Taking the High Line:
Elevated Parks, Evolving Neighborhoods, and the Ever Changing Relationship between Urban and Nature

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Introduction

"If you were actually able to make a park on the High Line, it would be great for property values. But this will never happen; it is just too far-fetched. These people are dreamers." (A local property owner at a Community hearing, April 2001 David and Hammond 2011 p. 31)

Everyone talks about it and everyone wants one; *The High Line* in New York City started a worldwide trend of elevated parks. Old and unused rail lines are transformed into exciting urban environments. New York's Mayor Bloomberg has noted that the project has ushered in a renaissance for the area impacting the real estate values and development in the surrounding vicinity. This was one of the main arguments for the realization of the project and even though there's been strong community support for the project, voices have been raised on how this change is affecting the neighborhood.

The aim of this paper is to critically discuss the evolving trend of *elevated parks* and especially *the High Line project*, by investigating what reactions and debates it has triggered. Highly acclaimed as an expression of *Landscape Urbanism,* it focuses on the reuse of abandoned infrastructure and active landscapes. The project has been a success, seeing millions of visitors since its opening, but the neighborhoods around it have undergone changes. Gentrification raises alarms as projects like these have a dual function in both increasing property values (as intended by supporters), and causing friction with those negatively impacted by those forces.

The High Line story is one of an evolving view on urban planning and design; a product of a constantly changing view on parks and public places. Robert Hammond, one of the activists behind the creation of the High Line commented that: "*Central Park was meant to be an escape (...) On the High Line, you're in nature, but you can hear the traffic, you can see the Empire State Building*" (Jacobs, 2012), highlighting the interrelationship between the 'urban' and nature.

Methods

The idea for this paper sprung up from a visit to the High Line, following a discussion with the Project for Public Spaces senior vice president, Kathy Madden. Enchanting as it is, as soon as the first bliss wears off, the complexity of the project raises interesting questions. It is highly relevant not only for landscape architects, designers and architects, but also planners, since the High Line has influenced many other projects. This influence raises questions of *who* is initiating

the provision of public space, *who* public space is intended for, and what consequences a project of this magnitude can have on the surrounding locale.

This paper is an analysis of the High Line case through explorative and observational methods, including the analysis of documents, blogs, reviews, and journals. As one aim is to identify and follow the debate, an open search was made in the initial phases of the work to identify the relevant sources. Observational methods here refer to the site visit and direct observations of photos to identify possible areas of conflict, such as issues of access, shortage of amenities and preservation. The theoretical basis for the discussion in this paper connects to both the project itself and the effects and processes the changes have caused in connection to the surrounding area. Landscape urbanism is a concept gaining attention and is acknowledging the diverse role that urban parks can play in today's society. The High Line has been discussed in terms of gentrification impacts to the surrounding neighborhoods. Both gentrification and landscape urbanism are concepts important for the understanding of the context this project has emerged within, and the complexity of contemporary design, and management of parks and public spaces.

Landscape Urbanism- A New Frontier between Urban and Nature

Landscape urbanism is an emerging concept involving the ecology of the city, the multi-functionality of nature and landscape, and the interrelationship with the urban environment. What is considered an urban park and what functions should be supplied by one has shifted dramatically over time and is still evolving. In the United States the first urban parks were unimproved commons at the edge of cities which were developed into pastoral landscapes with a narrative of nature, as opposed to the urban, the park acting as a refuge from the city. At first parks were enjoyed by the upper class as the working class lived too far away and did not have the time or access. At the end of the 19th century, parks underwent a social reform changing the relation between park and nature as parks aimed to be a public common, and not a mere resemblance of pastoral landscapes (Cranz, 1997 & Low et al. 2005). In the 1930's more focus was put on recreational services, widening the definition of parks. In the 1960's this developed into recognition that a wide range of places can be used for recreational uses, not only parks (Cranz, 1997). According to Cranz, society is currently experiencing a fifth model, understanding that parks have the potential to contribute to sustainable lifestyles by bridging the divide between production of resources and consumption of resources. This new era also recognizes the need to reclaim places previously used in other ways for parks and the wider public space uses (1997).

