible for purchasing the railway structure. It was later revealed in 2005 that if the Surface Transportation Board issued a certificate for trail use to the High Line, then the FHL would not be responsible for the current costs of purchasing the High Line from the CSX. Regardless, funding became a necessary question and the main focus of any redevelopment’s feasibility. Without adequate funds to pay for the costs of saving the structure, the High Line’s long history of halted reuse scenarios would once again continue.

Identified as a funding source for the High Line’s redevelopment in Reclaiming the High Line (2002), the federal government supports a national grant program called the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a non-profit organization that spearheaded the movement to create a nationwide network of public trails from former rail lines. This program funds adaptive re-use of abandoned rail infrastructure. It also offers a variety of other transportation funding programs through multiple federal agencies. By 2002, New York

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City asked the federal Surface Transportation Board to grant a certificate of interim trail use to the High Line. This preserved the railway as a part of the federal Rails-to-Trails network. Participation in the Rails-to-Trails foundation offered grants and encouraged partnerships with the state government in order to facilitate the project’s execution. This included oversight capacities (supervision of the project) – a cost the CPO could not adequately raise funds for in the early 1990s before beginning the demolition of the High Line. With this obstacle negotiated, the Friends continued to move forward with their redevelopment plan.

The Design Trust also identified New York State as a potential source of funding. The State owned the largest percentage of developable land beneath the High Line and thus, it was in the state’s best interest to increase those property values. The state acquired these properties after the High Line stopped running in 1980 and the Surface Transportation Board, assumed responsibility for the land underneath the railway. If the State of New York supported the preservation of the High Line, the FHL would secure these lots of land and control the property that the hoards of developers were fighting over.

The High Line area, more specifically the Meatpacking District, was quickly gentrifying and becoming a desirable place to live. Friends of the High Line argued that the line’s reuse, as a public open space, would provide a vital amenity to an area of Manhattan that ranked third-to-last in the percentage of space allocated to public parks in New York City. Restructuring the High Line into a public park, the Friends argued, would make the strongly commercial area more desirable as a place to live and visit.

Tearing down the structure in order to make space for new development would only

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inspire another business district. Supporters believed that the High Line could become a unique, landscaped promenade with views of the city that could never be found while walking on the streets. They also believed that the High Line was an irreplaceable piece of urban infrastructure that, in the current era of market-driven urban planning, would never be feasibly built again because building a structure the size of the High Line would require billions of federal funds. Because neoliberalism dissuades government intervention for funding new infrastructure not related to partnerships with private interests, large projects rarely receive public funding. To receive adequate private and public support for recreating the High Line as an open space, the FHL had to embark on an effort to brand the project in public perceptions, but also reach out to private real estate investors in hopes of receiving funding from the city.

**Branding the High Line**

“Perception is important because it largely defines the metropolitan experience. As has often been observed, if a situation is perceived as real, it is in real in its consequences. We enact metropolitan culture as we internalize these perceptions and organize our lives around them.”

– Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City*

Strategies of branding and marketing facilitate the progression of a campaign or project by making the project known and hopefully, something that more people care about, perhaps even enough to donate money. The branding strategy defines the project usually through an image or the notion of the story behind it. As *New York Times* reporter, David Dunlop pointed out: “It won’t be enough to say ‘don’t tear it down.’”

For such a strategy to be well received the neighborhood would have to feel some emotional attachment to it; traditionally, a strong narrative provokes those emotions by

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reminding the public of a fond memory or desire to see more greenery in a certain part of the city. Much of the success of the High Line is due to the FHL’s emphasis on defining a sense of place on and near the railway. Joel Sternfeld’s whimsical photographs also contributed to the story of the High Line. Hammond comments on the branding process: “By creating works that are visually compelling, it makes people want to be involved.” Maria Garcia-Starkey, the secretary of Community Board 4 (an advisory committee for Chelsea and Clinton areas that discusses matters related to the communities’ welfare) states, “People who want to retain the character of the neighborhood feel the High Line is an important part of that.” Marketing spreads the story of the project through commercial efforts. When done effectively, the combination of branding and marketing convinces outsiders of the project’s value and garners support for it, whether financially or politically. With the High Line, the strategy of selling the redevelopment project to the city followed along these lines of branding and marketing the space as a real estate development tool for the neoliberal urban economy.

To secure the integrity of any great project, money and a name are required. It has become almost common-place for celebrities to pose as the iconic face of local and national efforts to improve society, with the hopes that it will catch the public’s wandering eye. Edward Norton, the Hollywood actor known for his leading roles in Primal Fear and American History X and whose visionary developer grandfather helped save Boston’s Faneuil, read Adam Gopnik’s New Yorker piece in the fall of 2001.

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When Joshua David and Robert Hammond opened up the discussion about the future of the High Line, Ed Norton sought out the group in hopes of helping the cause. Hammond recounts the initial interactions with Norton: “We did not even have an office at the time, but he did some digging and he found our number.”

Norton’s father co-founded the Rails-to-Trails organization, which (as mentioned before) focused on converting abandoned railway tracks into hiking trails. Norton, coming from a family dedicated to enhancing the urban experience, directed his celebrity to the High Line project after reading about the project in the *New Yorker*. Tremendously intrigued by the FHL’s proposal to redevelop the railway into an open space, Norton advocated for the High Line’s preservation and redevelopment by introducing other celebrities, such as Martha Stewart along with other notable Manhattan elite, to the outstanding potential the High Line possessed as an urban space. He also offered his unconditional support. He knew as a wealthy celebrity that his name and generous philanthropic donations would help continue the project onward. He felt that it was important for him to support what he saw as a great act of citizenship.

However, Norton’s role in the progression of this project was not solely determined by the need for his ability to raise money. It cannot be denied that money influenced the High Line project. Hammond recalls Norton saying: “There are a lot of causes out there doing more important things . . . This is about optimism. This is about New York reinventing itself.”

Norton, aware of the social power that comes with being a celebrity, offered his name and widespread recognition to the High Line project. Because of his family’s long line of civic service in the city, he understood the difficulties of implementing a large public project due to the many roadblocks typically found in the

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city’s political and economic bureaucracies. This made Norton a valuable player and public face for this project, best articulated by his appearance on the public broadcast, *Charlie Rose* in 2005.

With Norton’s support, the Friends of the High Line organized fundraising benefits in 2004 at Martha Stewart’s Starett-Leigh Building office overlooking the High Line to attract community members and potential donors to the FHL’s project. In doing this, they also crafted the narrative of the High Line, which in turn influenced the branding and marketing strategy of the redevelopment project. At a benefit, Norton stated: “The whole idea that something’s been left alone long enough for nature to actually take a foothold in it, and create this green space while no one was paying attention is fantastic to me. I love it.” By helping bring in other Manhattan elite, such as Diane Von Furstenberg, through a benefit raising $600,000 in July 2004 in Furstenberg’s West Village studio, the Friends continued to collect more private funds, which in turn were used to pay for building materials, construction, and the design team. The architecture of the park reflects the budget the FHL had because they could purchase high quality materials, such as the long, stone planks used to make the snake-like path, and also hire a professional team of architects and landscape architects to make use of the large budget. The quality and shape of the park’s design will be discussed later in more detail.

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FHL Continues On

While the High Line is criticized for being a screaming example of Manhattan’s focus on money and culture, the redevelopment of the High Line into a fashionable park is one way the city acknowledges how to attract flows of capital into the City of New York. Michael Sorkin, a Chelsea resident, architect and writer, is in favor of the park, but comments in 2008 on the consequences of continuing to developing an already desirable place to live: “It’s going to be a great park. But if it proves to be another really big nail in the process of making Manhattan into the world’s largest gated community, so be it. Let it be remembered for that.”

The High Line reflects a movement in the city to update the existing framework to reinvigorate the urban economy. Much of this is centered around tourism and attracting people to visit landmarks and contribute to the local economy by eating at restaurants or shopping in nearby boutiques. These institutional actions spur from the overarching hope that a place people wish to visit is also one that people will desire to live in. Gifford Miller, City Council speaker notes on the community’s response to the High Line’s redevelopment as of 2002:

I understand that for property owners and many in the community that if you have to choose between the High Line as it currently is and no High Line, bringing it down makes sense. But I believe . . . that when you consider the possibilities for a preserved and reused High Line as a public space and a signature moment in the New York landscape, that the positives are almost endless.

