RICE UNIVERSITY

Appropriating [Negative] Space

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis will preserve and exploit the inimitable urban condition of the High Line by suggesting that its current alien presence in the city can be reclaimed and experienced while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of the historic structure. The High Line is an artifact; it represents a time in history when New York was bustling in a transportation fueled economy. History has constructed its current segregation and its 20 years of isolation from the city has allowed for ecology to self-seed a native prairie. Its integration back into the urban fabric via a series of public and private access nodes will serve to bracket between the artifact and the city as well as provide access to an elevated territory of much needed green space in Manhattan. Moving people sectionally through the city along these nodes is essential to the cultural and historical experience of the city. Its exploitation will in turn embed the artifact so deeply as a support system into the urban fabric that it will be able to sustain itself through the life cycles of the city.
Acknowledgements

Constant support and encouragement from my friends, family, and mentors have made this thesis possible. This thesis was by no means an individual accomplishment.

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Site background

The High Line is an untouched ruin of what used to be an elevated rail line that delivered freight to factories and warehouses on Manhattan's west side. Running from 34th Street and 12th Avenue to Gansevoort Street, it was originally part of railroad system that stretched thirteen miles from Spuyten Duyvil to Spring Street. Currently, 1.5 miles of discarded rail beds have survived and symbolize the cities effort to revitalize itself from the Great Depression. It was constructed in 1934 as the first completed phase of New York City’s largest infrastructure projects: The West Side Improvement Project. It allowed the transportation fueled urban economy to perform more profitably and improve conditions in New York City’s most heavily used public open spaces- its streets. The High Line was elevated to alleviate the congestion of rail, ship, and street traffic that caused fatal accidents on 10th Avenue, often called “Death Avenue.” Factories and warehouses were even designed to accommodate the incoming freight. The High Line served the city until the 1950’s when the rise of air travel and trucking led to a drop in rail freight and made its last delivery in 1980. It is a “Miracle born of neglect,” (Jones, Friends of the High Line) wildflowers and overgrown grass have produced an unclaimed void that cuts through 22 blocks of Manhattan. Many New Yorkers don’t even know of its existence.

Specifically, the High Line runs through three Manhattan neighborhoods: Hudson Rail Yards area, Far West Chelsea, and the Gansevoort Meat Packing District. Until recently, these areas only consisted of garages, factories, and warehouses. Facing expanding development of the city, this fabric is slowly being reoccupied by artist boutiques and restaurants. The fate of the High Line has remained uncertain and at the center of controversy since its abandonment. Its immediate
threats are the west side developers and the Chelsea Property Owners (CPO) who are eager to tear down the historic line to build new lofts and condominiums. In contrast, artists who support reclaiming the High Line to help preserve their galleries and the culture of the community have colonized much of west Chelsea. After many years of debate, there is finally an opportunity to create a public space. The 'Friends of the High Line,' a non-profit organization of local residents, businesses, and civic forums, and New York City have recently sponsored a competition to foster proposals on converting the rail line to create a new and much needed public promenade. "Reclaiming the High Line" is an 'open ideas' competition to design 1.5 miles of Manhattan.
### The High Line Facts

<table>
<thead>
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<td>Total Length</td>
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<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Sidings</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Blocks Crossed</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publicly Owned Lots Traversed</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privately Owned Lots Traversed</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Street Crossings</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum Width</td>
<td>88 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Width</td>
<td>30 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail Easement</td>
<td>20' above the track</td>
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<tr>
<td>Load capacity</td>
<td>4 fully loaded freight trains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
<td>0' - 29 feet above grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>steel frame, reinforced concrete deck, gravel ballast, metal handrails</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Identifying Lost Space and Reclaiming the Forgotten Void

The inimitable urban condition and proportion of the High Line begs for a truly distinctive public space. I propose to preserve, appropriate, and exploit this indeterminate void by suggesting that its current alien presence in the city can be reclaimed and experienced while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of the historic structure.

The High Line is an artifact; it represents a time in history when New York was bustling in a transportation fueled economy. History has constructed its current segregation and its 20 years of isolation from the city has allowed for ecology to self-seed a native prairie in its abandonment.

Where is there a disjunction in preservation? Where is the High Line no longer continuous- and how may these gaps enhance the experience of the artifact? How can the experience facilitate a successful public space?

We have a blurred understanding of public ‘place.’ In fact, many places are typically in transit- people flow through space like traffic. Not much is seen or observed. Unlike these voids, the High Line will serve to identify and reclaim this lost space and engage the user. ‘Program’ in public spaces are often in a state of uncertainty; it is constantly changing and adapting, thus the quality of a space is determined by its interaction with its user. The boundaries are fluid- it is within the dimensions of space where social and cultural spheres of action take place.