Landscape urbanism is an attempt at finding a balance between the built and natural environments (Duany & Talen, 2013). There is a need to plan, design, and maintain various places - foremost through understanding their identity, physical pattern, meaning, and setting. According to Mohsen Mostafavi, this is the territory of ecological urbanism, with the capacity to accommodate the inherent conflictual conditions between ecology and urbanism (2011). The last decade has seen a rise of a new paradigm in architecture and urban design - landscape urbanism. The variety and divergence of this in combination with its broad approach on the urbanist agenda sometimes makes it difficult to define what it is all about, however, the concept of using landscape as a model for urbanism holds the framework together (Assargård, 2011).

According to James Corner (2006), landscape urbanism has the potential to contribute to the need to fully understand the cultural, social, political and economic environments as embedded in, and symmetrical with, the natural world. Landscape urbanism fundamentally draws attention to the key elements of contextualization, complexity, and contingency promoting an understanding of places and projects based on a 'systems ecology view', which includes people and what they do and have done in the same frame as a comprehensive view of the natural world (Assargård, 2011). The motivation of landscape urbanism is the creation of a sustainable city regarding several parameters, such as ecological, social, economic and aesthetic aspects (Waldheim, 2010). Landscape urbanism and its proponents have been criticized for being overly interested in building large urban parks that give way to a sort of "green sprawl". Charles Waldheim claims that the whole movement and paradigm of landscape urbanism is much more a way to describe urban form differently; where the ecology is being reconstructed and combined with architectural ideas, rather than simply planning for parks in cities (2006 & 2010). Landscape, sustainable, and ecological approaches in urbanism are critically needed in organizing our cities and communities.

About the High Line

The High Line is a former train track now transformed to a publicly owned but privately managed park situated on an elevated structure running on Manhattan's West Side, Chelsea, and The Meatpacking districts. The High Line was built in the 1930's to get the freight traffic from Manhattan's industrial districts off the street level and was running until 1980 as part of the public-private West Side Improvement project. In the 1950's trucks took over as the main transport mode and the last train operating on the High Line ran in 1980. The south most part of the line was demolished in the 1960's and by the end of the 1990's the High Line was considered an eyesore, at its best, just forgotten (thehighline.org, undated a).

Two local residents, Joshua David and Robert Hammond met at a community board meeting in 1999 where the future of the High Line was to be discussed. Officials in the Giuliani administration and local business owners were at that time convinced that the only way forward was to tear down the High Line. Having fallen in love with the structure, David and Hammond founded Friends of the High Line (FHL) as a community-based non-profit organization which today manages the park (David & Hammond 2011).

Saving the High Line was a prolonged process fighting both local property owners and a political administration who wanted to demolish the structure in order to develop the area below. In David and Hammonds own book *High Line - the Inside Story of New York's Park in the Sky* (2011), the process to secure the preservation of the High Line is described in detail. In the beginning, public opinion about the structure was that it was a dark and dangerous place, full of crime, prostitution, homelessness and pigeon shit. The founders of FHL wanted to involve celebrities from the very beginning, reaching out to local gallery owners and personal contacts as they understood that they had to get attention and change the politician's minds as well as the public opinion. By using the media power of celebrities, involvement of the community and gaining attention through special events, parties, fundraising, idea competitions, these private citizens, essentially became un-trained planners, yet they managed to accomplish a great feat by swaying public and

governing opinions, representing a new way of non-traditional urban planning working to develop the urban environment; an example of citizens taking planning into their own hands.

The park was designed by landscape architecture firm, James Corner Field Operations and architects Diller Scofidio+Renfro in cooperation with the Friends of the High Line and input from the community through the open meetings held by the Friends of the High Line (thehighline.org undated a). The ribbon for the first part was cut June 8th 2009 (the second part opened 2011) and since then more than 4 million people have visited the High Line (thehighline.org, undated b, David & Hammond 2011).

