

Loving The High Line

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working draft of a chapter for the book *Deconstructing The High Line*, edited by Christoph Lindner and Brian Rosa, upcoming in 2016 on Rutgers University Press.



The High Line has been completed. Rather, the work of reconstruction, performed by contract labor, is finished. The architects and landscape architects who have worked for so many years designing the project and managing its construction have finalized their plans, marked off their punch lists and sent out their final invoices. And the mayor whose administration has claimed the High Line as a crowing achievement in an array of ambitious building projects has left office with his legacy cemented and — in a city that often marks its historical periods by mayoral administrations — the narrative of his administration wrapped up more neatly for having completed it. The construction of the High Line has, also however, been a long process during which much has happened, other processes and cycles of longer and shorter duration have “progressed” forward or spun in place, and the world has perhaps changed. The opening of the High Line is then as much a set of conclusions as it is the commencement of the project’s existence as an architectural object or element in New — York City’s tissue of public space.

In a variety of accounts, the High Line project has long been discussed as being either itself a process piece, as a part or symptom of other processes, or in other time-based terms. A “High Line effect” (McGinn 2014) has been described that attracts “visitors” and makes the city more “livable” by creating what is supposed to be a green space apart from the somehow “crowded” and difficult-to-live in city. This has been differentiated from “Bilbao Effect” (Rybczynski 2002) produced

by the sculptural, monumentally-scaled museum that Frank Gehry designed for the Guggenheim that is claimed to have contributed to a project of “revitalizing” a depressed provincial capital by providing a symbolic, though mute, “icon” for the city. Less clear, and certainly less explicit in the popular press, is the distinction between the “High Line effect” and, the original referent, the “Beaubourg Effect” that Jean Baudrillard (1982) described in his critical essay on another seminal project of systems-oriented, urban culture-making: the *Centre Georges Pompidou* in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. Also, a *longue durée* project manifesting a transition between paradigms, the *Centre Pompidou* shares the High Line’s quality of mediating, uncomfortably, between the registers of material systems (both natural and infrastructural, systems of signs and information and the production of images and environmental conditions). If the High Line is organized by design operations effected within and upon dynamic systems and conditions of flux then — just as in Beaubourg — these are simultaneously ecological, semiotic, economic and political processes.

The High Line is unavoidably cast as a monument to civic building initiatives of the Bloomberg administration, appearing as evidence of the working of a neoliberal urban policy organized by public-private partnerships and committed to a vision of enlightened economic development working in the public’s interest. This can be differentiated from the (neo)conservatism of the Giuliani years in which a narrative was constructed of the crisis and chaos of the 1970s and 1980s being pushed back by fiscal discipline, and aggressive policing focused on “quality of life” issues and embracing the “broken windows theory” (Wilson, Kelling 1982) linking the visual appearance of disorder, and the tolerance of social deviancy and political dissent with uncontrolled violence and criminality. The Giuliani years would find — perhaps too late — their ideal urban architectural project in the reconstruction of lower Manhattan after the attacks on the World Trade Center. In this issues of symbolic monumentality would be engaged politically in the refiguring of office tower and the public spaces of a financial district as monuments to dead heroes and defiant assertions of national unity and strength. In contrast, the Bloomberg administration would struggle to maintain a narrative of prosperity and progress in the face of crises that were more in the register of the mayor’s history of synthesizing media and financial information systems. If, in this narration, a claim was laid to elements of the legacy of progressive politics and their complex relationship to architectural modernism in New York City, then projects relating to the World Trade Center had provided a venue for the resurgence and reappraisal of conservative postmodernist discourses from the 1970s



Publicity photo of Mayor Michael Bloomberg on the High Line.

Psychological Operations

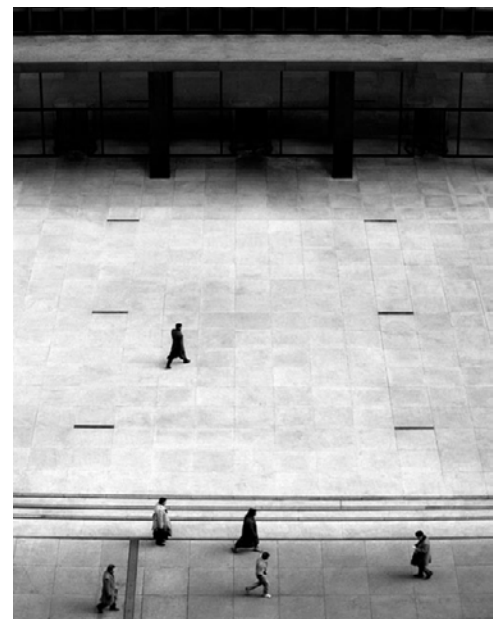
The rhetorical schema in which the High Line “succeeds” by attracting visitors or “revitalizing” neighborhoods is, more than architecture, that of planning. In this the patron, if not author, of the High Line has been Amanda Burden, Director of the New York Department of City Planning during the Bloomberg administration. In 2014, shortly after the end of her term as Director, Burden gave a retrospective account of her career as a planner and public servant in a speech at the annual meeting of *Technology Education and Design* (TED). TED serves as something of a vanguard for the liberal progressive tendency in the United States by positing a conception of “design” that is at once expressive, innovative and entrepreneurial. In this model, technology is figured as an updated version of the old modernist hybrid of science and industry, and “education” is approached as cultural production and ideological formation. Burden concludes her TED talk with a discussion of her role in the reconstruction of the High Line, which she begins by noting, “When I was appointed, saving the first two sections of the High Line from demolition became my first priority and most important project” (Burden 2014). In framing the High Line reconstruction as a project of preservation or “saving” she complicates the figuration of design as a uniformly positive, additive process in which creative actors insert or “place” designed objects into empty spaces. She complicates distinctions between subjects and objects: those who act and that which is acted upon. Burden uses several terms to refer to subjectivity in her talk. She begins with the assertion that “cities are fundamentally about people” and that therefore the public spaces between buildings are “more important” than the buildings themselves because they make the

