



HIGH.Lighting

Jason Hilgefort / Land+Civilization Compositions

Without a doubt, the High Line is one of the most iconic projects of this century. But more interesting than the design itself is how it has framed the relationship of spatial design (architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, etc) with its many “outside forces”. Whereas previously spatial designers were more willing to operate within their own bubbles; currently we are all more and more aware of the intertwining and layered relationships of the myriad of actors in urban development. The High Line is indicative of the numerous ways that spatial designers now must position themselves more consciously within the larger forces at hand.

Bottoms up

There is clearly a long history to the site including the construction of the rail line, its decommissioning, and both of those realities impact on the neighborhood. But let’s pick the story up in the 90s, with the formation of *The Friends of the High Line* spearheaded by Joshua David and Robert Hammond. This group fought both the city and private interests that sought demolition and redevelopment. And THEY were the ones that brought forward the notion of using it as an elevated public space. Designers might want to speak endlessly about the design of Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro¹, but in reality is the design itself that important? Look back at the other finalists for the competition now. One has to ask, would a different winner have had much of an affect on the ultimate qualities of the space? I highly doubt it. One could argue the biggest impact a “creative” had on the project was when photographer Joel Sternfeld was commissioned to

photograph the line and shared this hidden gem with society at large.

So, one of the most iconic projects of the 21st century was conceived by a couple of guys from the neighborhood. The ripple affect of this pervades the profession. Empowerment, engagement, etc are common buzz words in the practice now. Citizens themselves are more aware of their power and potential role in the forming of their own cities. All spatial designers have reacted to this reality and many even directly approach the community for works, not the public or private sector. Now, of course, there are many other examples of bottom up initiatives; but is there any more indicative of the power of the people and its impact on our profession?

Hi.Impact

One cannot talk about the High Line's influence without relating it to the much discussed "Bilbao Effect". Now, the Guggenheim put a small fairly obscure Spanish city on every globe trotting tourist's must see list; while the High Line "merely" affected the transformation of an old industrial area, in one of the most well known and touristed cities in the world (more on this later). Yet, its copycat reality is undeniable. From Chicago, to London², to Wuhan, to just slightly east of the High Line itself (the Low Line) there are endless cities throwing their budgets at designers in an attempt to even slightly replicate its results. Again, this is not, per se, new. Iconic structures like the Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House, etc. have long made mayors and tourist departments drool. What is different here, is that it is a park. Sure it is a very particular park; but yet, it is just a raised green walkway. And one can reflect on this in relation to green and cities (that's coming up next). But perhaps more noteworthy, is the fact that icons need not be buildings. Spatial designers, politicians, and developers are distinctly aware of this reality — now. Public spaces, art projects (ie "The Bean" in Chicago), and even events (biking weekends in Bogota, beaches along the Seine in Paris) are understood to be "iconic". The role of public spaces and the experiences users have within them has never been so treasured by society and subsequently the profession.



Painting the town green

Well, if one has to mention Bilbao, then has to point out the project's impact on "Green Chic". The High Line is so iconic to the notion of greening cities that its horticulturalist — Piet Oudolf — is now practically a household name³. Simplistically put, they took an elevated rail, put green on it, and now people love it. It feels like a parody of the American TV series Portlandia's comedic take of "put a bird on it". Have a wasted roof — put green on it! Don't know how to design that façade — put green on it! Bus stops seem good enough already, NO! PUT SOME GREEN ON IT! Our cities have gotten green with envy of their once contradictory relationship with nature. As populations boom and consumption patterns exponentially increase, painting the town green makes us all feel better about our personal behavior. And spatial designers cannot help ourselves in incorporating this, all to often merely aesthetic, movement. For example, Stefano Boeri's recent tower in Milan "clad" in trees. It is praised by many environmentalists. But one has to wonder how much extra concrete and steel,



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and therefore carbon, was necessary to hold up those trees? And how much water needs to be pumped up the façade and used to water them? Obviously the High Line cannot be solely faulted for these realities. But shouldn't we as spatial designers be more critical? Shouldn't we be talking more about what is often behind this green movement — the green of money? More on this later...

Historical Fiction

But let's expand on that notion of "put some green on it". In spite of the previously existing qualities of the space, for it to function as a publicly accessible park, things had to change. Simultaneously, the public had in their collective minds the powerful imagery of the photographs by Joel Sternfeld. Therefore the designers and construction company went to great lengths (and costs) to both remove EVERYTHING from the top of the top surface and to put the new rails PRECISELY where

the old ones had lain.