The most intriguing shift in the story of the High Line before 2005 is the changing perception of property owners in regards to the line. In 2001, the Chelsea Property Owners created a campaign with flyers reading: “Money doesn’t grow on trees. And the

last we checked, it wasn’t growing in the weeds of the High Line, either.” However, when the Design Trust found evidence that the redeveloping the High Line into a park would be economically beneficial for the property owners adjacent to the High Line, the main argument in favor for preserving the structure focused on increasing real estate values. The CPO quickly followed this thinking and agreed to drop the demolition order. The players interacted with the various arguments of the High Line’s future, which ultimately resulted in a compromise between the different parties. The story now shifts into an examination and analysis of the economic realities of the redevelopment project.

87 Ibid.
Traditionally, the intention of a park is to provide a place for recreation, whether it is restorative (the blissful counterpoint to the city) or therapeutic (a place to leave the stresses of the urban experience behind). Because parks also occupy extensive plots of land, they also have important effects on the development and character of an urban setting.\textsuperscript{88} Cities, as focused and accelerated centers for economic activities such as innovation, learning, production, and consumption, expose existing trends in the political-economy of spatial development.\textsuperscript{89} Building on the information about the private and public funding sources presented in the first chapter, this second chapter discusses the economic study commissioned by Friends of the High Line in 2001

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followed by an account of the 2005 Special West Chelsea zoning proposal and implementation.

An understanding of the economic theory behind the High Line project reveals evidence of Bloomberg’s strategy to govern New York City like a businessman would manage a corporation. Ultimately, this evidence indicates the importance of location when redeveloping an urban area. The city government’s focus on real estate development in order to generate rents and increase capital flows within specified districts indicates a larger trend in the American city. This trend grants perspective on the modes of neoliberalism, some universally familiar and others contingent on the specifics of this situation, implemented in the process of the High Line.

The High Line Park as a City Investment

Meditating over the future of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmstead wrote in 1861 that, “the town will have enclosed the Central Park. . . . No longer an open suburb, our ground will have around it a continuous high wall of brick, stone, and marble.” He continues on to predict that when the land surrounding Central Park is bought and developed into residential areas, then the value of Central Park’s design could be evaluated. Instead of planning for the present conditions, Olmstead proposed to design a park for the city’s future market conditions, when green public open space spur development and property values soar. Olmstead astutely designed the park in a manner flexible and responsive enough to adapt to the perceived demand for use of the space as a recreational amenity.

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Today, hundreds of thousands of people live and work within a few minutes of Central Park, which keeps the real estate values high because people desire to live near amenities and public spaces that allows for respite from the hectic city streets. However, as Susan S. Fainstein notes in *Restructuring the City* (1983) states, “As a spatially embedded commodity, real estate embodies a crucial paradox . . . the investment produces an inalienable commodity whose association with a particular location makes it scarce and valuable.”\(^9\) Capital invested in the built environments cannot be removed. While the social and economic factors determining the value of property could change, capital investment in the built environment is illiquid. These fluctuating changes can detract from the property’s attractiveness as a public investment, especially when compared to machinery or other forms of fixed capital.\(^2\) Olmstead, one of the first to think of parks in urban planning terms, established Central Park as an example of a carefully designed public space by accommodating the recreational needs of the city inhabitant, but also by directing market activity towards generating revenues from property taxes because of its location in Manhattan and its improvements over the course of its existence as a park.\(^3\) Like prior public investments in the city, the future value of the High Line will depend on those two factors: its location and its improvements.

The High Line follows the example of Olmstead’s strategy of framing Central Park as a public investment. Alexander Garvin in *The American City: What Works, What Doesn’t* (1995) discusses the decrease in this type of city investment by noting that, “their very existence has eliminated pressure for additional park development and made it

possible for other issues to dominate the urban planning agenda.” The conditions in the city today pose an intriguing incentive for parks to reemerge in the urban planning discussion. While Manhattan today does not face the same issues of density that it did in the 1970s, the city, nonetheless, faces its own new set of challenges, such as affordable housing and sustainable transportation. Because the challenges in the city are different than those of the 1970s, the solutions to those challenges are also different. The city considered Central Park a public investment, in a similar manner to how Bloomberg rationalized public funds for the High Line project, the distinction between the two being the realized physical form of the two parks, which is due more to the historical contexts of the periods in which they were built.

The argument in favor of additional public spending on parks begins with the recognition that people enjoy visiting parks, as key public amenities of the community, because it is an affordable means to enjoy leisure time. With this truth, capital invested in a park, attractive to the average person, will draw attention to the space and in turn will allow consumers to contribute to the local economy by purchasing products at nearby businesses. It follows then that if a public park stimulates capital flows within the areas near the open space, then the value of the surrounding properties rises. This incites the property owners to profit from this noted shift in interest towards this particular district by charging higher rents to individuals and businesses occupying these spaces for commercial and residential purposes.

Because of the neoliberal tendency that dissuades government intervention in any activities of the market, municipal governments do not see problems in local urban

95 Andrew O’Sullivan, Urban Economics.
communities as clearly as the local residents, who experience the challenges of a rising
cost of living on a regular basis. While a neoliberal approach to real estate development
has value and virtue, in that it inspires entrepreneurship and independent local
governance, this lack of attention from the government can cause the interests of private
property investors to overshadow the quality of the urban experience, as financial
innovation becomes a primary lucrative motivation in the city.

When local governments work with the community (whose residents understand
the intricacies of the day-to-day mechanics of a neighborhood) to protect the interests of
the resident (through flexible zoning resolutions that protects the character of the
neighborhood and promotes incentives for inclusionary housing), the land becomes
available for active public use, which in turn stimulates the local economy. In the
process of the High Line, municipalities worked in collaboration with the Chelsea
residential community to better understand the FHL’s desire to redevelop the line into a
public park. However, for any city support to be given, Mayor Bloomberg needed to see
tangible truth about the FHL’s claims that restructuring the High Line into a public park
would be more economically beneficial for the Lower West Side than new development
solely through office buildings and apartment towers. In order for a public investment to
achieve its intended purposes, it must provide an incentive to enhance the private-
market conditions of neighboring real estate. So, the Friends of the High Line
commissioned an economic study to outline the city’s investment.

In 2001, HR&A [Hamilton Rabinovitz & Alschuler] Advisors, Inc. conducted an
economic and fiscal impact study called Transforming the High Line. Hammond, close

97 Clare Cumberlidge and Lucy Musgrave, Design and Landscape for People: New Approaches to Renewal (New
98 Garvin, 30.
friends with Gifford Miller, then chairman of the Department of City Planning, persuaded the Department of City Planning to commission the report in order to demonstrate to Mayor Bloomberg that redeveloping the High Line into a public space would produce economic and social benefits far outweighing the initial capital costs to the city government. 99 The study, paid for by the Greenacre Foundation, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, and the New York City Council, identified the costs of rehabilitating the structure. Those costs were then compared to the public benefits that creating a new public space could be expected to cause as a result of implementing a scarce amenity on the Lower West Side. 100

As a consulting firm, HR&A initiated an innovative rezoning plan with the Department of City Planning in order to secure more than $100 million in funds from the city to implement the 2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning Resolution. The money allocated would be used to transfer ownership rights from the CSX Corporation to the city, which would allow the structure to be preserved under the Conservancy Act. All funds allocated would be funded separately from the city’s capital budget and would not affect other municipal services. 101 Since restoring the High Line and reusing it as a public park, more than $2 billion in new residential and commercial development has been realized in the areas surrounding the High Line, with a predicted $2 billion from planned future development. 102

100 High Line, News & Blog, “Feasability Study on Track, To Conclude Early Fall,” Friends of the High Line (30 August 2002).
As a whole, the economic study done by HR&A argued the importance of place in New York City. The consulting agency argued that the redevelopment of the High Line as a park would bind the three adjacent neighborhoods into one cohesive district. Unlike other commercial districts in Manhattan, such as Park Avenue, the infamous street grid does not determine the shape of the High Line district. Instead, the form of this new district weaves through the grid, instead of along it, by passing behind the larger avenues and allowing people to travel above their neighbors at a faster pace than if walking on the sidewalks below.

In line with Bloomberg’s initiative to rezone the five boroughs of New York City and unify the regions within it, the economic study enhanced Bloomberg’s original vision. John H. Alschuler, Jr., chairman of HR&A Advisors, comments: “in writing the economic study, we sought to portray the image of what New York could be like.”

The vision Alschuler described in the report followed HR&A’s mission to analyze, advise, and act by furthering the FHL’s campaign through an economic argument. The study sufficiently answered the questions Bloomberg had about the project’s economic viability as an open space. The argument presented persuaded Bloomberg to move forward in supporting FHL’s efforts, which in turn suggested an innovative rezoning of West Chelsea. Without a rezoning effort, the city’s investment could not be protected from over development. By associating the High Line redevelopment project with Bloomberg’s vision to rezone New York and build a city through collaborative public and private partnerships, the mayor quickly accepted the project by committing $50 million of municipal governments funds to the FHL’s project in summer of 2004.