city “come alive.” People, when taken together, constitute for Burden the public and she identifies herself as an “animal behaviorist” who understands how people behave in or “use” public space. There are however distinctions within Burden’s category of people. “New Yorkers” “crave comfort and greenery” however both “architects” and “developers” favor “bleak plazas” because, for architects, they are “plinths for their creations” and for developers they offer minimal cost from maintenance and security. When people are constituted into smaller groups with specific, local interests they become, for Burden, “communities” who must be listened to so that their opposition can be overcome and their support secured for projects benefiting the “common good.” Burden also introduces another, more problematic, collective subjectivity in the form of “commercial interests” whose goals, in her account, often do not align with the “common good” and who “will always battle against public space.”

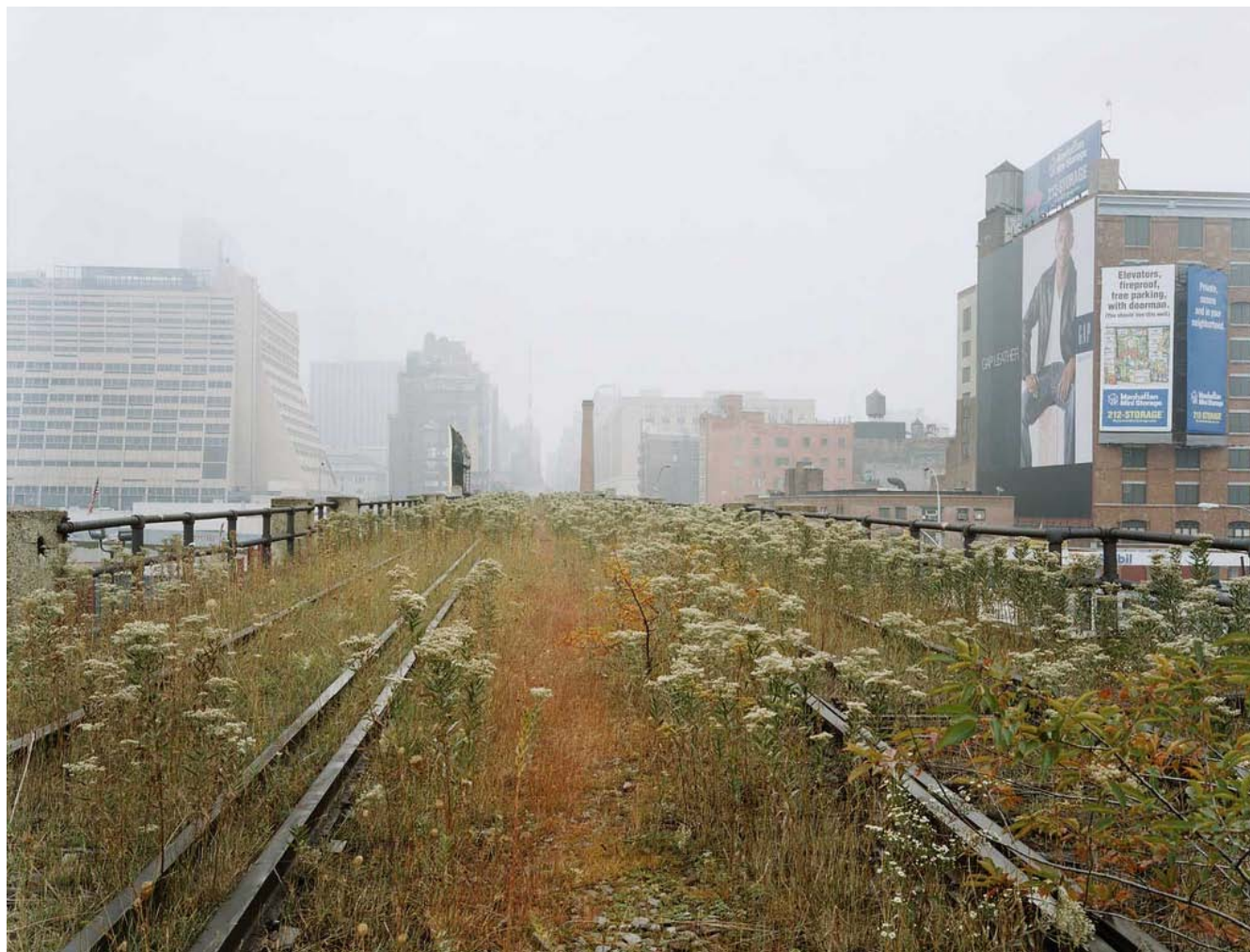
In Burden’s zoological account of urban planning, however, only three subjects are given individuality: herself, Bloomberg, and her “stepfather.” Burden begins the narrative of her career by introducing her stepfather as the creator of Paley Park, the “vest pocket park” on 53rd Street that, since its completion in 1967, has been celebrated as a model for privately owned public space. Design work on the project was done by the landscape architecture firm Zion and Breene but, according to Burden, the “dedication and enormous attention to detail” that defined the project came from her stepfather, William Paley, the chief executive who built the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) into a major national media firm that shaped the development of popular radio culture in the United States. An exemplar of the political pragmatism that characterized an American progressive tendency that managed technocratic without being socialist, Paley was a moderate Republican who collaborated with the Rockefellers on cultural philanthropy projects but also maintained connections to Roosevelt administration. During the Second World War and had served, with the rank of Colonel, in the psychological warfare branch in the Office of War Information during the Second World War. In discussing Paley Park and public space in general, Burden uses the terms of both media and psychological operations. Without acknowledging her source, she refers to the film study *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* by William Whyte (1980), sponsored by the progressive, and still influential, Municipal Arts Society. Burden had worked on the documentary early in her career and rehearses its narrative of people as charmingly eccentric social animals who are naturally attracted to one another and move their chairs just to feel that they are in control of their environment. She does not discuss the “bleak plaza” in front of the Seagram’s Building, other public space — also the product of bootleggers-made-good and the emerging media industry — observed in Whyte’s film but it is clear that this would, for Burden, represent the work of plinth-making “architects” rather than progressive civic place-making. What she does discuss is feelings and specifically human feelings of attraction and desire and belonging. Public spaces should be “friendly” and make people — even those who don’t use them — feel good about their city. Despite her professional credentials, Burden asserts that the way to “turn a park into a place that people want to be” is to work “not as a city planner but as a human being. ... You don’t tap into your design expertise. You tap into your humanity” (Burden 2014). If this humanity is assumed to be shared and universal then the feelings it experiences are mediated by images perceived, immersive as environments. In this humanist conception, leaders and designers are defined less by their superhuman genius or technical expertise as the perfect commonality of their humanity or, as Paley was famous for, their astute comprehension of popular taste and desire. In beginning her account of the High Line project Burden however introduces a strange anecdote that complicates and exposes the contradictions in her humanist perspective. She describes being taken to see the High Line and becoming convinced of the importance of preserving the elevated deck and making it into a public space. Burden makes no mention of the circumstances of this encounter, of who made her aware of the situation, brought her to the site or framed, analyzed and proposed the project. This all seems to have melted away in the intensity of the encounter. “When I went up on that old Viaduct,” Burden recounts, “I fell in love the way you fall in love with a person” (Burden 2014). She describes nothing more of what she fell in love with but there is, perhaps, nothing more to describe. Burden, as an exceptional human subject, is able to look at the High Line