This adaptive reuse project frames the debates of historic preservation flourishing in our profession today. Koolhaas and a pile of others have weighed in on the matter. Certainly one can reflect on China tearing down villages and rebuilding them completely anew with western shopping destinations replacing villagers homes. But the location of metal lines for trains to ride on being treated as sacred? Where pedestrians and flowers will now flourish? And where previously no pedestrian was permitted? This is just silly. It is nostalgia for the unknown. Yet this is indicative of many projects where designers meticulously replace old realities anew, all in the name of “preservation”.

Commodification+Gentrification

As was alluded to previously, the High Line is currently littered with selfie stick swinging outsiders wanting to capture and share their moment upon the now global icon. Further, it featured celebrity endorsements by folks such as of Edward Norton⁴; predating the interests in the profession from the likes of Brad Pitt and Kanye West. But let’s back up. What allowed all of this hype to occur? This was a massively expensive project. How (and why!) did the city justify funding such an investment in a formerly industrial area that had already started to slowly transform?

The answer: the transfer of development rights. To give the short story, the city planning department set in place rules that lessened the heights of buildings adjacent to the Line to buildings. And transferred those development rights to other buildings in the area that were far enough back to not affect views and light along the pathway. The future tax revenue generated from these new, more dense, and more commercially viable properties was “borrowed” to pay for current investments. And clearly, it worked. In fact, it worked so well that initial zoning provisions encouraging connections to the new park were soon being competed for by the many new developers. In order to obtain the right of access, for their often high end residential pro-

jects, the developers were fighting to get cultural entities to function as partners/tenants so they would make their bid for direct High Line access more appealing. Further, it is to be noted that the new Whitney Museum of American Art by Renzo Piano has relocated from its seemingly prestigious Madison Avenue location to this area. All of this is exciting, but at what cost?

Obviously the wave of development happening in the Chelsea area and in places like Hudson Yards cannot be solely laid at the foot of the High Line. After all, this is in Manhattan, redevelopment in the area predated the project, and this sort of neighborhood transformation is happening in many places all over the city and the world. We can certainly have a long winded discussion in relation to terms of urban development vs gentrification. But that is not the point. The work of the city, designers, and activists unquestionably accelerated the transformation of the neighborhood. And that is more to the point. This project reflects a new reality for spatial practitioners. It is not merely about investing in our communities — but how precisely? And what impact might those investments have? Fundamentally, who has the right to the city? How can we practitioners be more responsible? And to whom exactly? For example, we have always assumed parks improve cities. It seems inherently true. But if the High Line is drawing tourists, pricing out locals and drawing in more commercial entities — is Chelsea better for it? Is New York better? And of course, who decides? This is highly debatable. And that is the issue at hand. We as spatial designers have to debate and rethink our modes of operation and projects such as the High Line highlight these new issues facing our profession.

A Brand New World

I tell my students now, that when I reflect back on my days in university, it was such a different time. Cities were in trouble in the 70s/80s. Many people were literally scared of them and fleeing to the suburbs. Urban centers were seen as being for pioneers. We designers just dreamed of how we could make our cities more palatable to more



people. No one was wondering: “what we do if we make urban spaces too nice”; or “what we do if too many people wanted to live there?!”. In just a generation our society’s relationship with urban environments has fundamentally shifted. And therefore our role as spatial practitioners is rapidly working to keep up.

The High Line, a truly wonderful place and project, is indicative of this shifting playing field on which we are operating upon. I mean the idea of the question: “what if this beautiful, beloved, iconic park was bad for the city and our citizens?”. Who could have seen that coming? It is a brand new game that we are all playing.

1. Side bar. I find it maddening that architects will refer to it as a DS+R project and fail to mention Field Operations. How could one look at that project and possibly mention DR+S first!?! And not FO at all!?
2. Mr. Foster, are you serious?!
3. Ok, perhaps only spatial design households. Has a horticulturalist ever been famous before?
4. FYI, Norton’s grandfather was James Rouse of The Rouse Company. One of the most influential development firms in North America, with iconic projects like Faneuil Hall Marketplace — the initiator of the ‘festival marketplace’ typology.