



Repurposing the High Line: Aesthetic experience and contradiction in West Chelsea



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ABSTRACT

New forms of urban development harness aesthetic experience in order to secure, legitimate and reproduce class inequality and social exclusion. Our research on the repurposed elevated rail tracks that form the base of the High Line Park (HLP) and nearby development in New York City's West Chelsea neighborhood investigates one instance of urban aestheticization processes and their contradictions. Drawing on a variety of ethnographic, textual and photographic sources, we analyze how aesthetic components of the landscape shape the social interaction that occurs in and through these spaces; the manner in which the views from the HLP orchestrate visitors' perception of the city; how choices made about what to preserve and what to obscure from the industrial past shape our understanding of history and how new additions to the site such as plantings, public art, and amphitheaters communicate to visitors how they are to interact with each other, who "belongs," who to fear and with whom to identify. We also explore how design occludes an understanding of the material phenomenon that undergirds the neighborhood's transformation and the low-income residents who continue to share the neighborhood with the new urban elite.

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1. Introduction

The role of culture, the arts and aesthetic experience in urban development is undisputed, as urban districts and cities everywhere vie for tourist dollars and "creative city" status (Landry & Bianchini, 1997) in what Scott (2008) calls "cognitive cultural capitalism." While cultural projects sometimes involve new construction, more often obsolete factories, brownfields, waterfronts, railroad tracks and other bi-products of the industrial city are transformed into conduits for aesthetic experience and, eventually, economic and symbolic capital for a variety of stakeholders (Zukin, 1991). Sites that once functioned as tools for manufacturing, transporting and storing commodities become destinations through which value is produced through aesthetic experience (Zukin, 1995, Krivy, 2011, 2013; Walks, 2006; Pow, 2009). In this process, reclaimed industrial sites are recoded, made to produce new affects and social relations, invested with new meanings and often drained of old ones. Their new purposes require users to learn new habits of apprehension and aesthetic values, as "eyesores" are

recast as works of art, sites of high culture consumption or picturesque landscapes. In order to facilitate this conversion, non-profits, developers, preservationists, artists, architects and other stakeholders draw on existing discourses about aesthetic value. They also guide the production of new aesthetic values and enlist them in concrete design strategies (See Fig. 1).

Because the deployment of aesthetic experience – both discursively and materially – is so central to urban development today, it is crucial for urban scholars to examine the aesthetic dimension of urban transformation. We need to understand not only the social, political and economic processes through which development takes place, but also how the deliberate manipulation of aesthetic experience itself is deployed in the planning and outcome of these projects. As Mitchell (2008) explains "[t]he spatial form of the landscape is both the result of and evidence for the kind of society in which we live." It is "ideology made solid" (Mitchell, 2000). Such statements invite an analysis of what specific repurposed industrial structures and scapes mean as social, aesthetic, ideological and spatial artifacts; what they do as objects of sensual or aesthetic apprehension and how power, inequality, social inclusion and exclusion and identity are produced and reproduced through the design strategies deployed in repurposing. Such

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Fig. 1. Aerial View of segment 2 of High Line, author's photograph.

attention to aesthetics is especially important given the key role that aesthetic experience and ideology play in legitimizing and contesting power and politics in the modern and postmodern world (Bourdieu, 1984; Eagleton, 1990; Kristeva, 1984; Marcuse, 1978; Trotsky, 1957). As Walks (2006, p. 466) argues

The emergence of a politics driven by aesthetic motivations, delineated by aesthetic concerns and/or masked by aesthetic appeals would appear to be an important component of neoliberal times ... it would appear that neoliberalization and aestheticization are intertwined, emerging as a byproduct of, and a strategy for, social exclusion and the management of class and other social identities in the context of deepening cultural reification. Yet, while evolving partly as a response to the contradictions of the contemporary (neoliberal) city, aestheticization processes produce new contradictions and amplify existing ones.

Our research on the repurposed elevated rail tracks that form the base of the High Line Park (HLP) and nearby development in New York City's West Chelsea neighborhood investigates one instance of aestheticization processes and their contradictions. The High Line Park is an urban greenway fashioned from the ruins of an abandoned section of elevated railway gracing the Western border of New York City's West Chelsea district and, more recently, reaching beyond West Chelsea to the massive new Hudson Yards mega project on its northern border. One of the most successful economic development projects in New York City in recent times, it is a spectacular urban brand, helping to sell the city in a globalized world of competitive city-regions (Ashworth & Voogd, 1995; Greenberg, 2008). Like many other urban regeneration projects, HLP renovation was financed by the city and private investors only after initial supporters sold the project to city, private and community stakeholders based on appeals to both economic growth and to a discourse of public good (David & Hammond, 2011). The discourses through which funding for the High Line was framed initially appeared to reconcile the inherent contradictions between

the growth machine's logic of capital accumulation, the generation of exchange value and the use values and aesthetic concerns of the community (Logan & Molotch, 2007). Our research suggests that these contradictions persist.

Our study draws on participant-observation and interviews conducted over the past two years on and around Chelsea with High Line visitors, Friends of the High Line staff and volunteers and local business owners. We also attended community board meetings and other public discussions concerning housing and development in West Chelsea. In addition, we have culled newspaper articles, on-line blogs and discussions, public relations material, manifestos and mission statements generated by the project's architects and design firms for the purpose of conducting a content analysis of the rhetorical strategies deployed by High Line boosters and detractors. During the course of our research, we have assembled a sizable data-base of photographic images. The analysis of these images plays an ongoing role in our study (see Harper, 2012a, 2012b; Krase & Shortell, 2011; Pink, 2013), as does a reading of the built space of the HLP and surrounding neighborhoods. Using these materials, we read the aesthetic properties of the urban landscapes we are studying, how material and aesthetic components of the landscape shape the social interaction that occurs in and through these spaces and how the landscape on around the HLP is enlisted by users (Daniels & Winter, 1993; DeLyser, 2003; Matless, 1998). We also examine the manner in which the views from the HLP orchestrate visitors' perception of the city, how choices about what to preserve and what to obscure from the industrial past shape our understanding of history and how new additions to the sites such as plantings, public art, water features, pathways and amphitheaters communicate to visitors how they are to interact with each other, who "belongs," who to exclude or fear and with whom to identify (Anderson, 1999; Lofland, 1998; Merriman et al., 2008; Shepard & Smithsimon, 2011). We also explore how design guides visitors toward a highly aestheticized experience of the surrounding neighborhood. This aestheticization occludes both an understanding of the material phenomenon that undergird the neighborhood's transformation and the existence

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