The High Line’s integration back into the urban fabric will release it of its derelict nature and separation from the surrounding neighborhood as a series of public nodes that will serve to bracket between the artifact and the city. These brackets
will serve as an amenity to the public and provide access to an elevated territory of much needed green space in Manhattan. They should be seen as related social experiences rather than a collection of structure and objects. In addition, private property owners that border the elevated rail structure are also given the opportunity to appropriate and provide access.

Experiencing the urban canopy at the street level is equally as important as the elevated urban panorama. Therefore, these vertical transition points, both private and public, challenge the High Line's physical divorce from the street. Moving people sectionally through the city along these nodes is essential to the cultural and historical experience and at the same time serve to challenge the anonymous character of public structures. Its exploitation will in turn embed the artifact so deeply as a support system into the urban fabric that not only will it remain protected from developers eager for commercialization, it will be able to sustain itself through the life cycles of the city.
HISTORY of the High Line
HISTORY of the High Line

Early Transit Use

1847

The Hudson River Railroad installs tracks on 10th, 11th, and 12th Avenue at grade in Manhattan, New York.

A "West Side Cowboy" escorts each train, waving a red flag to warn pedestrians.

1908

St. John's Park Terminal is built to receive Hudson River Railroad freight.

Trains are fully functional at grade and run between Albany and Lower Manhattan.

1908

10th Avenue earns the nickname "Death Avenue." Congestion of rail, street, and pedestrian traffic become a problem.
1911
Eliminating the tracks at grade and to elevate them become known as the "West Side Improvement" project.

1914
City Commissioner Calvin Tompkins unveils his plan for an elevated freight line from 72nd Street to St. John's Park Terminal.

His plan was to have a three-tiered roadway where trucks, trains, and cars would have their own level.

1931
The NEW St. John's Park terminal is constructed. It was designed to receive elevated rail freight directly into the second story of the building.
1934

The High Line officially opens on June 28, 1934. The first train runs on the High Line, delivering freight to the RC Williams company warehouse.

New York Central Railroad president F.E. Williamson delivers a speech upon its arrival "This simple event today may well mark a transformation of the West Side that will affect its development for the better for decades to come."

1934-1960

The High Line is fully operational

Estimated cost: $85 million

Officials claim it is the one of the greatest public improvement projects in the history of New York.
1960
A decline in rail traffic causes the New York Central Railroad to sell St. John’s Park terminal and to stop service south of Bank St.

The city demolishes the High Line south of Bank Street.

Jane Jacobs proposed a 475 unit development to prevent the city from planning a 14 block urban renewal project on land formerly occupied by the High Line.

1976
The federal government forms Conrail and the High Line becomes Conrail’s property.

1980
The last train travels down the High Line carrying three boxcars of frozen turkeys.

1984
Conrail sells the High Line to Peter Obletz for $10.00 (ten), who aims to re-establish rail service.

1991
Rockrose Development Corp. demolishes the southernmost five blocks of the High Line, bringing its terminus to Gansevoort Street.

1992
The ICC allows the High Line to be declared ‘adversely abandoned’ but only if Chelsea Property Owners can cover the cost of demolition.
1999
CSX Transportation assumes control of Conrail and calls the High Line for reuse.

"That Platform has no right to be there except for transportation, and that use is long gone... This has become the Vietnam of old railroad trestles." (Joseph Rose, City Planning Commissioner)

2000
Friends of the High line, a not-for-profit group forms with the interest in preserving the High Line and using it as an elevated public space.

2001
The Design Trust for Public Space hosts "The future of the High Line" panel discussion to investigate the legal, political, financial, and design issues of reclaiming the High Line.

Resolution 1747 is passed in favor of reusing the High Line as a public space.
current conditions
of the rail bed

found objects

art installations

'voluntary landscape'
precedents
Verticality: this term is often used to describe dense cities. Height is too often associated with power and it is beginning to be challenged as an absolute rule for our city spaces. Rooms with a view will no longer symbolize ‘success.’ What is the implication of these open spaces (elevated territories) when they are divorced from the life on the streets?

If we examine the horizontal layers of cities it allows us to identify and describe urban spaces differently. In turn, it will open up possibilities for new uses of these spaces. The High Line presents a unique elevated territory; it is not contained within a city block but instead cuts through 1.5 miles of Manhattan’s urban fabric. The High Line will permit simultaneous experiences of street life and elevated views.
ONE CITY — two perspectives
view from elevated territy
view from street life
explore the void

The High Line creates a 1.5 mile void through Manhattan 30 feet above the ground.

