

Parks for Profit: The High Line, Growth Machines, and the Uneven Development of Urban Public Spaces

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This paper investigates the growing inequality of public spaces in contemporary cities. In the era of neoliberal urbanism, stratified economic and cultural resources produce a spectrum of unevenly developed public parks, ranging from elite, privatized public spaces in wealthy districts to neglected parks in poor neighborhoods. Contemporary economic and cultural practices in public space are equally segmented, as privileged public spaces such as New York's High Line reflect the consumption habitus of the new urban middle class, while violence, disinvestment, and revanchist policing permeate public spaces on the urban periphery. Using New York's High Line as an archetypal neoliberal space, I trace its redevelopment from a decaying railroad viaduct to a celebrated public park. I argue that contemporary parks and public spaces are best analyzed on a continuum of privilege.

At the opening ceremony of New York's High Line in 2009, billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg declared that the new park—built with much fanfare atop an old elevated railway—was “an extraordinary gift to [the] city's future” (Pogrebin 2009: C3). His statement placed him in a long tradition of politicians, city boosters, and urban planners who have collectively asserted that parks are built for the public good (Low et al. 2005). For centuries, parks have been closely related to ideas about democracy, public health, and civic virtue (Wolch et al. 2005; Joassart-Marcelli et al. 2011). But park development in the contemporary city has taken on a different complexion. Rather than existing for the broad public, new spaces such as the High Line in New York and Millennium Park in Chicago represent an effort by city governments and elite private interests to leverage parks for profit.

The group of elite political, economic, and cultural actors¹ that came together to redevelop the High Line represents what Harvey Molotch (1976) famously termed the “growth machine.” Molotch argues that “growth” is the driving force of all cities, as the economic benefits that accumulate through urban growth provide incentive for elites to act collectively in ways that structure further growth. In Bloomberg's New York, neoliberal

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economic doctrine and an overarching “growth” ethos have exacerbated social inequalities of all kinds (Brash 2011); these effects are particularly visible at the level of public space. City governments and developers build luxury public spaces to lure tourists and wealthy consumers for leisure and consumption—the High Line and the Brooklyn waterfront greenway are two prominent New York examples—while parks catering to poor communities and immigrants are underfunded, forgotten unless they can serve “growth” schemes—as seen, for example, in the case of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens, which was recently leased to a billionaire to build a new sports stadium (Powell 2013).

The High Line thus represents an archetypal urban park of the neoliberal era, where the rising inequality of economic and cultural resources produces a spectrum of unevenly developed public parks, ranging from elite, privatized spaces in wealthy districts to neglected parks in poor neighborhoods (Wolch et al. 2005; Joassart-Marcelli 2010; Boone et al. 2009; Roberts and Chitewere 2011). Developed for profit and spectacle by New York’s contemporary growth coalition—the Bloomberg administration, real estate developers, and financial and cultural elites—the High Line has become one of New York’s most popular tourist attractions and an anchor for the super-gentrification (Lees 2003) of western Chelsea. The High Line also functions as a model of neoliberal park development, with copycat projects emerging in Mexico City, Philadelphia, and Rotterdam, among many other cities. While the “urban village” of Jane Jacobs offered a community-controlled model of urban space (see Shepard and Smithsimon 2011: 38-44)—one that could be exclusive, elitist, and undemocratic—today’s urban spaces are the province of global capital and culture, where the “community” is transnational and the “control” is elusive, privatized, and panoptic (Flusty 1994; Mitchell 1995; Low 2000; Madden 2010; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011).

In this paper, I explore the High Line’s redevelopment from the 1990s to 2012, when elite actors converged on an initially grassroots effort to save the old railroad viaduct, transforming both the space and the surrounding areas in the process. I analyze how elite visions of cultural consumption, tourism, and socio-spatial exclusion have taken root on the High Line through the concerted efforts of the Friends of the High Line, the private group that manages the park. While the High Line’s unusual form gives it singular standing within New York as a tourist attraction and a cultural icon—key to the city’s contemporary “branding” efforts (Greenberg 2008)—I argue that the political, economic, and cultural pressures that gave rise to the city’s most privileged public space also permeate parks of all sizes and uses.

NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC SPACE

Despite the “contextually embedded and politically mediated” (Peck et al. 2009: 51–2) impact of neoliberal policies on urban public space, scholars have nevertheless identified important changes in the form and function of parks and public spaces that parallel transformations in capitalism, urban politics, and culture. From the first planned parks of the modern city, parks have fostered social control and shaped the social construction of “the public” (Taylor 1999; Madden 2010). In industrial Western cities, elites built parks in the English picturesque tradition, with the intent that vast, bucolic green spaces would perform a civilizing function in the midst of the “deleterious” urban environment (Cranz

1982; Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992). With the advancement of industrial capitalism and mass consumption in the twentieth century, parks acquired “recreational” functions (Cranz 1982), offering spaces designed to “fit the body and mind of the park user to the regimented demands of industrial capitalism” (Madden 2010: 193). Following the gains of the Civil Rights movement and other postwar social movements, access to green space became more explicitly politicized, as poor communities of color organized for neighborhood parks, with mixed success in combating the “uneven development” of urban parkland (Wolch et al. 2005; Boone et al. 2009; Joassart-Marcelli 2010).