Paley Park. Still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*



A “bleak plaza.” Still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*



The High Line prior to reconstruction.
Photograph by Joel Sternfeld

and the resurgence of nature that it represents and, as if making eye contact with a lover across a crowded room, see another subject looking back at her. The account of the High Line's development that follows this Jane-meets-Tarzan moment is rendered in the terms of a love affair. Burden thinks constantly about "saving" the High Line. She defends in from unnamed "developers" who would turn it into a mall or demolish it for not fitting with "their image of a gleaming city of skyscrapers on a hill" and she invests it with agency and admiration. "Public spaces have power," she asserts. "Its not the number of people using them it's the even greater number who feel better about their city just knowing that they are there" (Burden 2014).

Burden's ardor appears to both solidify her as the persona of the entire city and blind her to her paramour's past, other commitments and entanglements, and possible faults. Not only do the Friends of the High Line, who proposed the project and the architects and landscape architects who worked on it fall outside her frame but also present struggles over the gentrification and economic inequality, and the law-and-order "cleaning up" of the city under the Giuliani administration that set the stage for them. Rather than attempting to rationalize and systematize these processes — perhaps as the caricature of a "city planner" would — Burden's practice of "tapping into [her] humanity" instead involves the production and transmission of images of the city and investing these with narrative meaning. Despite the up-beat affirmativeness of Burden's TED talk this process is not as simple as the conversion of a piece of utilitarian, material infrastructure — the rail line into a symbolic, culture-affirming, social space — a park — nor is it immaterial. Just as the building of CBS, and Bloomberg Media, involved the synthesis of social relations, communications systems, and material infrastructure, Burden's city is an infrastructural machine, engineered to produce value. The primary value produced is however, symbolic and constitutive of subjectivities. In this the progressive modernist project of using built forms to affect "social engineering" is shifted to one of more explicit political economy in which relational structures are designed to transform conditions both cultural and material.

Infrastructure and Its Double

The original construction of the High Line as an elevated railway was part a restructuring of the infrastructure along Hudson River that inaugurated a much larger project of remaking of the city through infrastructure. This would advance under the direction of Robert Moses who would come to stand as both an avatar of technocratic city planning and a leading translator of Modernist urbanism into the terms of American culture and politics. Moses' later work, driven by postwar prosperity and responding to the social transformation it brought, would be more explicitly high modernist in character. The High Line and the west side reconstruction, however, took place during the Great Depression and mobilized labor from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and others of the subsidy and stimulus programs that made up the "new deal" that Franklin D. Roosevelt was seeking to strike with the country. In addition to increasing the efficient flow of materials into the meatpacking and industrial facilities of Chelsea and TriBeCa, the High Line served as part of a larger project to organize the city and region as an integrated social-technological machine. Constructed and managed by collaborations between state and industry actors, this apparatus was directed towards both the production of value and the reproduction of stable, rational social order. Since the WPA was initiated to keep people working and to facilitate the continued circulation of capital, its projects had the double purpose of powering this circulation while at the same time teaching, choreographing and arguing for modern forms of life that would constitute a social body. Questions of materiality of this social body could be, how it could be constructed or constituted in conscious, controlled ways and to what degree was it was either an artificially engineered machine and or a "natural" living system would, however remain both open as theoretical questions and as flashpoints of political contestation.

