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Revisiting the High Line as sociopolitical project

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The High Line is a 2.3-km-long public park built on an elevated derelict freight rail line that winds through the West Chelsea neighbourhood of Manhattan. The site underwent two design competitions to define its transformation into a park, a first public competition in 2003 and a second limited one in 2004. The winning design team realized the park in the following years, with the first stretch opening in 2009, and the last in 2014. The park is owned by the City of New York but programmed, managed and operated in partnership with the local non-profit group Friends of the High Line (FHL), who have initiated and driven the transformation process and who now also raise the park's annual operating budget. Because of its boosting effect on real estate and economic development in the adjacent neighbourhoods, it has earned the City of New York a massive increase in tax revenue while at the same time causing considerable gentrification effects. Originally inspired by the Promenade Plantée, a similar linear park on a railway viaduct in Paris realized in the early 1990s, the High Line has now propagated the idea of reusing disaffected industrial infrastructures to cities worldwide.

In contrast to many other scientific fields, in the design disciplines the claim of objective authority is not a prerequisite epistemological drive—at least not by default. One could even state that, at the core, design holds many truths as it translates a wide range of often contradicting societal needs, aims and dreams into spatial projects. Moreover, intention and effect are not in the least clear-cut. Projects differ by designer (according to their ideas, ideals and preferences), the perception and interpretation of the given situation. Questioning and reframing what is considered a 'good' and 'successful', or a 'bad' and 'unsuccessful' project—in other words, the work of project critique—thus has a formative influence on both theory development and design practice. The critical reflection on canonical projects has been, and still is, especially influential in formulating new questions, priorities and pitfalls.¹¹ See, for example, the projects featuring in James Corner (ed.), *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999); Charles Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006); Mohsen Mostafavi and Gareth Doherty (eds.), *Ecological Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA/Baden, Switzerland: Harvard University Graduate School of Design/ Lars Müller, 2009); Jeannette Sordi, *Beyond Urbanism* (Trento: List Lab, 2015). View all notes As this issue has the explicit ambition of (re)inserting the 'For whom?' question into the design discourse, the 'Under the Sky' section revisits one of the most canonical projects in current theory and design practice. The High Line has become a hallmark of the new '-isms', of which the critical reception is instrumental in formulating new agendas for theory and practice.

As such, a reflection about how sociopolitical concerns are included or excluded in the project is not only timely, but indeed crucial in the development of the field towards a more socially inclusive and environmentally just horizon.

JoLA has fostered landscape critique from the outset, in its 'Under the Sky' section. In the field of landscape, the interest in critique has just recently generated two comprehensive theme issues on the topic, one in *JoLA* itself (*Landscape Criticism*, 3-2018) and one in *SPOOL*, the open-access journal for design in architecture and the built environment (*Criticising Practice, Practising Criticism*, 5/1 2018). A 'culture of considered critique' seems to be evolving, as *JoLA's Landscape Criticism* issue's guest editor Julia Czerniak calls it. We think this proves especially urgent for the study of urban landscapes, where environmental and societal concerns with associated knowledge practices easily conflate or collide. Critical thinking offers a means of reflecting on the dynamic interplay of societal forces, professional activities, academic education and research that structures how people view_and make_the urbanizing world. Landscape, as an area of study, and landscapes, as experienced material constructs, do not lend themselves to narrowly siloed research or confined sectoral actions. Criticality does not belong to any one discipline. Rather, it helps scholars observe how disciplines operate differently_and to take a position on what they learn from these observations about disciplinary constraints and affordances.

This is why we decided, for this edition of 'Under the Sky', to give the floor to two author teams that evaluate the same urban landscape, the High Line in New York, from two different disciplinary vantage points_while complementing the critical discourse on this canonical yet contested design project by as yet underexplored aspects. The first author team, Diane Davis and Stephen Gray, focuses on the High Line's particular urban planning context of New York City at the turn of the century, unfolding a nuanced view of the role activism played in the complex process, while opposing blunt dismissal of the High Line as a gentrification machine. They shift the understanding of the High Line as a 'design project' to appreciating it as a 'planning network'_supporting those who want to drive similar initiatives. The second author team, Natalie Gulsrud and Henriette Steiner, dive into the design project as such and confront it with questions on environmental justice. They unpack critical aspects of the High Line's planting and counter the common appraisal of its formal design and ecological performance critiquing the design profession's naive use of the concept of urban greening, without considering the question of who will benefit from it. In juxtaposing the two positions, we intend to make our readers realize how controversially a project can be critiqued from different disciplinary angles, and how powerfully critique across the disciplines can foreground the political implications of landscape design in support of advancing societally responsive practices for urban landscapes.

Notes

1 See, for example, the projects featuring in James Corner (ed.), *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999); Charles Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006); Mohsen Mostafavi and Gareth Doherty (eds.), *Ecological Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA/Baden, Switzerland: Harvard

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