In the era of neoliberal urbanism, public spaces structure social practices in ways that reinforce the social relations of contemporary capitalism (see, e.g., Harvey 2002; Brenner 2004; Peck et al. 2009). Like urban parks in previous eras, public spaces such as the High Line express the relationships among citizens, the state, and other institutions of power. Today’s urban parks and public spaces are diversifying. The neoliberalization of public parks is far from complete, and an amalgam of city parks districts, private conservancies, and business improvement districts increasingly control public spaces (Zukin 2010; Taylor 2010; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011; Joassart-Marcelli et al. 2011). Overlapping administrative units and “revanchist” police tactics also blur the public/private distinction of spaces (Smith 1996; Vitale 2009). As Zukin (2010: ch. 4) argues, privately managed spaces like New York’s Union Square or Zuccotti Park can be the sites of populist expressions and political actions, while state-run public spaces can sometimes be “more repressive, more narrowly ideological, and not representative [of democratic principles]” (158). The inequality of urban public spaces in contemporary cities—expressed by the contrast of luxury spaces such as Bryant Park (Madden 2010) and ghettoized spaces of gun violence (e.g., Schweber 2012; Nickeas and Gerner 2013) or sidewalk “stop and frisk” (Vitale 2005; Beckett and Godoy 2010)—mirrors neoliberal doctrine’s “savagely sorting of winners and losers” in the global economy (Sassen 2010). In the contemporary city, there is growing unevenness in the economic, political, and cultural resources that structure and sustain the spaces, squares, and parks that materialize the “public sphere” in physical space (Low and Smith 2006; Madden 2010).

We are also witnessing a parallel divergence of cultural practices in space and the ways in which public space is experienced. In wealthy, predominantly white sections of the contemporary city, “entrepreneurial” public parks (see Hall and Hubbard 1996; Zukin 2010) create both the subject of citizen-consumer (Scammell 2000) and a heavily (if discreetly) surveilled, de-politicized public realm. In gentrified neighborhoods like Manhattan’s Lower East Side, community gardens that once served to “take land out of the market economy and ‘decommodify’ it” (Zukin 2010: 211) now function as symbols of “authentic” urban communities, more apt to structure the consumption habitus of the new urban middle class, such as preferences for “local, organic” foods, than offer refuge for rural migrants and radical environmental activists (Martinez 2010; Eizenberg 2012b). In less affluent areas like East New York, community gardens lie mostly out of the purview of developers and gentrifiers (Zukin 2010). While some large parks, like New York’s Central Park, host daily cultural events and are funded by wealthy conservancies, there are other large parks, like Chicago’s Washington Park, that serve more as lines of race and class demarcation than spaces of consumption and where the trend is not one of development, but disinvestment (Wolch et al. 2005; Boone et al. 2009).

Understanding these changes in urban public space requires that scholars dispense with ideal-typical images of public spaces, especially those that implicitly frame contemporary spatial inequalities vis-à-vis an idealized past. Rose-colored visions of community gardens, Berkeley's People's Park (Mitchell 1995), or Jane Jacobs' (1961) "urban village" preclude interrogations of the inequalities and power relations present in each of these "ideal" spaces. In analyzing privileged public spaces such as the High Line, a consideration of history is key: stratified, nominally "public" spaces that reproduce existing power relations have always been a part of cities, dating to the agorae of Greek antiquity (Low and Smith 2006: 4). Likewise, cities have always contained spaces of violence and exclusion, and counter-hegemonic spaces are often fleeting, at constant risk of cooptation or destruction (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011; Eizenberg 2012a; see also Lefebvre's discussion of "representational spaces" [1974 (1991): 33, 40–6]). Therefore, to examine the emerging diversity and hierarchy of urban public spaces is not to glorify Frederick Olmsted, Jane Jacobs, or community gardens. If elite spaces like the High Line are not fundamentally "new," they are at least spatial representations of the ongoing redefinition of citizenship and the state under neoliberalism, as privatization and commerce structure the convergence of consumption and citizenship (Jubas 2007; Trentmann 2007).

The High Line case reveals how this redefinition is occurring in a context of privilege. In a super-gentrified section of one of the world's wealthiest cities, elite actors developed a public space to spur economic growth and structure the leisure and consumption patterns of the new urban middle class. In this paper, I present data on the redevelopment of the High Line, tracing its transformation from a disused piece of transportation infrastructure into one of New York's most visited tourist attractions. The initial movement to redevelop the High Line emerged not as a growth-oriented "urban strategy" (Smith 2002), but as a contestation to the Giuliani-led growth coalition of the 1990s. It was only after the commitment of political, economic, and cultural elites that the efforts to save the High Line transformed from a grassroots contestation to the centerpiece of a post-modern urban renewal project.

I support this historical analysis with ethnographic data that illustrate the socio-spatial texture of the High Line. Like other privileged parks and public spaces, the High Line's design and management structure consumption, leisure, and social control. With a privatized network of "artisanal" food vendors, artists, security guards, and park personnel, the Friends of the High Line embed the park with commerce and covert surveillance. Luxury spaces like the High Line help produce the social relations of contemporary capitalism, as they reify the "increasingly essential structural [economic] function . . . [of] aesthetic innovation" (Jameson 1991: 5) and reinforce the privileges of the upper strata of the "postindustrial" labor market—the "winners" of neoliberalism's "savage sorting" (Sassen 2010). The Friends of the High Line's institutional narratives and events programming further connect the park to a privileged vision of public space. As one tour guide put it, "there are three main reasons why people come [to the High Line]: architecture, horticulture, and history" (Field Notes 10/11/11). The ethnographic data also point out the residual economic and cultural impacts of the High Line's rise: the explosion in "starchitect"-designed condominiums, the massive in-progress development of Hudson Yards, and the imminent relocation of the Whitney Museum of American Art from the Upper East Side, all happening directly in the High Line's shadow. I conclude

by underscoring the increasingly divergent cultural practices and economic resources of urban public spaces under neoliberalism, with the High Line case at one pole on a continuum of privilege.