In the postwar period, Moses would mirror his reconstruction of the infrastructure along the Hudson with a waterfront parkway, named for Roosevelt, along the East River. This arterial road extended ribbons of circulatory infrastructure, looping and slashing through Queens and the Bronx to growing suburbs on Long Island and north of the city. Enfolded in the interwoven traffic streams of FDR drive, would exist an enclosed bubble of real extraterritoriality in which would stand the symbolic utopia of the United Nations Headquarters, designed by a fractitious collaboration of modernist architects of which Le Corbusier as the most prominent. UN Headquarters stands as a perfect symbolic diagram of the modernist differentiation between infrastructure and that which it serves and facilitates. A rectangular office tower, like a huge bookshelf



The United Nations Headquarters

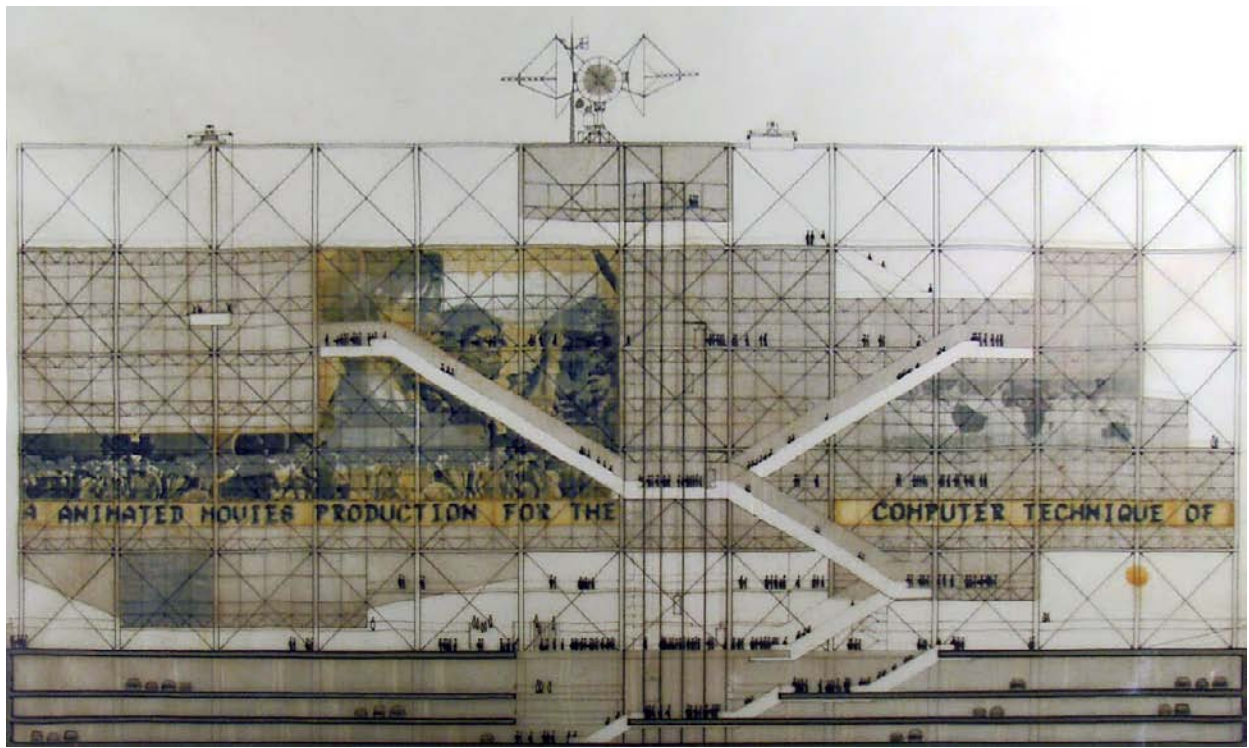
or file cabinet, housing the organizational bureaucracy stands next to round congress hall containing the symbolically constituted whole of a united world community. The true dichotomy however lies not within the architecture of the UN Headquarters but between the architecture as superstructural symbolic object and the infrastructural armature that situates and supports. Modernism's abstraction made it possible to imagine a separation between the engineering of material infrastructure and the design of symbolic form. In the American context this split was invested with significance in ideological struggles between progressive tendencies and the populist and conservative forces that would oppose them. The "bleak" minimalism of modernist aesthetics may have been comfortably applied to "corporate" modernism and conventional domestic projects but, when it came to housing, infrastructure and public space projects organized by efforts to construct new social subjectivities, resistance was mounted to "utopianism" and "social engineering" that was seen to threaten the wholeness and naturalness of the human subject. The rhetoric and antinomies of these oppositions shaped the aesthetic and cultural politics of postwar modernism and the various strains of "post-modernism" that followed it. These symbolic politics are resurgent in discussions of the High Line, now that the possibility has been opened of its becoming "Architecture" in the more rarefied since. What the High Line does, however, is to make uncomfortably clear the ways in which differentiations between the material and the symbolic, underpinning the opposition between the social engineers and their agonists, have not held up and perhaps never did.