Initial problem of void: alien presence in city

SEREGATED from public
Layer of control- intensity of history [death avenue]
History planned it that way- no passengers, no access (freight train)
*segregation is a problem because derelict object to residents
no access
segregation from rest of city has allowed ecology to take over
ecology takes pollutants out of the air
elevated ecosystem

Integrate in order to Preserve
Define Integration and why does it need to be reintegrated? Reclaimed strategies of engagement and how to draw the public
It is good for the city (save it from its sad state)
much needed green space in city
significant amount of unclaimed real estate in neighborhood
undergoing extreme development pressures
amplify essence of structure
*infrastructure as support system- Plug in
integrate an tie it in to protect it from developers
Preserve views

Preservation of Artifact/ Ruin/ Relic
Why preserve it? Preservation of void and ultimately connect to city
It has a strange specific quality (proportion and length) that other
public spaces do not offer in NYC.
Support that Privately owned public spaces from 1961 zoning are unsuccessful
Being put on display
History behind it- marking of west side development
High line can never be recreated in today’s market.
Artifact of time and use
Self seeded prairie; where did it come from?

**Reclaim and Reoccupy void: initial approach- ACCESS**

Reintroduce as a different program- find use for it
Pedestrian vs. train moving linearly along the line-moving at city level
Moving people from one point to another in the city without dealing with
  Chaos of street traffic
  What is essential to experience? Moving sectionally through the city. Views, occupation at different city level (in such a vertical city to begin with)

*Anonymous Public structure*- third element- as brackets between city and artifact
Reoccupy and tie back to rest of fabric and city. In between spaces
  *why is there a need for this type of public structure? How is it embedded?*
  Program in constant state of change and uncertainty
  Development trends that influence access points
  Ie: Olympics, art fabric, various transportation operating at different scales
**Walking the Line**

The Promenade Ribbon is a public art project located in San Francisco’s Embarcadero. Similar the High Line, it has a specific linear proportion. It is a 25 foot wide pedestrian promenade, glass-lit that serves to connect downtown to the Mission bay area. There was a strong emphasis on the abstraction of the line, how its shifts, transforms into ramps, and comes back to meet the ground.

"The line, in this version, would tell pedestrians how to behave. It would edge their activities with a strong formal expression of directions, and as such it would be a version of the road line that is continuing image of the California experience"

-Jane Brown Gillette

Architect Stanley Saitowitz claim the line marks a "tenuous edge" between the city and the Bay. At night, the its physical presence seems to disappear and a band of land emerges. Whether it be walking, running, or even skateboarding, the Ribbon conveys order to its surroundings.
In 1988 the city of Paris converted an out-of-use viaduct into a public promenade near the Bastille. It is three linear miles of public walkway with retail and shops built below. In addition, the promenade plantee has successfully revitalized the its location in the 12th arrondissement. This serves a good example for reclaiming the High Line because rather than being a eye-sore and hindrance to the neighborhood, it was a catalyst for revitalization.
analysis

site analysis, neighborhoods, existing conditions, zoning laws, future development.
hudson river park
jacob javits
convention center
new penn station
morgan parcel
post office
chelsea park
starrett lehigh building
elliot house
london terrace
chelsea water side park
dia center
chelsea piers
the kitchen
fulton houses
DEA building
chelsea market
gansevoort peninsula

hudson rail ye
far west chels
gansevoort m
packing distri
analysis_ownership

public ownership

private ownership
Native and Allen Flora
(Encountered Friday, May 11th, 2001)
Scott D. Appell, horticultural taxonomist
Source: The Horticultural Society of New York