METHODS

I employed a multimethod approach in conducting the study of the High Line. To analyze the actions of political and economic elites, I used journalistic accounts, minutes from Community Board meetings, press releases, and official High Line literature. These data were examined critically, as Molotch (1976: 315–16) rightfully points out that newspapers and other media represent a key cog in a city’s growth machine. Using ProQuest digital archives, I read and analyzed over 100 *New York Times* articles containing the phrase “high line” that were published between 1920 and 2012, in addition to other New York-centric periodicals—*New York Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*—and architectural publications—*Architectural Digest* and *Architect*. In addition to journalistic accounts, I read and analyzed relevant minutes and resolutions from the two Manhattan Community Boards (2 and 4) whose districts geographically contain the High Line.

To understand the institutional narratives of the Friends of the High Line (the non-profit group that manages the park), I read and analyzed every press release and email newsletter correspondence put out by the Friends of the High Line between 2001 and 2012—released approximately once per month over that period (available at thehighline.org). I also read and critically analyzed the book *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky* (2011) by Friends of the High Line co-founders Josh David and Robert Hammond. This narrative account of the High Line’s redevelopment, while largely a work of self-presentation, reveals useful information about the networks of elites that cooperated in the High Line’s redevelopment.

Between August and December of 2011, I also conducted an ethnographic study of the park. Twice per week, I spent 2–4 hours at the High Line, both observing the demographics of the visitors and noting how visitors used the park. I varied the days and times of my observations so as to provide the widest possible sample. In addition to my semi-weekly visits, each week I participated in the Friends of the High Line’s free tour that was offered each Tuesday evening. These tours afforded a large degree of downtime as the group meandered from 16th Street to 30th Street over the course of an hour, which provided an opportunity to interview High Line visitors informally as well as build rapport with individual tour guides, many of whom were volunteers. Over the course of the ethnographic study, I attended three additional cultural events that were hosted by the Friends of the High Line—a lecture on plant ecology, an interpretive dance performance, and a lecture on the redevelopment process by the group’s co-founder, Robert Hammond.

Because I was interested in understanding the roles of various institutional actors in shaping the High Line’s privileged qualities, I conducted approximately two-dozen unstructured interviews with tour guides, vendors, and park employees. In general, these were one-time interactions, as many either worked part-time (in the case of food vendors and tour guides) or rotated among several places in the city (in the case of art vendors). Multiple attempts were made to interview key actors at the Friends of the High Line and in the city government, but all requests were declined.

REDEVELOPING THE HIGH LINE: ELITE NETWORKS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Both critics and visitors met the opening of the High Line in 2009 with wide enthusiasm and acclaim. Tourists and New Yorkers flocked to see the magnificent views and the new perspective it offered on the urban landscape (Cardwell 2009). Architectural critics raved about its decidedly postmodern design, use of recycled materials, and the juxtaposition between city and nature (e.g., Ouroussoff 2009; Goldberger 2011). The High Line's emergence as a symbol of the *new* New York was something of turnaround from how it had been viewed in the public imagination for several decades. The railway had last been used for train traffic in 1980, and in the intervening years, the structure became a haven for graffiti artists and urban adventurers. The rail bed was a surprisingly hospitable home for wild flora, mostly grasses that bloomed as the Hudson's breezes tossed various seeds across the lower West Side. For the handful of trespassers who were able to make their way onto the railway, the High Line was a treasured, whimsical urban landscape (Gottlieb 1984).

At the same time, to many other New Yorkers, the High Line was incontrovertible evidence of the city's decline. In the years that followed the 1975 fiscal crisis—punctuated by the *Daily News's* famous “Ford to City: Drop Dead” headline—New York had bottomed out (Greenberg 2008). Suburbanization had gutted a good portion of the city's tax base. Much of the white middle class had migrated to the suburbs long ago; now it was the corporations that followed I-95 to Stamford, Connecticut (Godfrey 1995; Greenberg 2008). The High Line brooded over a desolate stretch of the lower West Side. With crime, seedy nightclubs, and the burgeoning gay and transgender population, the blocks between Tenth Avenue and the waterfront were an alien space to most New Yorkers. Running over Tenth Avenue, the High Line was a clear line of demarcation between the piers and Chelsea's brownstone blocks.

The city government had wanted to tear down the High Line since the early 1980s. Most politicians and developers saw the hulking, decaying structure as a serious impediment to the neighborhood's renewal. A number of the city's mayors and real estate developers went on the record in favor of tearing it down (Dunlap 1991). Meanwhile, activists held out hope that the High Line could be saved and transformed into something of public value (David and Hammond 2011: 20–1). But activists and opponents quickly realized that any change to the High Line would be very difficult. Owing to the complicated nature of federal regulations, it would not be easy to redevelop the structure—or destroy it. The federal Surface Transportation Board mandated that transportation infrastructure could only be dismantled if it could be legally considered abandoned. Such a judgment would force the rail owner, Conrail, to pay upward of \$30 million to demolish the viaduct (David and Hammond 2011: 10–11).

In the early 1990s, the Giuliani administration threw its support behind a lawsuit against Conrail. The plaintiff, a local business lobby called Chelsea Property Owners, alleged that the High Line had been “nothing but an obstruction to our businesses and properties for over 10 years” (Dunlap 1991: R13). Conrail defended the High Line's condition and declared that it was considering using the rail line for a recycling service. Ultimately, a federal judge ruled that “the public's interest in a revived transportation

service over the High Line must take precedence” over the property owners’ complaints (Dunlap 1991: R13).