Writing from the vantage point of the late 1970s, Rem Koolhaas would describe the condition architectural islands within infrastructure as "delirious" in his "retroactive manifesto" of New York City (Koolhaas, 1978). Koolhaas finds a proto-postmodernism in "the city of the captive globe" in which separate, microcosmic, worlds are created within a presumed-to-be-neutral grid of streets. In this, and his other early, polemical project *Exodus: The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* would assert the possibilities of an architecture of icons — or rather iconic objects — and the enclaves of autonomy enclosed by them, that would grow like the fruiting bodies of a fungus from the invisible substratum of infrastructure below. The utopian enclaves that Koolhaas described, however, were not, however progressive modernist projects like the United Nations Headquarters (or for that matter the United Nations). Rather, he looked to commercial social spaces, created as entrepreneurial ventures, that constitute identity through leisure consumption: downtown clubs and uptown hotels for the wealthy; amusement parks for the working class; and spectacular music halls for the middle class with some money to burn on entertainment. The delirium of Koolhaas' city comes from the dissolution, or liquidation, of subjectivity within the disjunction between symbolic and material orders effected by capitalism. The potential politics of the subjects reformed when this liquidity once more solidifies is, however, schizophrenic and alienated as much from the conditions of its reproduction as it is from the processes of production within which it is entangled. In writing a retroactive manifesto Koolhaas is able to indulge in one of the principle conceits of neoliberalism by displacing the work of reproduction to some already-occurred time in the past, or pushing it into the dark jungle of a naturalized culture.

As postwar reconstruction process developed and expanded into the creation of increasingly globalized, integrated systems of production and logistics, material and semiotic infrastructures would overlap, at sometimes competing with one another for space and resources and bandwidth and, at others, hybridizing and blurring one into another. A condition that was, on a global scale, hyper-industrial, and perhaps hyper-modern, would be experienced in urban centers like New York City as post-industrial as economic expansion and consolidation would push more and more of the processes of material production away from the city, first to the suburban periphery and then overseas. In architecture and urban planning this would exacerbate the difficulties of mediating between material and symbolic production. The architectural process piece that would manifest these difficulties most starkly would take place, not in New York but in Paris, in the *Centre Pompidou*. Rogers and Piano were awarded the commission in 1971 after winning a competition, initiated in 1969, for a new type of museum that was to expand the exhibition of art into a wider range of cultural



Rem Koolhaas, *The City of the Captive Globe* and *Exodus: The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*.



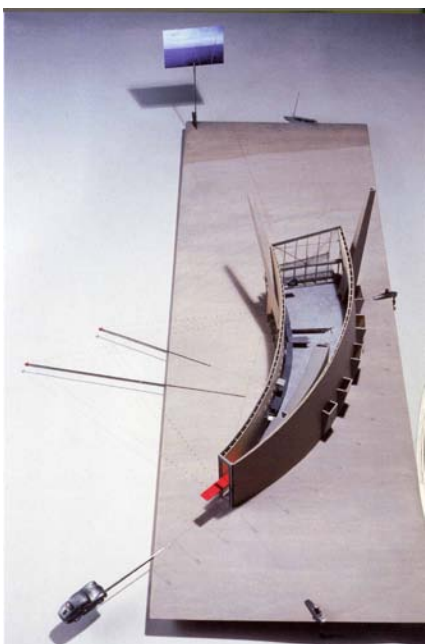
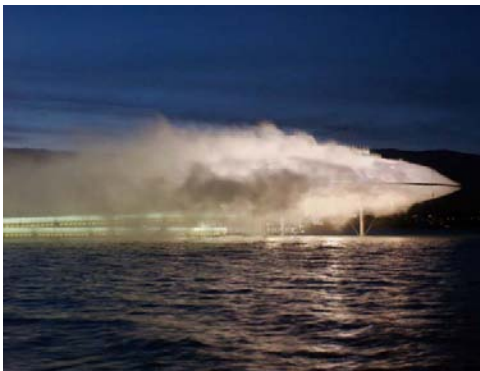
Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, *Centre Pompidou* original competition entry drawing.

activities that engaged with a larger public audience. Their original proposal, rendered in cartoon-like collage images, promised to realize a project in which the architecture was reduced to a flexible scaffolding and infrastructure supporting dynamic systems for creating and conditioning environments. In addition to the playful dynamism of the *Centre Pompidou*'s ducts and pipes making visible the mechanical workings of the building they were also intended to demystify the flows of energy and material through the building and the mechanics of creating environmental conditions. Ironically, the project was planned to reinforce the “return to order” after the strikes of 1968 and situated on the site of the Les Halles market that Émile Zola called the “belly of Paris” both because it was where food came into the city from farms in the country side and because of the seething foment of vice, criminality, filth and radicalism that frothed up from the churning circulation of food and bodies and money and ideas. By relocating Les Halles to the suburbs and replacing it with the *Centre Pompidou*, an actual infrastructure of circulation and potential site of appearance was replaced by a symbolic representation of material circulation whose primary function was to create a circulation of symbols. The project went through a long and contentious public process before it was completed in 1977 during this process, its openness and flexibility was largely designed out and the circulation of the public through the building — and the symbols through the public consciousness — became more controlled and efficient. When the *Centre Pompidou* did finally open it was against the background of the oil crises — in which the flow and exchange of energy and capital was impeded by political forces — and the building’s vectors of signification seemed to point more emphatically towards refineries transshipment hubs than the construction scaffolding or stage sets that were the architects’ intended citation.