1. N. Potentilla norvegica var. hirsuta – Rough Cinquefoil. Eurasia
2. N. Solidago sp. – Goldenrod. North America
3. N. Asclepias lanceolata (?) – Milkweed
4. N. Asclepias lanceolata (?) – Milkweed
5. N. Artemesia vulgaris – Mugwort. North America
6. A. Ailanthus altissima – Tree of Heaven. China
7. A. Verbascum thapsus - Giant Mullein. Eurasia
8. A Celastrus orbiculatus – Chinese Bittersweet
10. N. Oenothera biennis - Evening Primrose. Eastern North America
11. A. Daucus carota - Queen Anne’s Lace. Eurasia
12. A. Centaurea maculosa – Star Thistle. Europe
13. A. Sorbus ocularia – Mountain Ash. Europe
14. A. Parthinaudus tricuspidata - Boston Creeper. Japan
16. N. Quercus sp (Red Oak Group) – Oak. North America
17. A. Medicago (hispid or orbicularis) Trefoil or Alfalfa. NE Europe
18. A. Linaria vulgaris – Butter and Eggs. Eurasia
19. A. Hiracium caespitosum - Giant Hawkweed. Europe
22. A. Rosa multiflora – Baby Rose. China
23. A. Pyrus sp. (possibly calleryana or communis) – Pear. Asia
24. N. Solidago sp. (unusual spontaneous variegation). E. North America
25. A. Asclepias syriaca – Common Milkweed. North America
26. A. Morus nigra – Black Mulberry. Asia
27. A. Malus spp. – Crab Apple. Asia
28. A. Paulownia tomentosa – Empress Tree. Asia
29. A. Malus spp. - Crab Apple. Asia
Voluntary Landscape born out of neglect
The property in the neighborhood surrounding the High Line is mostly occupied by renters. The Chelsea Property Owners are concerned because they fear the High Line is an 'eye-sore' to the neighborhood and its preservation will only turn away potential buyers.
process

How can the High Line act as a support system?
process_ major transportation factors

an elevated territory is given over to the public

hudson river  west side highway  street traffic  lincoln tunnel  subway

the street is the ultimate public environment; a combination of scale and density

penn station
In order to preserve the integrity of the High Line, it needs to be embedded into the neighborhood as an amenity. The initial phase is to provide access and make the community aware of its existence and what it has to offer. Once users become attached, the activities that take place on the High Line will have connections with surrounding amenities and these surrounding amenities will rely on the High Line in order to thrive. Next, the open areas and parks will work its way into the system and eventually include the neighboring buildings. As a result, the High Line is so deeply rooted to the neighborhood that it is the backbone and support system of the community.
phase 1 ACCESS

1 ACCESS POINT
support active block
olympics 2012
stadium/ park/ NY Jets
jacob k. javits convention center expansion

2 ACCESS POINTS
activate buffer zone
gateway between redeveloped rail yard and quieter blocks just south

1 ACCESS POINT
support active block
cultural corridor
international art hub
buildings to remain as low as possible in respect to the neighborhood context
chelsea piers directly west

2 ACCESS POINTS
activate buffer zone
link to riverfront - views of hudson river, original high line easement permits bridge
construction over 10th ave down to a new public park
massive prewar factories and warehouse buildings dominate streetscape

1 ACCESS POINT
support active block
meat packing district
maintain historic district and character
process_access nodes

access opportunity where tracks come down to grade

access through building dramatic potential of curve the grid of the city seems to slowly rotate, turning the visitor from east to south

access adjacent lot street front position assures light, air, and views to the river and surrounding streetscape

access underneath structure at 23rd st, expands in width looks across to chelsea historic district

access adjacent lot undeveloped lot adjacent to another vacant lot provide access along the curve back to 10th avenue. unique zig zag condition

access through building "street level" retail space linking to interior commercial space of chelsea market

access through building terminates in the city-owned Gansevoort Market Meat Center
Test Site _23rd Street and 10th Avenue

access that is adjacent
Test Site _23rd Street and 10th Avenue

attributes:

connection to Hudson River
connection to park
access opportunity adjacent
easement negotiations
Test Site _23rd Street and 10th Avenue

easement negotiations

23rd street

north 23rd street

south 23rd street
The Chelsea Car Wash and Mobile Gas Station is an example of a business appropriating a vacant lot and integrating the High Line without demolishing any part of it. It uses the existing structure of the High Line to envelope their business; the underside of the High Line serves as the roof to the car wash and gas station and the columns have been reused to hold gas station pumps and items. The facade of the car wash is laterally braced back to the High Line. The architects designed a transparent facade in order to respect the integrity of the historic structure so it would not obstruct any views it previously had from the street.
Brackets :: Anonymous Public Structures

These public structures act as brackets between the city and the artifact. They provide access and are the final element to the track and prairie. Three initial access points are chosen to exploit different existing conditions in relation to the High Line.
underneath

site 1 _26th St. and Tenth Avenue

adjacent

site 2 _23rd St. and Tenth Avenue

through

site 3 _16th St. and Tenth Avenue
brackets

**site 1** 26th St. and Tenth Avenue

wrapper

circulation

plan
site 2 _23rd St. and Tenth Avenue

wrapper

circulation

plan
site 3_16th St. and Tenth Avenue

wrapper

circulation

plan
brackets_concept
brackets_concept
brackets _concept
brackets_concept
brackets_program activities
brackets program activities
The High Line has a strange specific quality; it is linear and narrow. Projected users of these access points and public structures are examined to determine how their speed and actions facilitate movement through these brackets.
summer
Material Thoughts