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103 Interview with John Alschuler, transcribed by Elizabeth Holden, 28 December 2010.
predicted earlier that year that the project would require $100 million to preserve and restore the structure.

While the report highlighted important issues about real estate development, the importance of rezoning Chelsea, and the benefits the park would have for commercial and residential development on the Lower West Side, the language of the study reveals the economic study’s form as an advocacy campaign, instead of a quantitative, and politically neutral, economic report. This is not to say that the economic report was incorrect in calling attention to the development limitations of the area. Rather, it reflects the nature of urban planning today especially in an era dependent on public and private partnerships in order to move projects, like the High Line, forward. While public investment in parks is not as common as it once was in the nineteenth century, these types of investments still serve an effective means to stimulating a desirable private market reaction. This has the potential to stimulate private investment in areas with a profitable private market.\(^\text{104}\) The economic study represents a necessary step taken by FHL in their campaign to redevelop the High Line, which presents evidence about how urban projects come about in New York City.

**Creating Place through Spatial Development**

The economic study proved the FHL’s argument that saving the High Line would bring more business and raise property values if it were to be converted into a green, public open space. A previous study done by the Design Trust for Public Space in 2002 predicted this conclusion, but failed to give the caliber of quantitative examples that the HR&A successfully presented to Mayor Bloomberg and the City of New York

in order to prove the High Line redevelopment’s merit as a plan of action. The Trust’s study concentrated on the most feasible design scenarios and which designs offered the greatest possible long-term benefit to the greatest number of people. Together, the trust’s and the economic studies guided the High Line’s future in a more hopeful direction.

The economic study outlined potential examples for growth through the reuse of the High Line. These included: pedestrian transportation, commercial potential, and community branding. The original goal in 2001 has been to cease all efforts to demolish the structure, which required an economic argument strong enough to outweigh the eager developers and city officials from claiming one of the last remaining spaces in Manhattan. The city planning process, typically one dictated by municipal representatives, extended the discussion to the Chelsea community by collaborating with the residents on how the city should employ its resources to better serve the area and provide the necessary means to stimulate property development without displacing the current community.

Continuing Bloomberg’s vision of a branded Manhattan, the HR&A study considered the creation of a High Line district linking the three neighborhoods that the High Line runs through the Meatpacking District, Chelsea, and Hell’s Kitchen. The creation of such a district would benefit local commercial spaces, while also revitalizing underutilized space in the industrial warehouses. The existence of a twenty-two-block-long public space would connect these three analogous areas into one recognizable entity, raise property values and attract new investment and in turn provide a greater

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105 “Reclaiming the High Line” Design Trust for Public Space (2002), 74.
economic benefit than if the High Line were to be demolished.\textsuperscript{106} The evidence of this district is apparent in the West Side today, as restaurants and boutiques emerged in collaboration with the High Line as a renewed green open space.

The study also presented a much-needed creative solution to the many questions that the High Line brought up if it were to become a public park. While parks can guide economic development in an area, this does not occur without the support of both the private and public sectors. The study, as tangible evidence for feasible action, recognized the challenge in maintaining the FHL’s vision of the High Line and the larger Chelsea community through the process of its realization, but it also acknowledged the nature of compromise in such a process of city planning.

The ultimate objective of a park then is to earn back all of the money that the public sector gave to the organization responsible for building it and then facilitate a continuous source of revenue. So, if an argument can be tailored to prove that the creation of an open space will generate more money for the city, it is in the public sector or city government’s best interest to invest now in the park with the expectation of earning more in the long run. A case study of Central Park enforced this observed economic trend when Horace William Shaler Cleveland in 1883 said,

\begin{quote}
In the ten years succeeding the commencement of work on Central Park in New York the increased valuation of taxable property in the wards immediately surrounding it was no less than $54,000,000, affording a surplus, after paying interest on all the city bonds issued for the purchase and construction of the park, of $3,000,000 – a sum sufficient, if used as a sinking fund, to pay the entire principal and interest of the cost of the park in less time than was required for its construction.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 75.
\textsuperscript{107} H.W.S. Cleveland, “Suggestion for a System of Parks and Parkways for the City of Minneapolis,” read at a meeting of the Park Commissioners, June 2, 1883, reprinted by Theodore Wirth, Minneapolis Park System 1883-1944, Minneapolis Board of Park Commissioners, 1945, pp. 28 – 34.
So, in drafting an advocacy economic study for the High Line as a public investment, it was argued that parks do not ultimately cost anything and they earn the city increased taxes which allows them to pay for additional services – a pressing concern today as the city budget fell drastically after the housing boom drop in 2009. This followed the 1990s housing economic boom, when there was a large surge of property development. This financial fluctuation affected the High Line most poignantly in the Meatpacking District and Hell’s Kitchen, as observed in the higher frequency of second-floor vacancies and transition of empty lots into “temporary” parking lots and parking structures. The reality of city building today is that city governments have a limited budget due to the financial crisis and parks are rarely priorities.

The issues about zoning needed to be addressed in order to accommodate the predicted increase in property values as a result of the High Line redevelopment on the West Side. The Design Trust identified:

There is pressure from private property owners and government agencies to modify the zoning designations (predominantly manufacturing) that currently surround the High Line to allow new uses. At the same time, calls come from community members to preserve the character, uses, and architecture that have evolved from the current zoning.

Any action would need to follow in line with Bloomberg’s zoning mission for the whole city, but also retain the integrity of the Friends of the High Line’s vision. Beginning in 2004, Mayor Bloomberg initiated an increase in zoning activity that focused on the neighborhoods around the five New York boroughs by “drafting master plans and refining broadly drawn zoning maps, neighborhood by neighborhood, and sometimes

108 Garvin, 46.
block by block.”\textsuperscript{110} The ultimate goal of this rezoning activity was to create conditions for growth in areas the city could handle it, while also promising to preserve the character of neighborhoods.

The economic study shifted the discussion of the High Line away from its image as a nuisance and towards a new perspective that embraced the redevelopment project as an opportunity to utilize a valuable asset of New York’s industrial history. The economic study emphasized the long-term social and environmental benefits of creating a space that allows New Yorkers to travel twenty-two blocks without crossing a single city street in comparison to the long-term economic windfall that would have accrued to a small group of property owners if the High Line had been demolished as they had proposed.\textsuperscript{111} While “demolition of the High Line may offer some potential economic benefit to the city through tax revenues that might be generated by resulting construction,” history shows that property facing green open spaces produce higher tax revenues.\textsuperscript{112} The conclusions made in the study came to fruition only after the 2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning proposal, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Redeveloping the High Line into a park eliminated the need to raze the derelict railway, but also increased the value of nearby properties and spurred action to continue development in the area further.

Yet, even though the interests of the residential community and those of real estate developers often differ when it comes to open space, the two factions compromised on the High Line’s future because of HR&A’s economic study. It quieted the Chelsea Property Owners after proving that the structure could be utilized to raise

\textsuperscript{110} Josh Barbanel, “Remaking, or Preserving, the City’s Face,” \textit{New York Times} (18 January 2004).
\textsuperscript{111} “Reclaiming the High Line,” \textit{Design Trust for Public Space} (2002), 75.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 76.
land values on the Lower West Side while also offering a comprehensive zoning plan as a solution to the continuing debates about the Lower West Side’s future development opportunities. The areas near the High Line, prior to its reuse, were plagued with vacancies and relatively unprofitable small businesses. By updating the zoning ordinances in Chelsea to accommodate the real estate market, invigorating commercial activity, and altering industrial zoning to residential zoning, the Chelsea Property Owners were satisfied and dropped the demolition order.

**Overview of Zoning in New York City**

Cities are in constant flux; as one section flourishes, another declines.\(^{113}\) Within metropolitan areas, market forces and government policies determine land-use patterns.\(^{114}\) Much of this is due to shifts in economic production and consumption trends, meaning the market demands certain products to be consumed based on political and social conditions. In the city planning process, the response to accommodating larger shifts in economic trends is often met by building new infrastructure, especially for transportation, such as highways and bridges.

Starting as early as the 1880s, New Yorkers protested the loss of their light and air rights as bigger residential buildings appeared in the city. By 1900, New York City’s real estate had become a major focus for private investment in taller buildings capital for at least half a century.\(^{115}\) Between 1913 and 1916, New York City translated community concerns about the skyscraper’s height and dominant commercial districts, like Fifth Avenue, into action through the nation’s first comprehensive zoning law. Seymour I.

