Critiquing Landscape Urbanism: A View on New York’s High Line

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Given the growing interest in landscape urbanism in Indian architectural discourse, this article critically examines the history and impact of its most prominent embodiment, New York’s High Line public park. Landscape urbanism has not contributed to social justice, political emancipation, or ecologically saner designs, as its proponents have argued. Instead, while small privately developed parks like the High Line have cornered most resources flowing to New York’s parklands, far larger parks in poorer areas face a decline due to dwindling public investment.

There seems to be growing interest in recent months in introducing the Indian architectural community to landscape urbanism. The Journal of Landscape Architecture (JLA Journal) dedicated its entire June 2011 issue to this subject, while the introductory Indian issue of the international architectural magazine Domus in November 2011 featured six large glossy pages, with illustrations, on the High Line, a public park built over a former elevated rail line in Manhattan, New York, deeming it the most visible success of this movement (Ciorra 2011). Landscape urbanism, as the guest editor of JLA Journal writes (Paul 2011: 30), “may play an important role in theorising and conceiving the character and morphology of its [India’s] future development”. This commentary attempts to unpack the claims of landscape urbanism by examining the writings of some of its earliest progenitors and by presenting the lesser-known narratives of its “impact” on New York’s urban context.

Landscape urbanism is a discipline that attempts to combine the art of landscape architecture with urban planning. It promises to integrate ecology with the traditionally engineered, infrastructural systems that drive urban development. Given India’s increasing urbanisation, the discipline can provide a potential model of organising our urban environments. It has been argued that landscape urbanism “has allowed landscape architects to fill a professional void, as planning has largely opted out of responsibility for proposing physical designs” (Waldheim 2006: 39). Professional voids may have been filled, but the question is: does landscape urbanism fill (or create) other voids left by planning?

It was a damp day in late July 2009, when I got to experience the $152 million High Line, called the “great West Side story” (Pogrebin 2009: 6). Since its inauguration by New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg in early June, the High Line had been receiving accolades from the press and my architect peers. As I stood about 30 feet above the ground (Friends of High Line 2010), among verdant vegetation and planting beds, it was easy to be spellbound by this oasis of green. The park offered panoramic views of the Hudson River in between run-down warehouses with graffiti-emblazoned walls. I did not know it at the time, but the park was a quintessential example of landscape urbanism. To me, there were two particular design features that were alluring: (i) the intelligent use of the train tracks that carved meandering pathways through the planting beds and flora, and (ii) the creative use of the changing urban context. These two points were linked, and as I eventually found out through my research, told a much larger, much more complicated story.

High Line’s History and the Ideology of Landscape Urbanism

Originally designed in 1929 and functional in 1934, the High Line was an elevated freight railway system 13 miles long, used to transport produce from the Meatpacking district without disturbing street-level traffic (Friends of High Line 2010). At that time, the project cost over $150 million (the equivalent of $2 billion today), but given the growth of interstate trucking, the High Line lay abandoned from 1980 onwards (ibid). Then, in 2004, a non-profit organisation called the Friends of High Line selected James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio+Renfro to design the reuse of this section of the line (ibid).

Charles Waldheim, founder of the landscape urbanism movement, describes the emergent practice, of which this project is emblematic, as (2006: 39):

[T]he use of infrastructural systems and the public landscapes they engender as the very ordering mechanisms of the urban field itself, shaping and shifting the organisation of urban settlement and its inevitable indeterminate economic, political and social futures.

So how is the reuse and redesign of the abandoned freight line used to “shape” and “shift” the organisation of the urban settlement of West Side Manhattan around it? And what kind of “indeterminate” yet “inevitable” economic, political and social future for New York did the High Line engender?
FACULTY POSITIONS

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In an article titled “Terra Fluxus”, the High Line’s designer James Corner himself (2006: 28) argues that landscape urbanism “suggests shifting attention away from the object qualities of space (whether formal or scenic) to the systems that condition the distribution and density of urban form”.

And yet, there is a tendency among those disciplines dealing with “nature” – landscape architecture included – to compress complex phenomena into “a flat, colourless cartoon” (Cronon 1995: 35), ignoring the social, political, economic and cultural particularities of the context involved. Corner challenges this view in his article, citing Marxist geographer, David Harvey (quoted in Corner 2006: 28):

‘the struggle’ for (landscape) designers and planners lies not with spatial form and aesthetic appearances alone but with the advancement of ‘more socially just, politically emancipatory, and ecologically sane mix(es) of spatio-temporal production processes, rather than the capitalisation to those processes, imposed by uncontrolled capital accumulation, backed by class privilege and gross inequalities of political-economic power.’

In other words, the breathtaking design of the High Line was only part of the job of the landscape urbanist; other responsibilities included creating socially just, politically emancipatory and ecologically balanced designs.

So did the landscape urbanism of the High Line fulfill these other responsibilities? Sadly, not according to me, and certainly not according to the man that Corner uses to justify the practice of landscape urbanism. In 2010, David Harvey was quoted as commenting that (Lindsay 2010: 6):

the billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, is reshaping the city along lines favourable to developers...and promoting the city as an optimal location for high-value businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists... in effect, turning Manhattan into one vast gated community for the rich.