In 1999, the Giuliani administration turned up efforts to dismantle the High Line. Conrail was in the process of being acquired by CSX, a transportation and logistics conglomerate. The revitalization of the West Village and the Meatpacking District in the 1990s had ushered in new luxury housing and upscale commercial establishments, and developers were eager to take advantage of the massive growth in property values (Dunlap 1999). The city and a coalition of developers led by Edison Properties filed another lawsuit against Conrail, while the Giuliani administration pursued other means of recourse (Kilgannon 1999). The High Line’s new management at CSX was not prepared to fight the city government and the \$150 million lawsuit. While it was unlikely that the new owners would revive rail traffic on the line, CSX declared that it would pay to repair the decaying elements of the structure (Kilgannon 1999). And, most critically, the company announced that it was open to alternative uses for the High Line.

In the summer of 1999, the High Line’s future officially became a matter of public interest. Community Board meetings were held in Chelsea and the West Village, where the Regional Plan Association presented various proposals, including turning the old viaduct into a public park (David and Hammond 2011: 7).²

At one of these meetings in Chelsea, the beginnings of the High Line’s eventual future were born, when two local residents—Josh David and Robert Hammond—met each other; several months later, the two founded the Friends of the High Line. The initial meeting between David and Hammond has since taken on mythic status both in official High Line lore and in journalistic accounts. The popular narrative tells a story of successful bootstraps community activism (see David and Hammond 2011). However, the folksy legend belies the duo’s sophistication and deep ties to the city’s elite. In the early planning period, Hammond enlisted the help of Phil Aarons, a developer who had worked in city government in the Koch administration (David and Hammond 2011: 9). Aarons quickly established himself as an integral member of the Friends of the High Line team, opening his extensive rolodex, arranging for meetings with attorneys from CSX, and helping to file a lawsuit against the city to prevent the High Line’s demolition (David and Hammond 2011: 9–11).

David and Hammond may have been new to the nonprofit world, but they were far from ignorant about how to generate buzz and financing for their proposal. Tapping into their personal networks and Aarons’ business contacts, the trio sought the support of elites from Chelsea’s art world and New York’s traditional philanthropic networks (David and Hammond 2011: 15). “I thought non-profits were run and funded by Upper East Side women,” remarked Hammond during a presentation at the New School, “but they weren’t interested” (Field Notes 11/16/11). Instead, their fledgling group found willing deep pockets among the philanthropists’ well-heeled children. Joining forces with their group of young professionals and long-time Chelsea residents were wealthy blue bloods with surnames like Rockefeller, Van Wyck, and von Furstenberg (Lee 2004). Soon thereafter, celebrities such as Edward Norton, Martha Stewart, and Kevin Bacon threw their financial support behind the Friends of the High Line (De Monchaux 2005).

As the Friends of the High Line organization was coalescing, a new administration was taking office in the city. Billionaire business mogul Michael Bloomberg was sworn in as Mayor of New York on January 1, 2002. Though a Republican like Giuliani, Bloomberg

was more receptive to the High Line's transformative possibilities and its potential to stimulate economic growth nearby. Josh David, the more idealistic of the two co-founders, was initially hesitant to back the growth ethos. Robert Hammond recounted, "Phil [Aarons] . . . started talking about how there could be all different kinds of development along the High Line, and Josh became more and more incensed. He was pretty anti-development" (David and Hammond 2011: 23). But as the Friends of the High Line continued to gain momentum and financial support, idealistic sentiments were cast aside for pragmatic realpolitik.

It helped that two of the Friends of the High Line's earliest supporters had recently assumed positions of power in the Bloomberg administration. Amanda Burden, a wealthy and well-connected member of the City Planning Commission, was named chair of the City Planning Department and Gifford Miller—a close friend of Hammond's from Princeton—was elected speaker of the New York City Council (David and Hammond 2011: 41). With the assistance of Burden and Miller, the High Line was made a prominent agenda item in 2002 (David and Hammond 2011: 44). In their initial meetings, the Friends of the High Line brain trust emphasized to the Bloomberg administration that redeveloping the High Line as a park would be an economic boon to the neighborhood. Enlisting the help of real estate developer John Alschuler, David and Hammond presented the city with a rosy financial picture. Hammond recalled that "[Alschuler] figured out how to frame the argument . . . : parks increase the value of nearby real estate, and thus the addition of a new park on the High Line could create an economic benefit for New York City" (David and Hammond 2011: 45). They projected that the properties adjacent to the High Line would receive an increase in value between six and thirteen percent. For an estimated cost of \$100 million, the city would see \$262 million in new revenues over the park's first twenty years. As it turned out, the actual revenue figures would far exceed these early projections. At Robert Hammond's 2011 presentation at the New School, he discussed the High Line's "return on investment" in detail, stating that the High Line—in just two years—had produced \$2 billion in new construction and \$900 million in new tax revenues (Field Notes 11/16/11; McGeehan 2011).

Bloomberg was sold. The administration believed that the redevelopment of the High Line would help the city's bid for the 2012 Summer Olympics (Pogrebin 2004). While any shimmering new tourist attraction would likely be of service to that end, the High Line's location—bordering the West Side Railyards, where plans for a new stadium were in place—made it especially appealing. The Bloomberg administration had other plans to encourage development in the neighborhood as well. With clear intentions to deregulate zoning codes in the former industrial district (see Weber 2002; Hackworth 2007 on the use of zoning deregulation as a principle of neoliberal urban development), the mayor hoped that the three plans would coalesce as a single push for economic growth (Bagli 2012).

New York ultimately lost the Olympic bid, but the redevelopment of the High Line and the deregulation of Chelsea's zoning ordinances proceeded as planned. With the support of the city, the Friends of the High Line went back to the federal government with the redevelopment proposal. In 2005, CSX donated the High Line to the City of New York. That same year, the Surface Transportation Board ruled in favor of the proposal to redevelop the High Line, prompting Bloomberg to declare, "The [board's] ruling is a great win *for all New Yorkers*. It allows us to implement our plans to preserve this valuable historic resource, create a much-needed public open space, *and strengthen our city's economy*"

(Friends of the High Line 2005: 1, emphasis added). But as the High Line's eventual reality would demonstrate, the mayor's statement was only partly true. The High Line would unquestionably boost New York's economy (McGeehan 2011).³ But on the matter of whether "all New Yorkers" would benefit, the design and management of the High Line indicated that the new park was meant to structure the leisure and consumption practices of the new urban middle class and anchor the continued super-gentrification (Lees 2003) of the surrounding communities.