Trendsetting: Elevated Urban Parks

The success of the High Line in New York City started a worldwide trend of elevated parks, giving attention to other similar projects springing up. In Jerusalem the "Train Track Park" connects rich and poor neighborhoods (Holmes, 2012 & Dvir, 2012) and in London ideas have been put forward to create a mushroom garden in an old railway tunnel beneath Oxford Street (Pouls, 2012). Officials in Mexico City, likely inspired by the High Line, plan to build an elevated park from scratch (Jacobs, 2012), in contrast to both the local initiative of the High Line project and the underlying idea to give old structures new uses. In the US, the Bloomingdale Line in Chicago (bloomingdaletrail.org undated) and the Reading Viaduct in Philadelphia are examples of a nationwide trend. Reading Viaduct is a locally initiated project aiming to create a public green space on an old train viaduct in rapidly redeveloping neighborhoods and is described by proposers as a magnet for residential and commercial development (readingviaduct.org undated). The acclaimed original inspiration for the High Line and other elevated park projects comes from Paris. Viaduc des Arts and Promenade Plantee, was initiated by the city of Paris and *Semaest*, an arts and crafts association, and in the beginning of the 1990's the abandoned track was turned into a pedestrian walkway on top of arches renovated to house workshops and galleries for artists and craftsmen (Campbell, 2002). These may seem similar to the "rails to trails" movement in the US where rail beds have been repurposed to bike trails, but it is inherently different as landscape urbanism views the remaining underutilized infrastructure not as something to remove to gain space for another use, but as an asset to be repurposed.

The High Line wasn't the first of its kind but the huge success of it has started the discussion of if elevated parks can experience similar success in other American cities (Jaffe, 2011). As a response to this debate, Witold Rybczynski (2011), professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania wrote an Op-ed in *The New York Times*, discussing the designers wish to make the project a new model for town planning and the beacon of landscape urbanism. Referring to other elevated park projects in the US, such as the Sixth Street Embankment in Jersey City, and The Iron Horse Trestle in St. Louis, he criticizes the idea of seeing the High Line as a quick fix to revive declining downtowns. In both Manhattan and the modern and wealthy 12th Arrondissement in Paris where Promenade Plantee is situated have been crucial to the success of the project, according to Rybczynski, we find examples not of "build it and they will come" but of "build it were they are" (2011). The high design, high maintenance model the High Line represents would not be sustainable anywhere else (Lange, 2011) because not everyplace is Manhattan or Paris, and these types of projects may not be suitable in other locations and cities experiencing different economic and social realities.

Critical Reflections

While the High Line is undoubtedly a loved place and a huge success, as predicted, the property values have risen, increasing the tax revenues for the city. *Travel + Leisure* magazine named the High Line the 10th most popular landmark of the world (travelandleisure.com, 2012). The experience of the place has been described with words like "serenity" and "exhilarating" and that the elevated structure works as a "refuge," an "altar" (Golden, 2011). One writer expresses that strolling along the High Line resembles a main street in a small town (Cardwell, 2009). *The New York Times* describes the High Line as a play between contemporary and historical, an immediate sense of calm, a thoughtful, sensitively designed public place that alters your perspective of the city, the height makes views possible but *"(a)t the same time, you are still close enough to make eye contact with people on the sidewalks, so that you never lose your connection to the street life*" (Ouroussoff, 2009).

The critical remarks that have been made concern the structure and design, details such as, "are there too many or too few entrances?" Even though the Friends of the High Line have the outspoken value that the High Line is a place for all people regardless of socioeconomic status, and having held continuous community meetings (thehighline.org undated a), issues are being raised about the "publicness" of the place (see comment by Rwordplay in Moss 2012b). In online magazine *Planetizen* Sam Hall Kapland stated that:

> *"The High Line obviously was not designed for these persevering dwellers, or the neighborhood. If so, from my public planning perspective, the generous funds received from its well-heeled patrons and the city should have been first used at the street level, to improve pedestrian safety and connectivity, contain the noxious traffic, and purchase a few of the area's unsightly parking lots for active playgrounds, pocket parks and common gardens that have been on the community's wish list for decades."* (Kaplan, 2012)