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Toll in *Zoned American* (1969) states, “If a legal institution has a life, it is delivered when an urge for public discipline begins to overtake events. The moment is often a climax. The birth of the zoning institution was in a year and in a city stirring with climactic events.”

By 1915, the need for controls on a building’s height and form became apparent when the 42-story Equitable Building was erected in Lower Manhattan on the northeast corner of Broadway and Wall Street. Without any setbacks, the Equitable Building cast a seven-acre shadow over neighboring buildings. This in turn affected the value of neighboring buildings.

To ease the pressure of the city’s surging physical growth and to respond to the apparent need for regulation of building size, reformers set out to create zoning restrictions separating residential, commercial, and manufacturing uses. Community discussions starting in 1913 about design and land use resulted in the Zoning Resolution of 1916, which established height and setback controls, while also designating residential districts (Figure 9). It fostered the iconic tall, slender office and apartment towers found in the city’s business districts and established guidelines for familiar three-to-six story residential buildings. However, the 1916 resolution did not emerge as a result of comprehensive planning for each section of the city. Rather, it was enacted to protect the property of powerful business leaders and good government reformers, who were unhappy with existing real estate activity, wanted to ensure orderly development of the districts they frequented, and establish stable land use patterns for those areas. The

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117 Ibid, 175.
1916 Resolution was thus mainly enacted to regulate Manhattan’s development by regulating the direction and magnitude of changes in land use.\textsuperscript{120}

While the Zoning Resolution of 1916 served as a model for early city zoning, it was narrow in its scope of regulation and the city needed to make exceptions to accommodate unanticipated obstacles. It only established three limited categories: exclusively residential, commercial, and unlimited, which lead to densely built-up areas alongside vacant lots. Factors not incorporated in the 1916 resolution that affected the population and economic trends (and thus how private and public investors used land) included waves of immigration, new mass transit routes, and economic and lifestyle changes.\textsuperscript{121}

While early zoning ordinances were far from sufficient as the urban life became comparatively more complicated than before, the political difficulty and legal cost of changing existing land use regulations had become so great that it was only tackled for large projects.\textsuperscript{122} The regulations had neither considered likely future development nor diversity within construction practices.\textsuperscript{123} In order to accommodate these problems, the city passed the 1961 Zoning Resolution to meet the new and different conditions that the previous 1916 resolution could not address. The 1961 Zoning Resolution coordinated use and bulk regulations, while also incorporating parking requirements to accommodate the proliferation of automobiles.\textsuperscript{124} In hopes of motivating private property owners to set aside space for public use, the resolution included “incentive zoning,” which offered developers a bonus of extra floor space in exchange for including

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Ibid, 356.
\item[123] Ibid, 364.
\end{footnotes}
plazas when constructing office building and apartment towers. While this created some 1.1 million square feet of new open space between 1961 and 1973, its effectiveness varied. In some areas, it freed pedestrian traffic, provided seating, and opened vistas to the sky. However, in others, it produced “sterile, empty spaces not used for much of anything except walking across.” By 1975, the New York Planning Commission attempted to improve the character and utility of these plazas by implementing a set of guidelines for seating, planting, and street furniture. It was the quality of the spaces’ design that ultimately determined their success.

**Zoning the High Line District**

The industrial Lower West Side, through which the High Line passes, was an area made to support a bustling industrial sector of New York City. The Meatpacking District housed more than 250 slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants in the early 1900s. When the last train ran across the High Line in 1980, after the industrial sector of Manhattan seriously declined, the West Side retained its zoning designation for light and heavy industry. With a decreasing demand for industrial production, the vibrant work force, which historically lived nearby in the Lower West Side, virtually disappeared. In place of manufacturing, artists (displaced from SoHo as rents skyrocketed after the area was established as a new center for restaurants and commercial retail) reclaimed Chelsea for independent art galleries. Soon more artists moved into this new area because it was more affordable.

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125 Garvin, p. 369.
127 Garvin, p. 370.
Neil Smith in *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996) explicates gentrification as:

the process . . . by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters – neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus.\(^\text{128}\)

In Chelsea, the process started similarly, in that displaced artists moved to Chelsea, created a network of artists and galleries, and eventually attracted more people into the area. Artists, designers, and local Chelsea residents used the formerly industrial spaces for restaurants, nightclubs, design and photography studios, and fashion boutiques, which in turn created a lively culture.\(^\text{129}\) Through the 1980s and 1990s, the Lower West Side, especially Chelsea, became a design districts, housing large information technology firms and fashion designers. The district grew in popularity, but could not support the demand for increased residential development because the majority of the land was zoned for light manufacturing.

In 2001, most of the blocks near the High Line fell under the categorization of M1-5. This zoning category is for light manufacturing. It is also the most common zoning designation because it is more open-ended than other types of zoning.\(^\text{130}\) M2 and M3 districts, for example, are used for heavier manufacturing. The Lower West Side, while still partly occupied by heavier manufacturing, mostly houses light industries, such as factories for products ranging from glass and leather to pharmaceuticals and electrical equipment. Therefore, in analyzing the zoning of the West Side, for the land nearest to the High Line, M1-5 fits the area well for the era when the High Line was a


\(^\text{129}\) Ibid, 52.

\(^\text{130}\) “Reclaiming the High Line,” *Design Trust for Public Space* (2002), 58.
running railway and the surrounding areas were used for manufacturing and other
industrial or commercial purposes related to the railway.

In addition, M1-5 districts allow for more diversity in the types of uses the
associated buildings can have. Such districts set aside space for light manufacturing, to
meet the vast spatial needs (such as tall ceilings and areas to load freight) required for
production, but the district also allows for community facilities, hotels, places of
assembly, parks, and hospitals. While M1-5 districts do not permit residential use,
variances, approved by the Board of Supervisors and Appeals, have led to a handful of
residential buildings in the M1-5 blocks since the 1980s. Several residential uses exist in
townhouse and tenement buildings that pre-date the 1961 zoning restrictions, such as
the Chelsea-Elliott Houses and the Fulton Houses (Figure 10).131

Most of the High Line is located in the West Chelsea neighborhood, just north
of the Meatpacking District. West Chelsea shares the same industrial past as the
Meatpacking District, but now hosts one of the world’s largest concentrations of art
galleries.132 Prior to 1994, Chelsea was zoned as M1-5 (light industry) and MX (mixed
industry, meaning flexibility to use space for commercial purposes). In 1994, the Chelsea
community passed the city’s first 197-a [section of the City Charter] community-based
zoning plan, which preserved the low-scale, residential fabric that had come to define the
neighborhood.133 This permitted residential uses of buildings and created what has
come to be defined as part of the Chelsea Historic District (2003). While this zoning
plan was a progressive community effort, it only addressed the property west of Tenth
Avenue because it was feasible to develop into residential spaces. East of Tenth Avenue,

where most of the High Line runs, remained as M1-5 zones (Figure 11). With the High Line near these sections, investing in residential development was risky. It was assumed that the eastern section of Chelsea, east of Tenth Avenue would be addressed at a later point.

There are several components to the debate about saving the High Line pertaining to zoning. Zoning was a compromise made for the developers of the land beneath the High Line who wanted to retain air and development rights that would accrue to their properties by demolishing the High Line. As of 2002, when Reclaiming the High Line was issued, the discussion about rezoning portions of West Chelsea east of Tenth Avenue not affected by the change in 1994 to permit residential uses. The fate of the area east of Tenth Avenue had not yet been decided because the Department of City Planning and the Chelsea Preservation and Planning Committee of Community Board 4 remained uncertain about how to balance the desires of private property owners with the quality of life for local residents. This board consisted of fifty unsalaried members, appointed by the Borough President, of the Chelsea and Clinton district who live in, or who, have a business or a significant investment in the district. Ultimately the zoning resolved the real estate development debate between the CPO and the FHL because it allowed developers of the land beneath the High Line to raise their property values in the same way that demolishing the High Line may have done, but also this zoning compromise preserved the High Line.
2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning

Initiated by the City of New York and supported by the Department of City Planning, rezoning spanned across Manhattan and New York City’s five boroughs in 2005, with a burst of activity not seen in decades since the 1961 resolution. In response to Mayor Bloomberg’s surprising reinvigoration of city planning activity, his City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden stated, “we are creating the conditions for growth where the city can handle it, while preserving the character of neighborhoods.”134 Across the five boroughs, the most common changes involved the conversion of large manufacturing zones to office and residential use.135 The Bloomberg administration’s focus on reinvigorating the planning process by working with communities across the city brought renewed energy to the city planning process. In light of the mayor’s extensive plan to brand the city and stimulate investment and consumption, Daniel L. Doctoroff, the deputy mayor for economic development, stated, “the Bloomberg administration recognized a basic fact of the modern economy, the transition from a large significantly industrial economy to a postindustrial economy.”136 One example of Bloomberg’s citywide movement to update zoning, the Special West Chelsea Rezoning proposal represents how city government is attempting to understand the fluctuating economic demands of the city by allowing infrastructure to serve a more flexible range of programming (Figure 12).