A WALK ON THE HIGH LINE

It is 3 p.m. on a cool Friday afternoon in September 2011⁴ and the High Line is at its verdant, vibrant best. Walking from the east, the dingy streets of the West 30s give way to the elevated green space, brimming with people after the summer's final gasp of heat and humidity. From the sidewalk, the High Line's black undercarriage is striking, as are the tufts of tall grasses and people peeking over its edge. Below the viaduct is the Friends of the High Line's seasonal complement to the new park, an entertainment complex on a soon-to-be-developed parking lot that abuts the High Line's northern terminus. A tall fence plastered in "Uniqlo" and "High Line Rink" logos faces the sidewalk along Tenth Avenue. Uniqlo, a Japanese fashion retailer, is expanding its New York presence and has partnered with the Friends of the High Line to bring an open-air roller skating rink to the park. At the entrance, a uniformed security guard stands watch over the sidewalk, defending the space like a bouncer. His shirt is emblazoned, fittingly, with "Citadel Security" (see Friedmann and Wolff's [1982] discussion of urban citadels). A handful of people—all white, in their 20s and 30s—casually skate. Beyond the rink stand a Uniqlo "pop-up" store and half a dozen food trucks, offering some of New York's upscale "al fresco" options—including CoolHaus, selling "architecturally inspired gourmet desserts," and Taïm Mobile, offering "Tel Aviv street food with a gourmet twist." The trucks are complemented by an arrangement of picnic tables and a long wooden bar—"The Lot on Tap," a collaboration between the Friends of the High Line and celebrity chef Tom Colicchio. A few dozen people—here too, predominantly white young adults—snack on falafel, dumplings, and beer while additional Citadel Security personnel stand watch.

A few flights up from the street, the High Line's northern terminus offers vistas of Midtown and the skating rink below. This "second section"—which stretched the nascent park from 20th to 30th Street—had just opened in June, and plans for the third section—which would bring the High Line to the rail yards at 34th Street—are moving along. A few men are already working beyond the chain-linked fence that halts the line of pedestrian traffic. Looking northward over the rail yards, it is easy to see what had attracted Bloomberg and the cadre of real estate developers to the High Line: twenty-six acres of effectively undeveloped space sitting right in midtown Manhattan.

An outcropping of benches provides seating for the dozens of people gathered at the edge of the park. Others press against the fence, eagerly taking photos of the Hudson River and Midtown's skyscrapers. Like the crowd at The Lot, everyone is white; the park's Latino construction workers are the only people of color in view. Walking south, the wide landing area gives way to the narrow pedestrian corridor that defines much of the High Line's one-mile linear space (see Figure 1). A long line of benches hug the western edge of the passageway; a few people read books, click on iPhones, and chat in



FIG. 1. Much of the High Line’s design channels pedestrians through narrow spaces. (Photo by author, 2011).

pairs, but at this time of day, the benches are mostly unoccupied. Opposite the benches is a row of tall grass, protected by a rope that hangs twelve inches off the ground, keeping stray feet at bay. A hundred yards south, the High Line careens through old industrial buildings and brand-new “starchitect” condominiums. Here the viaduct slices the blocks between 10th and 11th Avenues; the feeling of connection with the city’s street grid begins to dissipate as taller, lushier plants overtake the space. The darkness provided by the plants and buildings makes this section a moodier, more contemplative space, though there is little room for people to linger. Like a conveyor belt, the rhythm of foot traffic forces everyone to keep pace.

Around 23rd Street, the park opens up again. A small patch of grass offers the first place where visitors can get inside the ropes to touch and feel the flora, and today it is full with people lounging and napping. Just ahead, a uniformed High Line official stops to collect plastic bottles from a recycling bin. A few paces further, an ice cream sandwich vendor stands alone behind a pushcart while several people take advantage of the view to Midtown’s skyscrapers, taking photographs of themselves on their phones with the Empire State Building in the background. Just to the south of the skyscrapers, the nearby public housing towers also come into view (see Figure 2).

The employee collecting plastic bottles highlights how startlingly clean the park is. Megan, a white food vendor in her 20s, discusses how the Friends of the High Line regulate her immediate space. “[The Friends of the High Line] are OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder] about it being clean up here. We aren’t allowed to have any trash bags. We can’t even give napkins to people unless they ask for them.” She points to where she deposits her cart’s trash, a small black box hidden behind a plant at the High Line’s



FIG. 2. Public Housing Meets “Starchitecture”: Just to the east of the High Line stand (L to R) Della Valle Bernheimer’s “459 West 18th Street,” Audrey Matlock’s “Chelsea Modern,” and the Robert Fulton Houses—*New York Magazine* notes that the former “suggest[s] an M. C. Escher print” (Davidson 2009). (Photo by author, 2011).

edge. “It has to be hidden back there so that people can’t see it. I have to empty it away from the park at the end of the night.” Another food vendor, Ricky—a Latino in his 40s selling Korean tacos—discusses the process of obtaining a vending license from the Friends of the High Line, a process that had been criticized by some politicians for its lack of transparency (see Chan 2009). “It took about two months. [The Friends of the High Line] wanted to meet all our employees and taste all our food. It cost a thousand bucks to apply, too—non-refundable.”