In his sharp critique of the *Centre Pompidou*, media theorist Jean Baudrillard described the project as “a carcass of signs and flux, of networks and circuits . . . the ultimate gesture toward translation of an unnamable structure: that of social relations consigned to a system of surface ventilation (animation, self-regulation, information, media) and an in-depth, irreversible implosion.” Baudrillard criticized the *Centre Pompidou* for “sanitizing” the city around it, but more importantly, he condemned the clarity and authoritarian coherence of the story it told about social construction and the creation of subjectivity. Baudrillard referred to the *Centre Pompidou* as “Beaubourg” both in reference to the neighborhood in which it was built and so that the concept of the “beautiful city” can universalize his critique to include the postmodern city as a whole. In this utopian conception he sees both an end, or collapse, of politics and of culture. “This thing,” he asserts, “openly declares that our age will no longer be one of duration, that our only temporal mode is that of the



Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, *Centre Pompidou*.



Diller + Scofidio, *Blur Building, Slow House*.

accelerated cycle and of recycling: the time of transistors and fluid flow....The very ideology of ‘cultural production’ is, in any case, antithetical to culture, just as visibility and multipurpose spaces are; for culture is a precinct of secrecy, seduction, initiation, and symbolic exchange, highly ritualized and restrained. It can’t be helped. Too bad for populism. Tough on Beaubourg.” Baudrillard writes that the architecture — and perhaps all architecture of this type — treats “the masses ... like a converter, a black box, or in terms of input/output, just like a refinery handling petroleum products or a flow of raw material.” In this mixing of the metaphors of cybernetics and oil, a conflation is made between information, energy, and “raw material” that describes a too-bright interiority that condenses or constitutes wholes. To this Baudrillard opposes the dark space of another sort of infrastructure. “From today,” he writes, “the only real cultural practice, that of the masses, ours (there is no longer a difference), is a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that no longer has any meaning.”

Frame and Framework

In New York City the practice that has been able to most successfully engage with this mode anti-architectural, architectural production is Diller + Scofidio (now Diller Scofidio + Renfro). Together with the redesign of Lincoln Center, the High Line project has been one of two long-duration projects that have defined DS+R’s development from a specialized conceptual practice whose work was often dismissed as “not architecture” by conservative disciplinary border guards, into a major feature of whatever international avant garde there can be said to be in Architecture. This transition has taken place even as New York City itself has itself moved from the authoritarian clamp-down of the Giuliani-era clean up to a new gilded age of spectacular prosperity, coinciding with the High Line’s long redevelopment process of and into the uncertain present where the project has arrived, already an artifact from several different pasts. The early work of Diller + Scofidio has always included building that could be described as “iconic” (if that was what a critic wanted to see) including the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston and their proposal for a building for the Art + Technology Center that, had funding been secured, would have been built next to the highline. Another sequence of projects, however, engages with the capacities of architecture as frame and mediator. In the Brasserie restaurant in the Seagrams Building, around the corner from Mies Van der Rohe’s “bleak plaza” uses surveillance camera technology to materialize the otherwise tacit voyeurism of the bar. A beach house for a couple of art dealers named the *Slow House*, deployed a frustratingly curved axis of vision approaching the high-value ocean view, that was then framed, targeted by cross-hair window mullions and reproduced repetitively on video screens, most explicitly manifests linkages between framing, objectification and commodification that take place as architecture projects it field of effect into the surrounding context. Less literally a frame but equally a study in mediation is the *Blur Building* that adapts technical elements from one of the most exemplary projects of socially affirmative, environment conditioning media/systems architecture — the *Pepsi Pavilion* designed for the 1970 Osaka Expo by the design collective Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) — and a Fun Place style scaffolding to create, not a spherical interior but an reactive intervention in the open system of the climate: and artificial cloud of water vapor over a lake. This project was particularly transgressive of the compositional, object-making imperatives of architectural convention, less in being unformed and indeterminate in its objecthood, and more in being an intervention in the material dynamics of natural systems that was able to cut across the clean, safe separations between the real and the symbolic that these conventions were made to enforce. In both the High Line and the redesign of Lincoln Center these two modes of practice are combined. For all of its spectacular moments, Lincoln Center was a process piece, worked out through a laborious series of interventions into both material structures and infrastructures, and the social and political machinery of New York City. The diverse, but largely very conservative, client group originally sought to hire an master object-maker to be the architect whose humanist ideological orientation more closely matched theirs but quickly realized that the project would require the ability to design both globes and that which they are captured by. In the High Line this mode is even more radically operative.