The Friends of the High Line wanted to best serve the interests of the community and discovered that an updated zoning resolution would allow for the High Line to work well within the existing pattern of commercial activity, while also

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135 Ibid
136 Ibid
encouraging more people to live in the area. One of the problems with demolishing the High Line was that it would open up the possibility of developers transforming the neighborhood from a relatively low-rise area to one of giant apartment and office buildings. The community worried that this would happen if the CPO demolished the High Line down, especially if zoning did not change.

M1-5 zoning permits non-industrial commercial development of office and apartment buildings because the FAR [floor-to-ground area ratio] of 1.0 (20,000 square feet) in M1-5 zoning accommodates these uses for the space, even if the use is not explicitly industrial. This reflects a greater flexibility that implementing special districts can create, but it also cannot accommodate a much larger scale of development in the area. While developers have been trying to change the zoning since the 1980s, the Chelsea community hoped to preserve the character of the area, but still allow developers to realize the full potential of real estate values, in order to keep the neighborhood nice and raise the existing land values. The High Line project was the catalyst for these desires to update the zoning of its district, and it became synonymous with change through the 2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning.

The Special West Chelsea Zoning Proposal, approved on June 23 2005, influenced the redevelopment strategy of the High Line by preserving the railway as an open space and by shaping development according to what would enhance the High Line as an open space for the future. Rezoning accomplished these goals through an Inclusionary Housing Program and FAR trade-offs to preserve the light and air around the High Line. By contrast, the 2005 rezoning plan in Queens from College Point to Kew Gardens, only accommodated the current development challenge of affordable housing without a consideration for the future effects of quickly increasing property
values. Without an incentive to include affordable housing in the framework of this part of Queens, it will be challenging to maintain demand for these spaces.

This initiative resembled current development trends towards high-rise apartments and office towers in the existing plans elsewhere in the city. The West Chelsea proposal embodied the future vision of the city and one that encouraged new property development to accommodate new businesses, tourists, and residents, but not through only building new high-rises, as in Queens.137 The West Chelsea rezoning grants a more flexible interpretation of real estate development opportunities. While the rhetoric framed the 2005 West Chelsea Zoning plan as innovative and helpful to the Chelsea community, it harkened back to the original 1916 Zoning Resolution initiated by private investors. While the 2005 zoning proposal is more flexible in that it allows buildings to serve a range of uses, both of these types of ordinances best served the interests of private real estate owners, who wished to increase the value of the existing land.

The 2005 proposal addressed modifications to West Chelsea near the High Line, with the recognition that the West Side was entering a state of transition. The ultimate goal of this rezoning was to update the use of the surrounding buildings according to the neighborhood’s shifting focus on art galleries, high-end boutiques, and loft living. By preserving the core concentration of art galleries as a landmark district, the zoning plan maintained a key commercial element of West Chelsea. The zoning proposal also contained provisions that enhanced the High Line as an open space through use, density, and bulk regulations, as specified below. These regulations permitted residential and commercial development along Tenth and Eleventh Avenue. The proposal also

included regulations for building height and setbacks, in order to respond to the unique features of West Chelsea, including its early twentieth-century loft buildings, the Chelsea Historic District, and the Hudson River waterfront.\footnote{NYC Department of City Planning, “West Chelsea Zoning Proposal,” \url{http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/westchelsea/westchelsea1.shtml} (accessed 5 March 2011).}

Most of the development controls pertained to the areas adjacent to the High Line, which became known as the High Line Transfer Corridor (HLTC). The 100-foot wide area contained the entire High Line structure, and also included portions of the adjacent lots between West Eighteenth Street and West Thirtieth Street. The creation of the HLTC permitted property owners within the corridor to follow the development rights specified in the West Chelsea Special District, such as the base FAR. The Department of City Planning intended to minimize the negative effects of over-development by forcing property owners near the High Line to work in collaboration with the open space in order to preserve light and air around the High Line.\footnote{Ibid.} This required adjacent property owners to consult with the Friends of the High Line about their property and how the High Line could be incorporated into the use of that property. The Standard Hotel (Figure 13), an Andre Balazas building straddling the High Line between West Twelfth and West Thirteenth Street, and the HL23 (Figure 14), a new luxury residential condominium located at West Twenty-third Street, are two examples of this area-wide effort to create nodes of investment along the High Line as a common landmark to link three neighborhoods, that eventually will open up the Hudson Rail Yards in the next five years.

Because the High Line runs diagonally across the street grid, and north-south over mid-blocks zones, instead of over the larger avenues (such as Tenth and Eleventh...
avenues), the FHL wanted to insure that development on Tenth Avenue did not deteriorate the conditions near the High Line. In crafting the plan, the Friends of the High Line (as the representatives of the Chelsea community) wanted to make sure Tenth Avenue (an area close to the High Line) preserved its light and air, while also remaining visible at the street level. In response to the Friends of the High Line, the city proposed that any development sites located between Tenth Avenue and the High Line be subject to High Line adjacency controls.\textsuperscript{140} This meant property owners and developers on the avenue must follow additional bulk controls in order to preserve views, light, and air, while also providing regular public access points from ground level to the High Line level.

Bulk controls served as the means for ensuring these results. These mandated a mix of low and high street walls that remained consistent with the existing built character of walk-up apartment buildings and loft buildings with high street walls. As such, under the provisions of the Special West Chelsea Zoning Proposal, street walls may rise thirty-five feet to forty-five feet for twenty-five percent of frontages along blocks on Tenth Avenue and building heights must be lower at the Avenue’s intersection with east-west cross streets, while the remaining seventy-five percent of the building can rise to the maximum allowable building height of seventy-five feet.\textsuperscript{141} By forcing these areas to follow bulk controls that inhibited the size of the infrastructure near the High Line, the High Line’s reuse as a public open space was better facilitated because the railway did not become lost in overwhelming architecture and provided visual and physical access points to the High Line level (Figure 15).

\textsuperscript{140} NYC Department of Planning, “West Chelsea Zoning Proposal”
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
Along the length of the High Line, the Friends of the High Line wanted to maintain a varied experience of building frontages and general sense of openness to light and air. Therefore, they specified that buildings adjacent to the line needed to be set back at a level no higher than the High Line, until twenty-five feet away from the structure on either side of the line (Figure 16). This maintained the open feeling of walking on the High Line by preserving the air, light and views integral in the High Line experience.

As a result of the West Chelsea rezoning, which seemed to guarantee economic benefits from rehabilitating the High Line, the City Parks and Planning Department pledged $85 million for the restoration and conversion of the High Line.\footnote{Friends of the High Line, “High Line History” \url{http://www.thehighline.org} (accessed 14 November 2010).} The special zoning provisions also reflected New York’s shift away from the dirt and grime of the modern city and towards a city focused on the quality of the urban experience.

Rescaling sections of the city’s land use patterns provides evidence of the changing role of city planning today. Social interests rely less on urban planning as a redistributive measure for stimulating urban development. Instead, urban planning functions as a marketing mechanism for cities to maintain competition at a trans-national level. Branding cities as sites for business has become a new social objective for urban planning, and the value of urban form has been re-engaged by urban planners. In the process of image making, planners have used distinctive architectural and urban forms to increase the aesthetic draw of their cities as centers for cultural sophistication and progress. In doing so, planners have acknowledged the social desire for accumulating “symbolic capital” as a motivating factor in constructive behavior.