Materials were explored that are sustainable, durable, and add to the integrity of the existing palette of steel, concrete, and nature.
material thoughts

infrastructure
material thoughts

surface
material thoughts _path
Identifier

Giving directions and verbal references are described in terms that New Yorkers are already familiar with.
Site Specific

Each of the three sites are examined in plan, section, and elevation. In addition to what happens at these access points, the path in between these brackets are also explored.
site specific_elevation 1
site specific _elevation_ 2
site specific _elevation 3
site 1

I'll meet you offline at 26th and 10th for aerobics at 3pm.
Don't forget to catch the concert afterwards online.
site 1 void
site 1_sections
site 1_view from 26th and 10th
site 1_view from 26th and 10th
site 1_view from 26th and 10th
site 1_view from 26th and 10th
site 1 view from 26th and 10th
site 1_view from 26th and 10th
site 1_path
site 2

I'll meet you online at 23rd and 10th for painting class at 11am. The Community Board No. 4 meeting will start offline at 7pm.
23rd and 10th
11AM
Painting Workshop

16th and 10th
3PM
Nature Hike

26th and 11th
site 2_view from 23rd and 10th
site 2_plan
site 2_cross sections
site 2_cross sections
site 2_cross sections
site 2_cross sections
site 3

I'll mee you you offline at 16th and 10th to pick up danny from day care. Be sure to pick up some strawberries offline at the farmer's market.
23rd and 10th

8:31 AM
Daycare

16th and 10th

12:9 PM
Music performance

26th and 11th

1:31 PM
Offline
site 3_void
site 3_cross sections
site 3_path/ chelsea market
site 3_cross section
site 3_cross section
site 3 cross section
site 3 path
site 3_path
site 3_chelsea market
wrap up

Bibliography, Sources, Notes
appropriating [Negative] space

HISTORY- potential of void in city
    SEGREGATED from public
    Layer of control- intensity of history [death avenue]
        -no passengers, no access (freight train)
    Elevated ecosystem: segregation from rest of city has allowed ecology to take over
    Exploit the urban condition- potential of appropriation and experience
        Character out of disuse

REVEAL and maintain INTEGRITY of artifact
    Not looking to “take back” and preserve- but reveal layers of its life cycle via (my work- intimate moments (access points)
        Artifact of time and use
    integrate into life cycle of city
    embed as a support system [public amenity] to sustain life cycle

Mechanism for continued evolved use: APPROPRIATION
    Reintroduce back to city as a different program/ use
    3 components appropriation
    1. Path on High Line – public ROW
    2. NYC access- CSX owns easement rights
    3. Easement code-
        control appropriation- incentives to occupy – negotiation

PATH (section dwgs)
    Architecturally keep people from walking on bed
    Highlight street intersections- maintain views
    Reveal cycles of USE at access points

BRACKETS – between city and artifact - anonymous public structures
    3rd element (track + prairie+ path/ access)
    Exploit different existing conditions with 3 access points
    1. HL 26th and 10th- Underneath
    2. HL 23rd and 10th- Adjacent
    3. HL 16th and 10th- Through

Verbal Directions/ Identifiers
    Online | Offline
    path | bracket

User speeds/ appropriated program/ revealing tracks
Users moving vertically through city - and have opportunity to branch off into brackets
Jury Notes  
January 15, 2004  
Farish Gallery

Jurors  
David Brown  
Tom Buresh  
Doug Oliver  
Julie Snow  
William Williams

'volunteer landscape' rather than 'native prairie'

model of agreements public space becomes variable  
role of design for architect to make amenity available

back to public structure  
what are the mechanics for program to take place?  
Romanticize and real estate?  
Is it like suburbia?

Ie: day care  
Is it in the neighborhood-to support the system, or is it foreign and brought in?

Notion of preservation  
Real estate issue?  
Currency?  
How to understand park  
Do too much to limit?

Allow for things that you cant imagine (certain circumstances)  
Design systemically

Pull back  
Encourage take over

Between 2 buildings  
Sign environment  
Amplify essence- left partially uncompleted and users are left to complete

QUESTION:  
Desire to occupy?  
Do you facilitate or destroy the VOID?
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<td>2 Photograph by Joel Sternfeld</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>1-3 Trains Magazine</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 <a href="http://www.fhl.org">www.fhl.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York</td>
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