In a blog post by *DeZeen Magazine* Ricardo Scofidio describes the project as a “pulling back from architecture.”(2014) The political will and shared public narrative that drove the project of converting the High Line into a public space initially coalesced around a collection of images by photographer Joel Sternfeld, published the book *Walking the Highline*. Taken over a period of years, the photographs present the High Line as a “natural” space, recolonized by plant and animal life, that had reestablished an advancing “soil cycle” and become a microcosmic ecosystem within the city. The images are mostly composed so as to contrast this lush, second landscape with the surrounding urban context. Rather than a simple opposition between the natural and built environment, however, Sternfeld’s images suggest there are also ecologies at work with in the changing city. As one of the founders Friends of the Highline, Sternfeld has worked in more conventional ways to mobilize public support and organize capital for the project of preserving and converting the High Line into a public space. It was, however, his deployment of images that allowed a public to form that could visualize the conversion and project a desired future condition for the High Line. The qualities of the resulting condition, however, remain heavily marked by the doubly visual character of a project founded on a process of making visible — and therefor accessible, and therefor public — and then creating a structure from which to look at the city differently and visualize alternative possible conditions. The design of High Line as an urban architecture project is forced to negotiate between the imperative to create a space that is public, accessible, visible and “safe” for its range of imagined user groups and desires to retain the potentials of alterority, disjunction and difference that had defined the site. Also in *DeZeen*, Elizabeth Diller asserts that the High Line “became a ruin and it was self-seeded, all of that was what we built the thing out of, so our feeling was that our biggest work was not screwing it up – because it was already there.” (2014) The thing however, that was “already there” was as much a precarious microclimate of social ecology or “political landscape” as it was a growth of literal vegetation. If the steel deck of the rail line was a “ruin” then so too were the remnants of industrial production that had organized modernism, upon which had “grown” the living systems of postmodern culture and post industrial symbolic and image producing economies. In light of this, the great, lost cause of “not screwing it up” is reduced to the preservation of some of at least a ghost of the relational structures — turned into the relations of production by the High Line’s “friends” in the art world — that create autonomy in the unvalued, invisible and alien. All this while providing for public safety, access for Americans (and fortunate foreign visitors) with disabilities, emergency egress and unimpeded movement of the fire department, preventing the breeding or rats and other vermin, mitigating liability and doubtless claiming to reduce the risk of terrorism, vandalism, etc.



Lush vegetation on the High Line
Photograph by Joel Sternfeld



The Starrett Lehigh building viewed from the High Line.
Photograph by Joel Sternfeld

A strange paradox of the High Line reconstruction — and one that seems to have, in fact driven its success both in being realized and in being received as a model for urban development — is that even as the projects architects have attempted to turn away from architecture and operate more as gardeners in the urban jungle, its landscape architect, James Corner, has striven to claim for his work some of the totalizing vision and authorial agency that has defined, and often burdened architecture. In an essay entitled ‘Terra Fluxus’ (2006), , just as the reconstruction of the High Line was getting underway, he writes of a resurgence of interest landscape conceptualized as the plane of “complexity” where built infrastructure and ecological systems interface. In “Terra Fluxus” Corner attempts to selectively draw elements from modernist systems thinking and use them — along with a large measure of optimistic affirmation — to mediate between the neoliberal ideologies of growth, development and hyper-connectivity and the mythic romanticism of a conservative postmodernism figured as the (eternal) return of neoclassicism. Corner begins by invoking the shift from the progressive loading of what he calls the “green complex” of functionalist urbanism to conceptions of systems ecology. “This ‘green complex’,” he states, “comes in the form of parks and green open spaces, accompanied by the belief that such environments will bring civility, health, social equality and economic development to the city. More that aesthetic and representational spaces, however, the more significant of these traditional urban landscapes possess the capacity to function as important ecological vessels and pathways.” (Corner J 2006) He, however, turns this analyst not towards utopian ecological management but towards the neoliberal hybrid of technocratic control of market forces imbued with an almost mystical vitalism and turned into a “new nature” in which is synthesized biological systems, the plane of the circulation and accumulation of value, and the territorial domination of power. Corner writes that he would emphasize an “understanding of surface ... as urban infrastructure. This understanding of the urban surface is evident in Rem Koolhaas’s notion that urbanism is strategic and directed towards the ‘irrigation of territories with potential.’ Unlike architecture, which sums the potential of a site in order to project, urban infrastructure sows the seeds of future possibility, staging the ground for both uncertainty and promise... it is much more strategic, emphasizing means over ends and operational logic over compositional design. For example the grid has historically proven to be a particularly effective field operation, extending a framework across a fast surface for flexible and changing development over time, such as the real estate and street grid of Manhattan.” (Corner 2006)

Corner introduces a distinction between projecting and speculating on the future in both conceptual and financial terms and suggests, in his invocation of “operational



logics,” a potential politics. However, when he arrives at the point of articulating the promise held out, he resorts to romantic conceptions of constituting community founded on a mythos of symbolic order. Corner claims that “public spaces are firstly the containers of collective memory and desire, and secondly they are places for geographic and social imagination to extend to new relationships and sets of possibility. Materiality, representation and imagination are not separate worlds; political change through practices of place and construction owes as much to the representational and symbolic realms as to material activities.” (Corner 2006) In his more recent writings, Corner no longer refers, as he did in “Terra Fluxus”, to the socially engaged naturalism of Frederick Law Olmsted but rather to picturesque garden design and its tradition of composing pictures with in the uncomposed realness of the material world and using these this to construct or bolster the solidity of viewing subject. In his essay “Hunts Haunts” (Corner J, 2014) the humanist world-picture-making is coupled with the romanticism of ruins and conceptions of the “spirit” or “genius of place.” In the case of the High Line this *genius loci* is construed as a kind of nature spirit that emerges from the history and culture of the city taken as a preexisting ground to be projected upon. This reservoir of contextual meaning is taken as a thing to be discovered, tapped, extracted and speculated on; like oil or the remnants of antiquity redrawn by oblivious British neoclassicists on the grand tour. In this sense the High Line is a border. It is a thick border with an interior that accommodates voluntary prisoners as in Koolhaas’ exodus project. Here Sternfeld’s images are restaged — now with benches and lighted footpaths — for a procession of tourists who have come to experience the space. The High Line is not, however, either Koolhaas’ wall or a Beaubourg. As much as it is a cinematic procession of picturesque view or a closed system of social massification it is also a viewing apparatus for looking at the city and objectifying its visible valence. If the High Line steps away from architecture then architecture has taken several steps toward it. The icon makers have contributed many more-or-less inspired confections to the Flemish still life of architectural opulence that Chelsea is developing into.