This raises concerns for whom the project is design and its role in the ongoing gentrification of the surrounding neighborhoods. The term "*gentrification*" came about in 1964, coined by a British sociologist, Ruth Glass, who defined it as a process where one class is "invaded" by a class with more buying power, and that once the process starts, "it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed" (Glass 1964: xviii). The term has grown since then into a large area of scholarly research of its own, and is often situated in proximity to similar terms such as *urban regeneration, revitalization, renewal, re-invasion, and 'back-to-the-city movement'* (London and Palen, 1984, p.6). London and Palen (1984) listed five explanations for gentrification, which they likened with "reinvasion", playing off of Park and Burgess's (1925) invasion and succession cycles (1984, p. 8), those explanations pointed to: "(1) demographic-ecological, (2) sociocultural, (3) political-economic, (4) community networks, and (5) social movements" (1984, p.14). Theories abound on the cause and effect of gentrification, ranging from Neil Smith's *production side theory* that points to economic and capital restructuring of space (1986), to David Ley's *consumption side theory* that points to an influx and "geography of a new cultural class" into the city (1996, p.68), to theories surrounding *globalization* and *the new economy* (Sassen, 1995 &

Smith 2002). A more contemporary notion of gentrification comes from Richard Florida's, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002).

In "*New Globalism, New Urbanism*," Neil Smith (2002) points out a "third-wave" generalized gentrification (in contrast to the sporadic in the 50's and urban economic restructuring in the 70's and 80's) has focused on bringing the middle-class back to the city through more than only providing housing options, but that it has "evolved into a vehicle for transforming whole areas into new landscape complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflected urban remake" (2002, p.443), including new "cultural facilities, open space, complexes of recreation and pleasure" (443). This description fits well into the context of the High Line, in which gentrification is not solely about housing, but more about bringing in attractive urban amenities to spur further reinvestment in the city. In the context of this paper, gentrification processes are less a result of more affluent people moving into the area, then they are the result of a new "object" transforming the area and attracting more people, the High Line itself is the "*gentrifier*", which speaks to other towns and cities who have similar infrastructure and inspires them to seek the same results.

Even though the connection between the High Line and the changes in the neighbourhood have been ongoing during the whole life time of the project (the possible impacts were discussed already by the friends of the High Line in the initial stages) (David & Hammond, 2012), a heated debate was triggered by the article entitled *Disney World on the Hudson* published as an op-ed in *The New York Times*, August 2012. Pen named blogger Jeremiah Moss heavily criticized the project blaming the gentrification and "Disneyfication" of the West Side on the High Line. According to Moss the High Line is an attempt to tame the environment, scrubbing away the originality of the place and being a tool of the Bloomberg administration to justify the rezoning of the surroundings, focusing on luxury residential development. The original businesses have been hard hit, especially the gasoline industry, and will be replaced by chain stores and tourist friendly restaurants (Moss, 2012a).

In *The New York Times*, letters responding the Op-ed by Moss were published both praising the project and describing the changing of the neighborhood as something healthy and normal (nytimes.com, 2012). Blogger Matthew Gallaway accuses Moss of being too conservative, ignoring the need for development and arguing that the problem is not the High Line but an unfettered system that does not support affordable housing or spend tax money on non-profit cultural development (Gallaway, 2012). An even more nuanced critique is put forward saying that there is no question that the High Line *is* connected to gentrification, but that change itself must not be feared and Moss still points out important issues. Issues of socioeconomic and cultural plurality are important to discuss as New York is a place that experiences huge inequality (Chan, 2012). Other writers disagree completely, Elisabeth Licata for *Garden Rant* argues that "(b)laming projects like the High Line for gentrification is kind of like blaming the egg for the chicken" (Licata, 2012).

The new development in the area is directly connected to the rezoning allowing new residential development, first associated with the New York Olympics bid (David & Hammond, 2011). According to the founders of FHL the zoning process has been parallel to the High Line, and that the Friends of the High Line have tried to distance themselves from that process. Regardless who

and what is to blame for the changes, property values rose 103% between 2003 and 2011 (nycedc.com, 2011), and the project has generated 2 billion dollar worth of private investment surrounding the park and is predicted to exceed 900 million in new tax revenues for the city over the next 20 years (Illman, 2012). Local businesses have witness of hard times loosing profits since the High Line was built (Feeney, 2011).

The friends of the High Line have been countering this critique. The same day Moss's Op-Ed was printed Joshua David and Robert Hammond published an open letter on the Friends of the High Lines homepage (thehighline.org, 2012; David & Hammond, 2012) as well as letters from volunteers and supporters expressing their love for the High Line. Reservations about crowding, noise, and elite status have been expressed in an article in the local magazine *The Villager* (Humm, 2012). But important to remember is that the major argument to save the High Line was from the beginning that a new park would increase the value of the surrounding real estate which would raise property taxes and be economically beneficial for the city (David & Hammond, 2011 p.45).