Bloomberg is charged with “leverage[ing] public land and money to turn parks into self-sustaining enterprises”, ultimately creating a “two-tier parks system” (Arden 2010: 6). On one tier are spectacular, exclusive and expensive parks like the High Line, Madison Square Park and Union Square Park while on the other are neighbourhood parks like Canarsie and Flatslands in Southeast Brooklyn, that provide space for plebeian activities like sports, barbeques, picnics and walks. Their growing alterity is evidenced by at least two-mutually reinforcing factors: (i) the lack of public funding of social infrastructure and human resources, and (ii) the privatisation of successful parks eliminating cross-subsidisation to support other parks. In 1960, the time of retirement of New York’s infamous “master builder” Robert Moses, the New York Department of Parks and Recreation was the largest urban parks system in the United States (us). It boasted over 35,000 acres of land and received 1.4% of the city’s funds for parks’ maintenance and operations. Under Mayor Bloomberg’s gigantic 2010 city budget of $63.6 billion, the fraction allocated towards New York City’s parks was a paltry 0.37% (or $239 million) (Arden 2010: 11, 12). These budget cuts have resulted in the downgrading of the park’s workforce to around 3,000 employees: around half the number that was employed in 1970. So while lower income parks like Canarsie and Flatslands have just one dedicated maintenance worker each for 1,200 acres of parkland, the 2.8 acres of the High Line are tended to by a team of maintenance workers including gardeners, custodians and bathroom attendants (ibid). In the Bronx, 6,970 acres are patrolled by five-to-six security officers, while the High Line is patrolled by double the number (ibid).

In the past, it was customary for parks to pay close to 20% of their concessions revenues to build and maintain the parks system, but with the increasing reliance on private-public partnership models, “special arrangements” are made so that the percentage of revenues paid to the city are greatly reduced (ibid: 40). One “special arrangement” is that the Friends of High Line keep all of the money from park concessions. In diverting what was traditionally city income that could have been re-distributed to other neighbourhood parks, these profits have ended up as handsome rewards to philanthropically inclined individuals. Robert Hammond, the founder of Friends of High Line, pocketed over $1.2 million over a 10-year period (ibid).

**Conclusions**

It could be argued that parts of the movement have contributed to just what Corner wished it would oppose: “uncontrolled capital accumulation, backed by class privilege and gross inequalities of political-economic power” (2006: 28). The High Line has in fact become “a huge magnet for development” with more than 30 new projects already commissioned or partially constructed at the time of its inauguration (Kilgannon 2010). It is beginning to resemble that predictable form of gentrification where “shopping malls, multiplexes and box stores proliferate” as part of “a ‘new urbanism’ movement that touts the sale of community and boutique lifestyles to fulfil (bourgeois) urban dreams” (Lindsay 2010: 5).

In his critique of landscape urbanism, American urban designer Graham Shane asserts that landscape urbanism is a response to a particular type of American urbanism, typical to Detroit, characterised by “Henry Ford’s myopia, racism and anti-urbanism” (Shane 2003: 7). In embracing landscape urbanism for its small-scale and bottom-up approaches, we should not lose sight of the fact that other cities – in the us and elsewhere – are not organised along these principles and may not require a landscape urbanist response. He goes on to remind us that “the foundations of a true urbanity” are social justice and equality.

**Notes**

1 As its name suggests, the serpentine mile and a half long project is located on Manhattan’s West Side. Beginning at Gansevoort Street and progressing through the Meatpacking district, the elevated park is conceived as fairly linear, running between 10th and 11th Avenues, until...
West 30th Street. The urban park then loops around the West Side rail yards, along 12th Avenue veering close to the Hudson River terminating on West 34th Street. From Friends of High Line (2010): “High Line Maps”. Viewed on 1 January 2012: http://www.thehighline.org/about/maps

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, I will be drawing from the largely interdisciplinary fields of the humanities, detailed by Cronon in his 1995 work. He reminds us that scholars from the humanities, which include anthropologists, ethnographers, and literary theorists, have demonstrated that “the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history” (1995: 24) than traditionally acknowledged. So what the humanities offer, in addition to a shifting of focus from product to process, is an embedding of these products and processes within the larger context of human history.

Note that Corner (2006) mis-cites the Harvey source. The quote is from Harvey (1998: 56).

Mayor Bloomberg’s support of the High Line as part of his larger agenda of encouraging public-private partnerships to renew the city was instrumental in its creation. The High Line, a paltry 2.8 acres of a partially completed park, cost a whopping $86 million in city, state, federal and private donations (of which the philanthro-capitalist group Friends of High Line contributed a little over half) (Kilgannon 2010: 19).

In light of the current Commonwealth Games scandal and the issues of corruption plaguing the country, there is a third factor worth mentioning. This involves the unholy nexus between private interests and elected representatives who reallocate dwindling public funds towards the more exclusive parks. Christine Quinn, the current speaker of the New York City Council and “a leading supporter of the High Line project” during her controversial third-term council re-election, received $54,343 campaign funding from the Friends of High Line board members. While this practice of receiving campaign funding from private parties with vested interests is not considered illegal in the US, it is perceived as bribery in most other countries of the world. In April 2008, the New York Times unearthed a scheme that allowed Quinn, “to hand out funds for pet projects throughout the year”. In 2008 alone, $4.5 million of public money, and $17.4 million since 2001, was handed out in political favours, receiving only meek criticism that public funding was being “bestowed without accountability” (Editorial 2008).

Arden (2010: 12) also points out that the city of Chicago spends almost $150 million more on approximately 14,000 acres of parkland.

REFERENCES