The Whitney Museum of American Art by Renzo Piano viewed from the High Line.

Frank Gehry's lustrous fruiting body springs for an invisible mycelium no less banal — though perfectly Koolhaasian — than the Shopping Network. Neil Denari's luxury condominiums appear in an elegantly engineered, diagonal frame that expresses, on an architectural scale, all the fluid plasticity or a beautiful piece of non-functional sports equipment designed for never-performed labors of self-improvement. Here the masses passing along the High Line can gawk at the carefully "staged" interiors, notionally, inhabited by the global super rich, who for the most part fail to "appear" as political subjects or otherwise. For the less spectral rich there is a proliferation of more livable condos that, to greater or lesser degrees, choreograph luxurious forms of life while remaining inscribed with vestiges of non-alienated "loft living." At the end of the High Line in the Meatpacking District, Renzo Piano has again designed a culture refinery for the Whitney Museum, that will this time, be itself more refined and — in an era when "data is the new oil" — more sophisticatedly integrated into the circulation of signs that is the city's metabolism.

Steps Toward the Possibility of a "Next"

Through financial crisis and (possibly jobless) recovery the force field emanating from the High Line (or whatever is behind or beneath it) will retain its charge and continue to generate its effect. This new infrastructure of symbolic immateriality will go on imbuing the objects accreting around it with value and the machine that is the High Line will continue to make the "land" — both the literal earth and the cultural ground — pay. It will pay and keep paying even as a new municipal administration has arrived with a mayor who invokes a return the projects of progressivism (and was noticeably absent from the opening of the final stage of the High Line) but who has appointed a police commissioner who was the architect of the city's "broken windows" approach to law enforcement. What remains to be seen is whether and which subjectivities will be able to claim these channels of circulation, and the infrastructures of the new logistics as spaces of appearance. If postmodernism affected a liquidation of politics and culture into fluid streams of signs then we are now in the desperate era of hydro-fracking where the last drops of value — that "untapped potential" so sought after by neoliberalism — are being wrung, in atomized droplets form the city, its ecologies and its people through pressure, and the grinding, crushing rupture of production detached from reproduction, and consumption split from signification. Like the *Centre Pompidou*, the High Line has arrived late will be judged — fairly or not — in a different context than it was designed in response to. Discussions of gentrification and development that had been structured by issues of lack of affordable housing and loss of "neighborhood character" or "sense of place." A popular blog entitled *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* exemplifies a set of discourses in which the appearance of the High Line and its effect of making-through-making-visible is paradoxically framed as a disappearance of some older, more human city. What seems lost, however, is disappearance itself: a space that had been able to be inhuman and escape the front-of-house/back-of-house diagram of the stage-set city in which increasingly audience watches only itself. Character has been imparted and sense-of-place enhanced. If anything, the picture is too perfect and the space too precious. The construction of inhabitable world-pictures and microcosmic utopias, blind to their infrastructural support has, in many places, achieved a density that threatens to displace and suffocate all that is other to it: the city of the captive globe becomes a dense foam of spheres captured only by each other.

The next step — whether it towards or away from architecture, forward or back, keeping up, moving on or just keeping going — must be to find ways that the liquefied and diffuse objects of both architectural and political practice can coalesce, not into symbolic orders and micro-spectacular phantasmagoria, but into real, material, alternative infrastructures that support life, whether "natural" or not. If rupture and ruin is to be the field condition established by the strategic operations of power and capital, the tactics of condensation, blockage, and functional realignment must be found. If a thing like the High Line is to be useful as a ruin, it will not be as a shrine to a to a cultural mythology that composes world-pictures while causing displacement, disruption, fracturing and dissolution of reality outside its frame. Rather, it will be as a *memento mori* in the still-life image of the banquet. A reminder that

all infrastructures — whether material or social — are always also ruins or potential ruins, that the flows can coagulate, and that the subjugated barbarians can smash the empire's aqueducts and turn them into houses.

It is seductively simple to frame this next step as a call to refuse the reification and personification of dead things that Burden exhibits in professing her love for a derelict rail line even as she abstracts living people into populations, and “communities”, and constituent components of the urban apparatus. This paraphilia can be seen as the spatial expression of a passion that animates social formations from the “black box” high-frequency trading algorithms of post-material finance, to the autistic geekiness of “big data” cultural ideology, to the ecstatic techno-vitalism of “parametric” architecture. It would be easy to be overcome by an ethical revulsion and demand the stamping out of this perversion and the construction of, or return to a city where people address one another as subjects — whether to confront one another, struggle with each other or fall in love. However this may relate to Baudrillard's conception of Paris, New York has always been an inhuman city, made more so by its humanist rulers. The potential architecture, and potential politics that, despite the mystifications, is implied by the High Line is one that rather than claiming humanity and making places, struggles to keep moving, keep breathing and keep working, namelessly and without hope of definitive success. The radical potential in this struggle will lie not in the creation of spaces that supply a “sense of place” and affirm feelings of humanity in the setting up of conditions of possibility in which subjectivity can be broken and reformed and the city made and unmade responsibly, if often blindly, from within its dense meshwork of infrastructures, plans and agencies. There is no need for another Beaubourg as the “beautiful city” has already been built. From now on the task of architects working in the abattoirs of the Meat Packing District and wherever the High Line effect is manifest will be to process and package the “carcass of signs and flux” and thereby feed the city.

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