Today's prevailing term to soften the emotiveness of "gentrification" has become "*urban regeneration*" (Smith, 2002, p. 444), essentially becoming a more advanced and coordinated style of gentrification, and Smith notes that urban regeneration constitutes the "next wave of gentrification" (2002, p. 445). As gentrification has warped into a new more palatable term, it has become part of a "global urban strategy" which is an "expression of neoliberal urbanism," (2002, p. 446). This shows gentrification in a light that is not as simple as young urban professionals moving into an abandoned neighborhood and trying to transform it through improving one house at a time, or by adding a small business. In "*New Globalism, New Urbanism*," Smith demonstrates that gentrification has transformed from the Bohemian-Yuppie types that moved into neighborhoods, turning into a "competitive urban strategy within the global economy" (2002, p. 446). Gentrification abounds in pros and cons depending on the stakeholder and the point of view. For some it is a natural evolution of a transforming city. Matthew Carmona writes that London's public spaces that have been regenerated "simply reflect the changing nature of the city, change that in recent times has manifested itself socially, economically, and culturally, as well as physically" (2013, p.68).

Discussion

The reactions and critique concerning the High Line focuses mostly on the ongoing gentrification of the area and the role the High Line has played in this. Gentrification has long been a term of multiple meanings depending on the point of view. For the poor and disadvantaged it can mean economic eviction from a place long called home. For real estate developers it can spell huge financial gains, for architects it's a big opportunity to put their stamp on the city, for municipal officials it's a chance to tout a victory for the city, while for those seeking a lifestyle change, it may mean living in a trendy city condo with walking distance access to cafe latte's and parks. The idea of a gentrified neighborhood changes the "urban image" into one that Richard Florida describes as "Street Level Culture," which is a "teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creators" (Florida, 2002, p. 165).

Gentrification has always had its proponents and opponents. Those who claim that the city has a right to renew itself and improve over time praise gentrification processes for the transformation of neighborhoods. Opponents of gentrification proclaim inequality and injustices and criticize the process for displacing the impoverished long-term residents of a community. A rezoning process that has been going on in parallel to the High Line project has sped up the gentrification of the surrounding neighbourhoods and a direct effect of the rezoning allowed for new development and expanded residential area. The property owners who wanted to demolish the structure in the end of the 1990's wanted to do so to be able to develop their properties; instead a solution was found transferring the property rights. This points to that the changes was going to happen, regardless of the High Line, but it can also be interpreted seeing the zoning and the High Line both being products of the same social and economic development. The High Line fits in well in the broader context and conditions for contemporary urban planning.

When it comes to feelings towards change and gentrification the ownership of the process is crucial. In this same line, The High Line started as a small-scale project and has been accused of being "hijacked" by the political administration, according to Jeremiah Moss *"it quickly became a tool for the Bloomberg administration's creation of a new, upscale, corporatized stretch along the West Side. As socialites and celebrities championed the designer park during its early planning stages, whipping community support into a heady froth, the city rezoned West Chelsea for luxury development in 2005*" (Moss 2012a). The story provided by the founders of FHL describes a 'David and Goliath' struggle and eventually support from the city administration. The truth is most likely somewhere in between but the raised property values and the harder times experienced by the local, original businesses are an effect of a changing city.