Through zoning that encourages progressive development, cities have given incentives to commercial developers to design according to an aesthetically oriented
vision of what the city skyline should look like juxtaposed to the designer’s consideration of the street level visual walking experience. This noted trend in urban planning’s concern for architectural forms reinforces the importance of spurring gentrification in order to increase the value of annual rent payments on the land.\textsuperscript{143} While this helps areas become destinations for tourists, it reinforces the importance of money in Manhattan. Michael Sorkin, American architectural and urban designer and critic, notes that “while attention to the quality and texture of the city’s architecture and spaces – both new and historic – is of vital importance, the role of design as the expression of privilege has never been clearer.”\textsuperscript{144}

Today, as before, property developers often anticipate new opportunities for real estate development, as they should, before the city does. For the High Line, the Chelsea Property Owners desired to maximize the value of their land underneath the High Line, which to them meant tearing down the structure. However, because the community has the right to oppose a private corporation’s incentive to make a profit, FHL served as that voice against actions to redevelop the Lower West Side into a hyper-vertical section of Manhattan. Trying to avoid paralleling the history of SoHo’s development into a commercial district with high real estate rents, FHL hoped to avoid displacing the local art galleries from Chelsea, which would inevitably occur if action had not been taken to preserve the present character of the area. The community’s desire to prohibit over-development, especially in a city that grapples with significantly fewer available spaces on which to build, represents a consciousness at the local level about creating a sustainable

\textsuperscript{143} Neil Smith, \textit{The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city}, 45.
development model for the future that does not encourage rampant gentrification and the saturation of high-end commercial opportunities.

Development alone can no longer guarantee that real estate owners will pay high prices for land. For an area to draw capital, it needs to have a defining characteristic that is attractive to a wide range of interests. Historically implemented into city planning strategies, parks offer evidence as to why creating public spaces alters the perception of the urban experience. They seem to make their districts more desirable. With parks, come restaurants, cafes, and commercial amenities to serve our innate desire in cities to consume during times of recreation and leisure. Parks make a district seem like a great place to live. With bustling markets of human activity, West Chelsea is an exciting place to live. As more people desire to live there, more condominiums are built, and more people move in. This flow continues until the land is completely developed and rents have reached a high enough level to make real estate values soar and contribute funds to the city budget through increased property tax revenues based on assessments.

Certainly, this is the fully predicted cycle but it is important to understand whom these efforts in cities to raise real estate values are serving. It is not the middle-class citizen anymore.

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Tom Colicchio, co-founder of Gramercy Tavern in Manhattan and sponsor for the Friends of the High Line benefit in October 2010 at his Chelsea restaurant Colicchio & Sons, once stated, “a soup is the greatest articulation of a chef’s personality – its balance of flavors invoke the essential signature experience a chef is hoping to exude.”

If the urban experience could be made into a soup, public space would be the added, but necessary garnish to the city’s amalgamation of flavors, textures, and sensations. Public spaces partly dictate how we feel about a city, why we travel to certain spaces and how we spend our recreational, leisure time. A public space like the High Line plays on that inherent quality of parks by incorporating components, such as landscape and Manhattan vistas, to produce an urban experience unlike any other existing space in New York.

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York City. Public parks offer a different urban experience in comparison to the street (a network of paths through a city) because they embody leisure and recreation. Nonetheless, parks direct how people travel within their own urban existence. Since the High Line rests on an elevated plane while concurrently weaving through areas that only trains used to travel, the space provides an experience distinct from the regimented grid below (Figure 17). However, as a walkway and elevated network through three neighborhoods of the Lower West Side, perhaps the High Line is a new street above the grid.

The following section will analyze the design of the High Line through a chronological outline of how the ideas behind the design came to fruition through the realized park today. This will culminate in a discussion about the emergent field of landscape urbanism and its increasingly important role in the shifting values of urban designers and their client cities. Ultimately, this will provide continued insight into the neoliberal urban planning process and how it is shaping the American city.

**Designing the High Line**

Every city has a story to tell. Similarly, each microcosm within a city has a process behind the end result. The design narrative of the High Line is no different and like all great stories, it began with an initial philosophy about what the urban experience in New York City could be. The High Line, the physical result of that story, represents the players (outlined in Chapter One) and the public policy and economic development obstacles (described in Chapter Two) that the players overcame to begin the design process. Joshua David and Robert Hammond describe the surreal, natural experience of

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147 “The grid” here refers to the Commissioner’s Grid of Manhattan, drafted in 1807 and adopted in 1811.
wading through a lush pasture in the sky. This is vastly distinct from a walk beside the massive modernist architecture of Manhattan, such as the Seagram Building (Figure 18) located in Midtown on Park Avenue between Fifty-second Street and Fifty-third Street. A walk on the High Line invites visitors to reconsider the beauty of low-level buildings against the tall skyscrapers, while also feeling a connection to nature as the wild landscape trails beside one’s feet.

To facilitate this idealistic idea of conserving this wild pathway into an active sentiment, the Friends of the High Line sponsored Designing the High Line, an open ideas competition in 2003. The response was staggering. Around 720 individuals and teams from thirty-six countries submitted proposals for the first design competition.148 While many submissions presented outlandish proposals, such as installing a roller coaster on top of the railway bed so viewers could twist and turn through the vistas without ever stepping foot on the natural landscape, some proposals influenced the future, professional design proposals in 2004.

The FHL desired to extend their aspirations for the High Line project to a wider community of potential designers in order to further the possibility of preserving the High Line as a public space that retained its endearing “Secret Garden” like characteristics. Ed Norton and Robert Caro, biographer of Robert Moses, sponsored a fundraiser for the FHL in July 2003 at Grand Central Terminal to feature the results of the first design competition.149 The jurors, including individuals such as architect Steven Holl and Marilyn Jordan Taylor (chairman of Skidmore Owings and Merrill), chose four principal winners, three special award winners, ten honorable mentions, and more than

148 Friends of the High Line, Designing the High Line: Gansevoort Street to 30th Street, 106.
150 noteworthy proposals, based on their own expertise as professionals, work submitted by competitors, and the information contained in the competition guidelines. A successful vision demonstrated how the line could be transformed in bold, optimistic ways to benefit New York City for generations. The entries listed were also published on the official High Line website. Because the initiative to reclaim the High Line faced complex political, legal, and financial hurdles, competitors played a vital role in overcoming these hurdles by proposing designs that raised public awareness of the unique potential of the High Line.

Due to the tremendous number of proposals submitted in the premier conceptual design competition, the Friends of the High Line and the City of New York City partnered together in 2004 to sponsor a second design competition in order to select the official High Line design team. The second competition, intended only for established professional teams, received fifty-two Requests for Qualifications from experts in the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, art, urban planning, and horticulture. Teams participating had to create a master plan that was buildable, maintainable, and economically rational. From the fifty-two requests, the city government and the FHL selected seven preliminary teams and by March 2004 chose four finalist teams to present a design approach to the High Line redevelopment project. The FHL asked each team to create a proposal that most closely conveyed
the valued characteristics of the abandoned railway while respecting the history of the industrial Lower West Side through minimal design interventions on the site.

The Chosen Design Proposal

In the summer of 2004, New York City’s Center for Architecture displayed the four proposals to the public. By October, members of a Steering Committee made up of representatives from the City of New York and the Friends of the High Line, selected the team consisting of James Corner Field Operations (landscape architecture) and Diller Scofidio + Renfro (architecture) to begin designing the High Line.155

The Steering Committee actively encouraged the winning team to engage the public sphere through open planning sessions. The project contained unprecedented challenges in its structure (as an elevated linear pathway), its potential reuse scenarios (as a public space or transportation corridor), and its previous function as a railroad. The committee, seeing those challenges, offered this unique opportunity to a team they felt would collaborate well with the city, the FHL, neighbors, horticulturalists, and other necessary voices in the crafting of the High Line experience.

The dynamic of the winning team, which expanded to include Dutch horticulturalist Piet Oudolf and light designer Herve Descottes from L’Observatoire International, closely paralleled the mission statement of the FHL because of the team’s collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to the High Line’s design. Best known for the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) building in Boston (Figure 19), Diller Scofidio + Renfro combined an interdisciplinary emphasis in the design process with a contemporary style influenced by installation and video art, which matches well with the

The firm’s office is also located in Chelsea, within a stone’s throw of the High Line, at the northwest edge of West Twenty-sixth Street. This firm paired with James Corner’s team established a core collaborative practice that allowed the High Line proposal to be highly refined, a result most commonly achieved through vigorous group critiquing and collaborative efforts. The entire team consulted with each other to create a dynamic vision of the High Line, instead of the singular vision of one architect. James Corner and his firm Field Operations, then working on five other major public landscape projects, including Freshkills Park (a 22-acre reclamation landfill in Staten Island), contributed a progressive outlook on landscape through minimal architectural intervention (Figure 20). To Corner, being a landscape architect is seeing a bigger picture and choreographing a bigger team. For Corner and Field Operations, reinventing the field of landscape architecture is the ambition behind the team’s work, exemplified by the High Line.  