South of the vendors, near 17th Street, is one of the High Line’s more sociable places. At the “10th Avenue Square,” a glass cut-out affords people a view of the automobile and pedestrian traffic on the street below (see Figure 3); the wide seating banks provide room for groups of people to rest, and today many people are taking advantage. Overhead, billboards for luxury brands—Veuve Clicquot, Armani, and Hennessy—line the park. South of 16th Street is the Chelsea Market passage; here the High Line cuts through a section of a large industrial building that was originally a Nabisco factory. Inside, three art vendors sell their wares. One art vendor—James, a white man in his 30s—displays handmade mobiles with “inspirational” messages written on them. He sells them for \$20 or \$40 apiece, depending on the size, while he works on new pieces behind a large table. Nearby are competing gelato and artisanal popsicle carts and a full espresso bar. There is also an official High Line cart—selling books, apparel, and memberships—and a farm-to-table restaurant.

Scattered throughout the Chelsea Market passage are metal folding chairs and small tables, arranged haphazardly along the edges of the space. Many are occupied with



FIG. 3. A view of the High Line from the sidewalk; the 10th Avenue Square is at the left. (Photo by author, 2011).

readers, eaters, and people-watchers. A dozen people, mostly white young adults, are in line at the espresso bar; others wait for gelato and tamarind-flavored popsicles. With no plants, the High Line seems wider here, and the extra room, coupled with the bustle of the vendors, gives the space a feeling of continuous occupancy. It is here that the High Line approaches the conviviality found in more “typical” urban public spaces, like Union Square and Reading Terminal Market (see Zukin 2010; Anderson 2012). South of the Chelsea Market passage is the Diller-Von Furstenberg Sundek, named for two of the park’s billionaire patrons. Here there are a handful of wooden chaise lounges that are seemingly always occupied—often by white adults taking naps. Across the walkway, young children splash barefoot in the small, centimeter-deep “water feature.” Another High Line worker, this one walking north, stops to collect bottles and cans from a recycling bin.

The pedestrian traffic wends south through another “passage” at 14th Street. Today a predominantly white crowd of about a hundred is gathered, forcing north- and south-bound pedestrians to the park’s edges. A sign announces an interpretive dance performance entitled “Half-Mythical, Half-Legendary Americanism.” The performance features a group of dancers clad in neon pink and white-and-black-striped spandex parading in a style that supposedly mimics the nationalist sports demonstrations of the early Soviet Union. Blaring an off-key drone through a portable speaker, the group moves southward through the park, while onlookers stand on chairs to catch a glimpse over the crowd. The performance continues under the Standard Hotel—a luxury hotel literally built *over* the High Line in 2009—before ending a hundred yards from the park’s southern terminus at Gansevoort Street. Immediately to the west is a newly minted construction site, where the Whitney Museum of American Art will be relocating from the Upper East Side in 2015.

Exiting the High Line via a long flight of steps, there is another Uniqlo “pop-up” store and more art and food vendors on the sidewalk below. These food vendors are quite different from those on the High Line, however. Operated by immigrants, instead of recent college graduates and middle-class entrepreneurs, these carts sell Manhattan’s more commonly found “street food” items—hot dogs, soft pretzels, and the like—rather than hand-crafted popsicles and ice-cream sandwiches. One hot dog vendor, Abbas, says that he enjoys working in the High Line’s shadow: “people go, they drink, they relax [in the park]” before purchasing his food. The art vendors are selling similar items to those on the High Line; three display original artwork and a fourth sells movie posters and prints of *New Yorker* covers.

One of the artists, Patrick, discusses his resentment toward the Friends of the High Line. Under the current arrangement, only five art vendors are allowed to sell on the High Line each day, on a first-come basis. “I started selling up there right when it opened. Before [the Friends of the High Line] cracked down on it, there were about twenty artists who sold up there. Business was great, really great. When you have a line of kick-ass artists, everyone does well.” A few people poke around the art vendors’ tables, but no one buys anything. Beyond the vendors, the sidewalk scene yields to the din of 14th Street and the Meatpacking District’s luxury boutiques, restaurants, and cobblestone streets.

DISCUSSION: THE HIGH LINE AND THE UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC SPACES

The above ethnographic sketch of a typical day at the High Line illustrates how privilege is experienced in contemporary public space. Spatial “privilege” (see Kimmel and Ferber 2003)—a term I define as the hegemonic ability to make claims on public space, based on high standing within socially constructed and intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality, and national origin—reproduces social advantages in a process that both affirms individuals’ existing cultural capital and enables “practices of consumption that open up multiple arenas for the expansion of other forms of capital” (Centner 2008: 195). Visitors to the High Line eat artisanal foods, drink microbrews, take photographs, purchase artwork, and perhaps most remarkably, they occasionally sleep. The sketch points toward the institutional underpinnings of this spatial privilege—the private network of security guards, vendors, and park personnel that support practices of leisure and consumption. We also see glimpses of the broader circuits of economic and cultural capital that intersect with the High Line—the high-end residential buildings, the imminent development of the West Side Yards, and the relocation of the Whitney, as well as the branding of the elite philanthropists and corporations that helped finance the High Line’s redevelopment.

The ethnographic sketch further reveals how the design of the High Line puts constraints on individual spatial practices. While the intentions of architects (and the elites who ultimately direct the production of space [see Smithsimon 2008]) do not wholly determine how people will use public space (see Lefebvre [1974] 1991; de Certeau 2000), the High Line’s narrow, linear space—coupled with relatively few places to play, sit, or linger, especially for larger groups of people—structures the most typical movement within the park: a bucolic walk from one end to the other.