While the High Line exists on the community level, it has become a global phenomenon, prompting other cities to search for leftover tracks. Like the famed "Bilbao Effect" in which cities worldwide scrambled to have a museum built by Frank Gehry or other "Starchitects" as a tool for urban regeneration, so too the High Line has produced its own effect within the emerging field of landscape urbanism. Today, landscape urbanism is looking to utilize spaces and structures previously unconsidered for park uses, thus creating a gentrification of infrastructure that is tied to neighborhoods and districts. Even though the High Line was not the first elevated park the attention the project has gained has increased the interest for this type of project. This is of course connected to other contemporary developments in urban design and planning such as inner-city renewal within the post-industrial landscape. The strength of the High Line is its context, the site itself, and writers like Witold Rybczynski and other critiques fear that the elevated park as such can become a 'cheesy' and dated concept, even though it was an original response to genuine social phenomena. The secret of the High Line success is according to Charles Birnbaum at the *Huffington Post* not necessarily a determined leadership and a public/private partnership but a triumph of historic preservation and design, and describes the project as a role model for showing how development and preservation can work together as the project focuses on site specific, adaptive reuse approach with an holistic embrace both change and continuity (Nettler 2012). The focus on the site and the sense of place created by the ability to outlast the original use, local and material response to societal and economical changes, can be a reminder of the possibilities that the future will hold (Baldwin 2009).

The structure itself and the design features have been both praised and criticized, the location and numbers of access points and the restricted opening hours can affect who is using the structure, and for what? The Friends of the High Line and the design team had the wish to limit access and commercialization and made some very active choices to protection the High Line, but can this outdate the park? What will happen when the bliss wears off? The choice to not let single houses and private users to have their own access points may hinder a bottom-up privatization, but is this an expression of a top-down privatization - the fact that the private manager Friends of the High Line is the only force deciding what will happen on the High Line. The design team didn't want to include the mundane aspects of everyday life to differentiate the High Line from the street below. Everywhere else on Manhattan you can get a coffee, why here (David & Hammond, 2011, p.97)? Classic urban ideas about how to make public places inviting, lively and attractive from writers such as Jane Jacobs and William Whyte points at the need to be able to sit, eat, observe or meet. The key to success includes enabling diverse groups of visitors, at different times and for various reasons to use and enjoy the place. While many of these amenities are available near the High Line, this may not be the case in other locations where other leftover tracks exist and are being eyed for development. The concept and strategies of the High Line cannot therefore be copy pasted; the demands and needs at each specific location must be taken in account.

Landscape urbanism is investigating the ecology of a city and the interrelationship between nature and the urban. What is perceived as a park is constantly changing and the borders between parks, plazas as public space is becoming blurred. The multi-functionality of these places as well as an increased acknowledgment of the importance of green elements and nature in cities is challenging what a park is. The relationship between park and nature has changed over time, from imitation to separation to something new, nature and urban merged. Robert Hammond expresses that *"(s)ome people think of parks as being an escape from the city, but the High Line works because it never takes you away from New York. You are not in a botanical garden. You can hear horns honking. You can see traffic and taxis"* (David & Hammond, 2011, p. 12). By making a virtue of an industrial relic a new experience of the city emerges, which at the same time works as a green lung. The High Line shows the potential of forgotten spaces, and the multi-functionality of parks (Illman, 2012).

The High Line is a landmark in contemporary urban planning and design. Not that it is a truly unique design project, but it mirrors the complex reality for contemporary provision of public space. The surroundings have changed and the project itself is the center of the change, it can neither be separated from it nor completely blamed. According to Low et al. (2005) public space is facing new challenges of reduction of social and cultural diversity due to a changing society, exclusion, management, access and privatization and commercialization are potentially harmful to democratic practices.

Conclusions

A growing urban population of the world, focus on sustainability and densification makes land a scarce resource and the High Line project suggests that elevated parks can bring new nature into cities without occupying ground floor space. Implementations of concepts like the High Line in other places must be made with regard to geographical, cultural, social and political

circumstances as well as incorporation within the larger planning context. If the High Line is a result of the paradigm of landscape urbanism one conclusion is a reflection thereof; great landscaping cannot create a great place without a sensitive approach towards the neighborhood in question, the local physical structures and connectedness between them and the needs and wishes among the users of today and tomorrow.

Manhattan is a showroom for the rest of the world and the millions of visitors have spread the word. Regardless of the critiques some facts remain. The High Line is a pleasure to visit an example of astonishing entrepreneurship and a highly relevant project for urban planners and designers all over the world. Change is inevitable, but consequences need to be acknowledged; gentrification is for good and bad happening all around the world. For further discussion we would like to raise some questions: How can flagship landscape urbanist projects succeed at bringing the "green elements" into the city without driving out the liveliness of mixed income neighborhoods? Is a new narrative emerging in the city that combines urban and nature equally?

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