James Corner tells an intriguing story through his approach in designing the landscape architecture for the High Line. It was he who designed the striated paths that taper into diverging thin spurs in order to permit the grassland to grow wildly, as if the weeds had pushed through the planks independently (Figure 21). This effect of the path blurs the divide between the vegetal and mineral, creating a sensory experience similar to the whimsical High Line Joel Sternfeld depicted in his photographs.

It also represents their greater agenda to design the post-industrial city. James Corner proposes that landscape architects are best prepared to tackle the, “complex, large-scale, often environmentally damaged sites that have become the hallmark of urban

regeneration.” For the firm, the High Line project also marks a big advance for the landscape architecture field. Corner recounts his constant battle against the misconception that the architects, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, did all the work for the High Line. He asserts: “in every project we’ve initiated, we’ve led, we’ve had architects and engineers and other experts be part of our team. Professionally speaking, that’s a big advance for a field that’s normally reticent.” A leading figure in landscape urbanism, a theory that landscape is the defining core for the urban experience, Corner envisioned a landscape design that would challenge our assumptions about the style of greenery in an urban public park.

By respecting the innate character of the High Line through its pragmatic fusion of wild plant-life (vines, mosses, meadows, flowers) with steel tracks, railings, and concrete, the design team created a stimulating and seasonally evolving vision for the High Line. The team’s design embraced the simplicity of the space as a linear pathway and emphasized the intricacies of nature by stripping the architecture down to its bare minimum.

Beginning at the gradual, long steps of the Gansevoort Plaza major access point, one is slowly guided to the High Line level. Once above the street and on the High Line spatial plane, the wild landscape invites you to continue on through the green keyhole by leading you along a widening path that eventually opens up to reveal a full view of the sky along side the vast cityscape (Figure 22).

158 Ibid.
160 Friends of the High Line, Designing the High Line, 23.
Situated three stories above the streets of the West Side, the viewer’s elevation on the High Line alters perceptions of the city around and below the railway. A walk at this height grants an urban experience similar to those experienced by executives in tall office buildings overlooking the Hudson River. While nice vistas to see as one toils away on business reports, the added experience of seeing those same views in a public space dedicated to leisure in one that immerses an individual in the city instead of alienating an individual above it, creates a unique urban experience. The inspiring pathway allows the pedestrian to dream by suggesting unlimited opportunities for transforming eyesores into assets.

The path, while only one component of the park, defines the modest attitude the architecture team took when considering the High Line experience. The open space, when developed into a park, would need to be accessible; a large question the firm faced was how they would incorporate the path within the self-sown landscape. Diller Scofidio + Renfro formulated a vision for the path based on the free-flowing landscape, but also the surrounding industrial architecture, mostly comprised of brick and concrete. Through the strategy of agri-tecture, a conceptual combination of organic and building materials into a vegetal/mineral blend, the team designed an unscripted path through a striated system of modular concrete planks (Figure 23). This integrates the path with the low-lying vegetation, rather than segmenting the pathways from the planting areas.\footnote{Friends of the High Line, \textit{Designing the High Line}, 12.}

Through the pathway, the team stayed true to their objective of preserving the strange character of the abandoned High Line.

While the design of the High Line is commended for its whimsical, unplanned pedestrian experience, architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro consciously created the
pedestrian path. The path of the High Line weaves in and out of the landscape, but also evolves as the path continues, meaning that it changes width and shifts position along the line. In the same fashion as Frederick Law Olmstead’s Central Park, the visitor on the path is aware that it restricts movement to a certain plane. The High Line is not as free as an unconstrained space, such as a wide-open field, but this design is a variant of the inevitable compromise that involves placing a green open space in a city. The High Line is spectacular in that it slices through the grid and connects three neighborhoods through the power of walking, but it is a singular, linear pathway, which restricts movement. The value in creating public parks in cities is to remind urban dwellers of the ecologies outside of the built environment. The High Line becomes a recognized place, but the environments evolve not only with the changing vegetation along the park’s length, but also with the architectural characteristics of the surrounding districts. The path, like the team’s vision, is certain, but the character of each place along its length, in terms of the path and its built surroundings, is not. With this in mind, time plays a critical role in our understanding of the High Line design.

The design team consciously incorporated their awareness of the change of our perceptions over time through a landscape design that transitions ever so slightly as the path continues. In following their mission to accurately depict the conditions of the High Line before contemporary humans decided to intervene, Field Operations surveyed the self-sown landscape to record the plants present in certain sections, according to the conditions of the place (such as the degree of sunlight intensity in a section or the railway’s proximity to the Hudson River). This survey found the type of plants that could live in the flowing conditions of the 1.45-mile railway. The team found a naturally occurring transition between the species of the plants according to the environmental


conditions contingent on quality of life necessary for a specific type of plant to take root (Figure 24). This, in turn, inspired them to recreate this flowing change of vegetation over the time spent walking along the path exactly as Mother Nature had sown it through the landscape architecture.\textsuperscript{162}

The placement of a landscape that appears wild reinforces a listlessness for keeping time. Henry Adams, an American journalist at the turn of the twentieth-century who proposed a theory of history based on thermodynamics and entropy, observed that, “chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man.”\textsuperscript{163} In a similar way, Corner understands the inherent chaos of nature; and instead of fighting it through manicured pastures, he embraces it through an idyllic presentation of a pure landscape. Perhaps it is a primal instinct of the human to respond to greenery in this way, but nonetheless, the landscape varies in countless ways that play against the urban norm of regimented certainty, best seen in the Manhattan Grid below and around it. Corner creates tension against the street grid by designing a mixture of plants that build upon each other as they mingle with other species. He comments on his technique in \textit{Designing the High Line}.

“New plantings build upon the existing landscape character, working with specific environmental urban conditions and microclimates associated with sun, shade, wet, dry, wind, noise, open and sheltered spaces.”\textsuperscript{164}

Underneath the pathway is a thin layer of soil, which is a harsh, arid set of conditions for plants to root in. Strolling within the grasses and plants, a viewer sees a wild, dynamic character representative of these conditions, as the plants sprout up towards the sun instead of deep into the earth. Like the plants forced to grow in less

\textsuperscript{162} James Corner, “Terra Fluxus” in \textit{The Landscape Urbanism Reader}, 29.

\textsuperscript{163} Henry Adams, \textit{A Letter to American Teachers of History}.

\textsuperscript{164} Ricardo Scofidio, in \textit{Designing the High Line}, 31.
than favorable conditions, a visitor is quietly reminded of the need to be active in an urban setting, no matter how challenging the terrain may be, instead of retreating to the depths of solitude.

As a whole, the design of the High Line is wonderfully restrained through its mannered but heartfelt homage to the wild growth of the rail line’s period of abandonment. Robert Hammond recounts that the High Line designers endeavored to “save the structure from architecture.” While painfully fashionable, the High Line has the breadth of city support, through the work done by the Friends of the High Line and Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC initiative to promote a sustainable future, which will hopefully allow its role as a public space to outweigh the ebbs and flows of high fashion. The task of design today is to transform the rigidities of architecture into the adaptations of nature. PlaNYC, which will be discussed next, embraces a new agenda for landscape architecture that reflects the global-scale understanding of environmental degradation and the potential of cities to counter it.

**Landscape Urbanism**

In Mayor Bloomberg’s speech on PlaNYC in April 2007, an event asking New Yorker’s to generate ten key ideas (focusing on land, air, water, energy, and transportation) for a sustainable future by 2030, he stated that for New York: “to be a better city, we must build green, use mass transit, and restore purity to our water and air, with park access for all.” This is a type of city that is more urbane, but also more

\[165\] Karrie Jacobs “Beyond the Hype” Metropolis Magazine America (17 June 2009).
\[166\] Andrew Blum, “Metaphor Remediation: A New Ecology for the City,” Reconstructing Urban Landscapes (Michael van Valkenburgh Associates), 255.
natural. One in which the ecologies of human and nature coexist in an updated environment that permits those who enter those spaces to embrace this relationship, instead of trying to fight against nature because of our fear of its unknown “chaos.” This marriage of building and landscape in a singular ecology challenges previous expectations of the role of design in shaping the urban experience by choreographing the existing essence of the organic environment with man’s material-built world.

Adriaan Geuze, native of Holland and co-founder of Rotterdam-based West 8 (an international office for urban design and landscape architecture with an office in close proximity) stated, “traditionally buildings are used to give meaning to the city. I think that role can increasingly be assumed by landscape.” As climate change threatens to reshape the world, landscape architecture seems poised to play an influential role in creating public spaces that respond to looming questions of what future environment challenges will bring about in American cities. The High Line provides a setting for people to consider those realities of climate change as an elevated path through the city. The simple experience of walking the path crafts the main contemplative purpose of the High Line: to spur thought and generate a civically active urban aggregate that does not remain complacent by only serving a specific community. The future is uncertain, but Mayor Bloomberg recognizes the great economic potential in New Yorkers’ abilities to conceive of innovative ideas.