The Friends of the High Line's spatial strategy is partly a product of its position as a private conservancy. Though the park was built largely with public funds (Friends of the High Line 2008), the city government has outsourced its ongoing management to the Friends of the High Line. Like other "entrepreneurial" public spaces (Hall and Hubbard 1996; Zukin 2010), the High Line is therefore immersed in commercial activity—a product of the neoliberal prescription that public parks must be financially self-sustaining. Food vendors cater to privileged tastes for artisanal and comfortably "exotic" foods (Johnston and Baumann 2009), art vendors add to the privileged consumption aesthetic, and corporate partners—Uniqlo, AT&T, Calvin Klein, Millennium Partners, and many others (Friends of the High Line 2012)—underwrite the Friends of the High Line's operating budget. Through the park's commercial and surveillance mechanisms, the Friends of the High Line encourages privileged consumption and passive forms of leisure—in line with the design team's motto of "keep it simple; keep it wild; keep it quiet; keep it slow" (Field Notes 10/3/11).

Surveillance and exclusion are discreet on the High Line, as tends to be the rule for privileged public spaces (Madden 2010; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011). Only certain portions of the park are policed by methods of overt coercion. Beyond the High Line's design, the Friends of the High Line uses institutionalized social control to regulate the socio-spatial practices of park users. Private security guards—like those overseeing "The Lot" in the above ethnographic sketch—are most visible at the park's special events: lectures, dance performances, and the times I observed the "14th Street Passage" closed for private gatherings, such as a reception for the corporate law firm Skadden "and Alumni" (Field Notes 10/3/11). The majority of the time, the Friends of the High Line relies on relatively inconspicuous surveillance methods, such as the uniformed park employees who regularly empty the park's recycling bins. This tactic is possibly designed to prevent enterprising bottle collectors from scrounging through the bins for bottles and cans, which are worth five cents apiece at city recycling centers. Acts like bottle collection are widely seen as the sort of "quality of life violation" that the city's "revanchist" policies have sought to erase from public space (Smith 1996; Ferrell 2006; Vitale 2009).

Along those lines, the spatial practices that are supported within the privileged domain of the High Line further reveal the differential policing of public space characteristic of the neoliberal era. As Vitale (2009: 70, emphasis added) notes, New York's retaliatory policing strategies have targeted "Squeegee men, panhandlers, and *people sleeping in public spaces*," whom he argues "came to be the most visible symptoms of an urban environment that many people felt was out of control." While the NYPD's removal of homeless individuals from Manhattan's major public spaces is more or less complete (Duneier 1999; Vitale 2005) and sleeping in public has been effectively criminalized (Vitale 2009), at the High Line, it is routine in warmer months to find people sleeping on the chaise lounges at the "Diller-von Furstenberg Sundeck" or on the grass at "the Lawn." Sleeping in public space reveals either a profound trust in one's socio-spatial environment or a dire lack of other options. For privileged individuals visiting the High Line, sleeping in public space represents an enormous luxury; for less privileged individuals—such as homeless people, poor people, and people of color—sleeping in public space carries the stigma of poverty and potential danger. The sleeping practices of High Line visitors, therefore, illustrate the profound inequalities that exist among contemporary urban public spaces. In the divergent conditions of neoliberal public spaces, not only are parks in poor neighborhoods underfunded and unevenly developed (Wolch et al. 2005; Boone et al. 2009;

Joassart-Marcelli 2010), but the spatial practices engendered by differential methods of social control are similarly segmented along intersecting lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and national origin.

The High Line's redevelopment also informs understandings of contemporary growth coalitions and the new urban politics. Following the findings of authors such as Whitt (1987) and Scott (2004), the High Line's redevelopment underlines the centrality of cultural elites to the neoliberal growth machine. The success of the Friends of the High Line's co-founders in broaching New York's elite cultural networks—recruiting wealthy donors from the realms of fashion and art—played an important role in shifting developers' and politicians' attitudes toward the High Line in the early 2000s. Josh David and Robert Hammond were able to draw a new mayoral administration and a network of real estate developers into what was originally a grassroots movement, in spite of the fact that members of the growth coalition had spent decades agitating to dismantle the High Line. This suggests that the social spaces that foster "growth" are inherently malleable constructions: what was once seen as a spatial symbol of blight—a space that was the antithesis of urban development—became reformulated as a spatial vehicle for gentrification and capital accumulation.

The High Line's redevelopment further emphasizes the dialectical quality of socio-spatial contests (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). Today's grassroots contestation of urban development is tomorrow's co-opted centerpiece of a growth scheme, which is then subject to new contestations, like those of artist-activist Robert Lederman, who fought the Friends of the High Line's regulations on art vendors (Polsky 2009), and environmental groups who protested the use of rainforest wood in the High Line's construction (Parker 2009). While some of these contestations occurred in the High Line's public spaces, many of the political negotiations surrounding the High Line's redevelopment occurred within the "post-democratic" realms of city planning commissions and public-private partnerships (Swynedouw 2009; MacLeod 2011), thus raising questions about the ability of public space to sustain meaningful democratic interventions (Low and Smith 2006; Madden 2010).