Landscape urbanism emerged as a result of a growing interest in expanding the field of landscape architecture. Traditionally, greenery in public parks follows the long tradition of a picturesque landscape, that attempts to portray the idealistic image of nature by designing a Rococo environment of manicured shrubbery, carefully positioned

trees, and long spans of trimly-cut grass. The High Line is an effort to integrate a picturesque ideal into an older industrial site. Charles Waldheim, leading landscape urbanism professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, states:

Many cities in North America formerly known for their autochthonous architectural culture are presently engaged in re-branding themselves for larger economies of tourism, recreation, and destination entertainment, packing architectural objects and fragments of the traditional urban fabric as optional excursions into themed environments.169

Thus, landscape urbanism is one branch of this movement away from the traditional and towards a discourse of architecture responding to the economic, social, and cultural shifts surrounding de-industrialization.170 These new emergent forms of landscape urbanism frame these contexts in sites left in the wake of industry that has resulted in a different landscape aesthetic. The High Line is one of these new forms. Perhaps this movement towards a more wild landscape is man’s reluctant sigh of defeat in the millennium-long fight to control nature, as the city faces the bleak reality that the existing infrastructure cannot withstand the notable changes in the environment, best seen in recent natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and the tsunami in Japan.

James Corner’s landscape design for the High Line speaks as a metaphor for the place of landscape is playing in the contemporary city environment, which ultimately represents a larger trend in urban design. Corner’s design maintains the memory of the High Line’s history as an abandoned railway and its magical wildness, while incorporating a highly refined design aesthetic, that leaves no doubt in the visitor’s mind that the public park is an environment that has been affected by money, art and culture. Strolling along the wreckage of the industrial past while basking in the cultured and

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170 Ibid, 17.
moneyed present of Manhattan’s Lower West Side, the park is a sharp-witted reflection of what New York is as a city. How will the High Line inspire future projects along these lines of sustainability and minimal material intervention? The hype about the High Line, along with the public relations campaigns that were created to generate that hype, announce a sentiment of infinite opportunities to build whatever the community deems fit. However, the reality of neoliberal urban planning is that compromise is inevitable. As cities face budget deficits and apocalyptic images of climate change, how citizens facilitate progressive change in design will ultimately come down to how they utilize available resources in the service of civic virtue, likely with the need for a mayor, such as Bloomberg, that believes in and encourages realizing this value.
In the introduction it was asked if the process of the High Line could be viewed as a model of the convergence of neoliberal urban policy and landscape urbanism. Since the process of the High Line has now been thoroughly explored in its relation to neoliberalism, this question can now be revisited from a more informed perspective. The process reveals that multiple layers are involved in projects worthy of being titled “a model.” The different components of the discussion range from the players invested in the future of the High Line, to the economic development of the Lower West Side through the 2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning, to the emergence of a new type of park through landscape urbanism. The most common reoccurrence in this story is thinking. The stacking of multiple layers in one process reveals a model for collaborative thinking. There are three important branches of this collaborative thinking model, from
this discussion of the High Line, that are most poignantly exemplified in its joining of neoliberal policy and urban design.

**Public-Private Partnerships**

From the beginning of the High Line redevelopment, multiple players have been involved, which created a collaborative environment of thought. Due to this, the process of realizing the potential of the High Line progressed faster than it would have if only one sector of city government had the supported it, for example. This resulted in a more thoughtful reconsideration of the High Line’s reuse as seen in the two reports issued by the Design Trust for Public Space as well as the tremendous efforts made by the Friends of the High Line to increase awareness of this redevelopment project.

Public-private cooperation serves as one of the foundations of neoliberal policy at the local level. Beneath the abstractions of neoliberalism lie real problems for people in cities. No longer comforted by government-funded social services, the occasional individual organizes a resistance to these changes in the social structure of the economy through meaningful projects that attempt to operate within a neoliberal context. The Friends of the High Line resisted the initial intention of property owners to demolish the line in order to make space for new development by framing the argument towards utilizing the structure to spur real estate development instead.

In the case of the High Line, the Bloomberg administration supports this civic responsibility to act. There is a tremendous opportunity to utilize the monetary resources of the wealthy class to realize ideals, such as the High Line. New York City is closely bound within a capitalist market because of its history as one of the world’s financial centers. Yet despite its close tie to Manhattan wealth, the High Line represents
an opportunity taken to tailor this market-driven society towards socially responsible action.

The singular perspective of the architect did not dictate the formal characteristics of the High Line. Rather, its realization through built form was a greater articulation of the community. However, the nature of fundraising often leaves the intentions of the local masses behind in order to secure substantial funding for a project of such breadth. The powerful FHL brand does not represent its community anymore. It is much closer to the flashing lights of Time Square, in that it represents Manhattan at large. The reality in the world is that there is always a compromise somewhere. Future challenges will demand that citizens participate in the process of transforming the city’s infrastructure, but only if the leaders of those initiatives allow local communities to stay involved.

Flexible Zoning

Without the 2005 Special West Chelsea Rezoning, design plans for the High Line would not have moved forward. The romantic notions of transforming the railway into an open space would not have been realized if the city had not updated the existing zoning ordinances in order to accommodate the needs for the High Line. The majority of these actions were taken to protect the city’s investment in the park, but they also aimed to maintain the architectural character of the Lower West Side. As an area targeted by real estate developers since 1980, it was important to fully think about the repercussions of unlimited real estate development.

It also reflects the types of investments the city government is making. As of 2003, the Bloomberg administration predicted twenty-eight million square feet of commercial development and twelve million square feet of residential development
through the implementation of the New York Jets stadium at Eleventh Avenue and Thirty-third Street.\textsuperscript{171} While the city decided to build the stadium in Florham Park, New Jersey, through 2004 the Hudson Rail Yards were posed to become the area for the New York Jets Stadium. By building such a structure, its supporters believed it would attract fans and tourists from the greater New York metropolitan area, while also spurring development of the property near the Hudson Rail Yards. Yet creating a public park was more beneficial to the area, especially for the local residents, because unlike a stadium, which requires substantial public funds, the people will not have to continue to pay for the city’s investment in a stadium through increased taxes.

As seen with Mayor Bloomberg’s zoning efforts of PlaNYC that spanned across the five boroughs of Manhattan, the shift to entrepreneurial or neoliberal urban governance is less the result of an organic shift to entrepreneurship made in the face of real estate development pressures, than it is the result of government regulated disciplining of localities. The Friends of the High Line may have stopped the municipal government from destroying the High Line, but it never would have happened if it had not been a greater plan of the city government to increase real estate values. This means that these trends are more an indication of the constraints imposed by financial capital than by the political popularity of neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{172}

**Landscape Urbanism**

As the Harvard Graduate School of Design stresses the concept of landscape urbanism as a discipline, it will be important to differentiate between the *process of design* and the *design of process*. The combination of these components is key in creating


\textsuperscript{172} Hackworth, p. 18.
thoughtful and engaged designs for a social context, like a park. The \textit{design of process}, meaning the formal structure of the activity, brings an awareness of how to develop the initial idea of saving the wild landscape of the High Line into an existing design through the \textit{process of design}, which this document has been chronicling. Accepting this, the \textit{design of process} must prelude the \textit{process of design} in order for landscape architecture to be a “discipline” as the Harvard Graduate School of Design claims. The thought process and how we conceptualize innovation cannot be quantified and taught in the same manner as science. So is it is a discipline? It is through practice that we learn how to follow an idea to its eventual realization.

This is similar to the debate about whether art and architecture can be taught in school as a discipline. With design and landscape architecture saturated with popularity, it is not surprising that schools of thought are analyzing its components. However, there is hope in design because it entails elements that can only be experienced through the act of doing. Further, there is a structural design to that practice, which an individual learns through participating with the medium, instead of merely being taught it.

Contextual thinking is essential to everyday success in design and building.\footnote{Paul Groth, p. xiii} Without an awareness of the structure behind the \textit{process of design}, how we approach the challenges in society will not be met by fully realized actions. Perhaps this discussion by this group exposes a broader reinvention of landscape architecture as a choreography of topographies and ecologies through urban parks, rather than the lackluster association of landscape architecture within the confines of a discipline. Regardless, the landscape of the High Line inspires a call to action – to think of the future city! No longer does there need to be a dissonance between the city and nature. The High Line is that beginning.
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