CONCLUSION

The High Line has captivated millions of people and has rapidly become one of New York's foremost tourist attractions and cultural icons. By virtue of its prominence, the High Line may seem like a singular contemporary public space. But what happened at the High Line—the incursion of privileged consumption and the cultivation of privileged spatial practices—is happening in many urban parks and public spaces. Though it wasn't the world's first public park to be built atop a railroad viaduct (the Promenade Plantée in Paris has that distinction), urban growth coalitions around the globe are now developing "their" postindustrial High Lines, inspired by this mile-long linear space on Manhattan's once-derelict lower West Side that made billions of dollars for the city and private developers in just a few years (Field Notes 11/16/11; McGeehan 2011). Many cities have inherited spaces abandoned by industrial capital and in need of reuse. Returning them to "the public" is one option. Yet, as the burden of parks funding and management continues to shift to the private realm, all parks face pressure to become more "entrepreneurial" (Hall and Hubbard 1996; Zukin 2010). In wealthy, predominantly white areas of contemporary cities, access to political, economic, and cultural resources will tend to perpetuate socio-spatial privileges in proximate public spaces. Conversely, in low-income

communities of color, the historical underdevelopment of green spaces in these areas (Wolch et al. 2005; Boone et al. 2009; Joassart-Marcelli 2010) is reinforced by declining resources and heavy surveillance. Thus, the continued neoliberalization of public space will only exacerbate longstanding socio-spatial inequalities.

To be sure, neoliberal transformations in urban parks and public spaces are too contextually mediated to produce straightforward generalizations. Even scholars who bring nuanced analyses to bear on specific categories of urban parks, such as community gardens (e.g., Zukin 2010; Martinez 2010; Eizenberg 2012b), run the risk of flattening distinctions among public spaces of the same ostensible “type.” The High Line case illustrates how conventional forms of parks are transcended when privilege is inscribed in, and reinforced by, public space: is the High Line a “neighborhood park” that happens to cater to one of the world’s wealthiest neighborhoods? Is it a “promenade,” a “botanical garden,” or the city’s latest “flagship space”? Formal distinctions are tangential to uncovering how today’s public spaces reflect transformations in the public realm, in the state, and in constructions of citizenship. The High Line illustrates how issues of privilege, economic growth, and consumption are bound up in the neoliberalization of public spaces.

Notes

¹For conceptual clarity, it is important to distinguish “privileged” users from the “elite” actors who ultimately control the development of public spaces such as the High Line. “Elite” is a debated term within sociology (see Hartmann 2004); here I follow Khan’s (2011: 1) definition: “Elites are those who have vastly disproportionate access to or control over a social resource.” I use the term broadly to include elites from political, economic, and cultural contexts. Following Bourdieu (1984), I conceive of elites not as a unified cabal, but as a set of divergent actors possessing differential levels of the “forms of capital,” who are engaged in ongoing conflict over symbolic and material resources. Conflict among elites underscores the non-unitary conception of the new urban politics and the “growth machine” proposed by scholars such as Gilbert (1999) and MacLeod (2011). In a spatial sense, I conceptualize “privilege” as the hegemonic ability to make claims on public space, based on high standing within socially constructed and intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality, and national origin. Spatial privilege is further supported by the “attainment of multiple forms of capital” (Centner 2008: 198) and the racialized police practices that characterize the contemporary “revanchist” city (see Smith 1996; Vitale 2009). This broad conception of spatial privilege reflects the fact that many individuals experience it as a result of the postmodern expansion of formerly elite cultural practices (see Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991) and the post-1970s “revitalization” of downtown areas under neoliberal urbanism (see, e.g., Harvey 2002; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009).

²On the role of regional planning in contemporary urban growth efforts, see Wheeler 2002; on the history of New York’s Regional Plan Association, see Johnson 1996; Danielson and Doig 1982.

³In 2011, Mayor Bloomberg estimated the High Line was responsible for \$2 billion in private investment surrounding the park, including deluxe apartment buildings, art galleries, restaurants, and boutiques. “That commerce more than makes up for the \$115 million the city has spent on the park and the deals it has made to encourage developers to build along the High Line without blocking out the sun,” Mr. Bloomberg said. On top of the 8,000 construction jobs those projects required, the redevelopment has added about 12,000 jobs in the area, the mayor said” (Patrick McGeehan, “The High Line Isn’t Just a Sight to See; It’s Also an Economic Dynamo,” *New York Times* [5 June 2011], page A18). In 2013, the High Line counted a total of 1,374 new housing units—132 of which are affordable units—and just under 500,000 square feet of commercial office space were completed or put into construction from Gansevoort Street to 30th Street since 2005. “A total of 33 new housing, commercial, retail, non-profit and gallery projects are completed, in construction, or in the

planning stage as a result of the new economic development opportunities provided by the High Line,” the NYC Economic Development Corporation touts. The city balances this against the costs of Section 1 and 2 (\$152.3 million) and of the design and construction of the opened area (\$86.2 million) funded by the City (\$112.2 million), State (\$400,000), and Federal Governments (\$20.3 million) and private funds raised by Friends of the High Line (as of 2013, \$44 million). See <http://www.nycedc.com/project/high-line>

⁴This data is presented as a composite sketch of a “typical” day on the High Line, generated from four months of fieldwork (see Methods section). Some identifying information has been changed.

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Parques para Lucrar: La Línea Elevada, Máquinas de Crecimiento y el Desarrollo Desigual de Espacios Públicos Urbanos

Resumen

Este artículo investiga desigualdad creciente entre espacios públicos en ciudades contemporáneas. En la era del urbanismo neoliberal, recursos económicos y culturales estratificados producen un espectro de parques públicos de desarrollo desigual, desde espacios públicos privatizados para élites hasta parques desatendidos en barrios pobres. Las prácticas económicas y culturales contemporáneas en los espacios públicos son igualmente segmentadas, como es el caso de espacios públicos como la Línea Elevada de Nueva York que refleja el habitus de consumo de las nuevas clases medias urbanas, mientras la violencia, la falta de inversión y vigilancia punitiva permean los espacios públicos en la periferia urbana. Usando el caso de la Línea Elevada de New York como un espacio neoliberal arquetípico, esbozo su transformación desde un viaducto ferroviario en decadencia hasta un espacio público célebre. Propongo que es mejor analizar los parques y espacios públicos contemporáneos teniendo en cuenta la existencia de un continuum de privilegio.