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## Creative Cities and Country Cool: New York City's High Line as a Middle Landscape between Rural and Urban America

You walked out, and you were on train tracks that were covered in wildflowers. I don't know what I had expected. Maybe just gravel, stone ballast, and tracks - more of a ruin. Maybe I thought it would be full of homeless people. I just didn't expect wildflowers. This was not a few blades of grass growing up through gravel. The wildflowers and plants had taken over. We had to wade through waist-high Queen Anne's lace. It was another world, right in the middle of Manhattan. (David and Hammond 12)

This is how Robert Hammond, one half of the team that was instrumental in saving the High Line, describes the first time he visited the defunct elevated railroad on Manhattan's West Side in 2000. Apparently, wild nature had returned to New York City, one of the world's most quintessentially urban spaces, and transformed a historical right-of-way into a natural habitat for wild flowers, shrubs, and even trees. In the following years, Hammond's impression would become the nucleus of the eventual development and design of a public park on the High Line, one of the most recent and certainly the most popular addition to New York City's long list of parks. By installing a concrete walkway system next to the old railroad tracks that runs through, around, and sometimes even on top of a naturalized garden with wild flowers, grasses, mosses, herbs, and trees, the High Line is a piece of contemporary architecture that mixes urban and industrial with natural and rural elements.

This paper aims to read the High Line's particular blend of urban and rural aesthetics against the discursive backdrop of 'creative cities' and argues that the elevated park establishes a 'middle landscape' between the country and the city. It is a striking example for an urban space that creates new relationships between technology and nature, tradition and progress, and the local and the global by appealing to its apparent opposite: the

rural. These dialectical relationships, which have a long and prominent history in American culture (Marx, Trachtenberg), are updated to form a particular hybrid of alternative and rural America, what I want to describe as 'country cool.' In this context, the High Line's particular blend of urban and rural aesthetics draws on and incites particular discourses associated with contemporary notions of creativity and reimagines 'the rural' and 'the country' to become a productive part of urban renewal and the contemporary redefinition of what we understand as urban and rural living.

### I. The High Line: No Garden Variety Park

On many levels, the High Line's history is intricately tied to more general developments, both in New York City and the United States. Since the mid-19th century, street-level railroad tracks were running down Manhattan's West Side, where many of New York's factories and warehouses were located. Owned and operated by New York Central Railroad, this bridge between country and city provided New York with meat, produce, and other agricultural goods. Due to the crowded situation on Manhattan's streets, it also caused many accidents, as pedestrians, horse-carts, cars, and trains shared the same thoroughfare. Even the peculiarly rural installment of so-called West Side Cowboys, railroad employees who rode on horses in front of the trains to warn pedestrians, did not improve matters, and the idea for an elevated freight road was born. In a time when New York City was increasingly abandoning elevated railroads and dismantled them in favor of subways (Reiss 70), an elevated freight railroad was constructed in 1934.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to New York's elevated passenger railroads, the so-called "West Side Line" did not run above an avenue: Located between 34th Street and Spring Street in Lower Manhattan, and for the most part running parallel to 10th Avenue, it ran directly through blocks and buildings to deliver its goods. However, already in the 1950s, its decline began, when trucking replaced freight rail traffic at the same time that Manhattan's West Side became increasingly deindustrialized. As a consequence, the High Line's southernmost part was demolished in the 1960s, and the remaining part between Gansevoort

1 For a full account of the High Line's history, see Sternfeld 55-68, David and Hammond viii-xi, La Farge 8-11.

and 34th Street, covering 1.5 miles and 22 blocks, was closed in 1980 and lay dormant for the next two decades.

When the increasingly rotten structure was under threat of demolition in the 1990s, neighborhood residents Robert Hammond and Joshua David founded the non-profit preservation group "Friends of the High Line" in an attempt to save the structure. In 2000, as one of the first steps to raise awareness for the High Line, they commissioned acclaimed photographer Joel Sternfeld to take pictures of the High Line. Over the course of one year, Sternfeld captured the High Line's newly grown vegetation throughout the seasons and portrayed "a bucolic railroad landscape intersecting Manhattan's iconic cityscape" (Walking 60). The pictures emphasize the stark contrast between unruly nature and the densely built environment of Western Manhattan and document how, following the complete abandonment of the structure, self-seeded flowers and plants had grown over the old tracks and turned the industrial structure into a wild, natural space in the middle of the city - the space described by Hammond in the beginning of this article. The picture series was published in *The New Yorker* to considerable impact and subsequently collected in the coffee table book *Walking the High Line* (David and Hammond 32-33). By creating an interested and sympathetic public, Sternfeld's photographs soon proved to be an instrumental part in saving the High Line and thus ending a twenty-year-long struggle between those who wanted to preserve the railroad structure and those who wanted to demolish it in order to develop real estate projects on the grounds covered by the High Line. After many petitions, lawsuits, and appeals, and for the staggering amount of 153 million dollars<sup>2</sup> financed by public funds and private donors, the High Line was converted into a park that is now owned by the city of New York and operated by the Friends of the High Line.

On the surface, the High Line project is similar to the "Promenade Plantée" in Paris, another public park that was erected on a defunct elevated railroad. However, there is a crucial difference. In the words of Hammond:

We'd been to the Promenade Plantée, [. . .] but that design doesn't play off the unusualness of the structure: it is like that of a regular Parisian park, with rose trellies, an allée of trees, and a little water stream in the

2 For the first two of ultimately three sections.

middle. I thought it would be a missed opportunity if we saved the High Line and then put a standard park up there. (56)

This assessment of its Parisian counterpart formed the basis for the High Line's eventual design. In fact, the design of the Promenade Plantée very much activates associations with the object 'park.' This is not necessarily the case with the High Line, as the High Line obviously attempts to be a new kind of park. It is 'new' in the sense of being deliberately unusual and non-standard, and the element of the rural is instrumental in achieving this goal. This is already apparent in the two design competitions that were held during the development of the park. The first, open design competition had the primary function to gather ideas, and, as Robert Hammond says, particularly focused on the most recent developments: "The strongest common thread running through the [720] entries was an appreciation for the existing landscape. People loved what was up there already" (David and Hammond 58). The different possibilities of what one can associate with the High Line is also illustrated by the two founders of the Friends of the High Line and their respective approaches to the elevated railway. Says David: "Robert viewed the High Line as a landscape primarily, and I was always more interested in it as a structure" (David and Hammond 73). The second, official competition was held in 2004 and garnered 51 entries. Eventually, the relatively unknown, conceptual team Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro was selected with a "strategy of AGRI-TECTURE" that consciously integrated agriculture with architecture and landscaping with construction (Designing 32, capitalization in the original). From the start, they asked the congenial question: "How do you find the balance between preserving the magic that is up there and creating something new?" (David and Hammond 75). Their final design is dominated by a park structure that consciously blends the elements walkway, nature, and industrial structure to construct a hybrid that reflects the associations many people had with the High Line (Designing 32).

The eventual construction of the park was rather radical; everything save the elevation structure itself was removed, and then completely rebuilt according to the plans of the High Line's designers. Thus, it was recreated rather than preserved, an aspect that David sees as an asset: "It became a blank slate, which felt liberating. It freed you from thinking of the High Line purely as something to be preserved, and it allowed you to focus on what you could create there" (David and Hammond 95). During

reconstruction, large parts of the railroad tracks were reinstalled on their original locations and then overgrown by grasses, and concrete walkways were installed that run through a cultivated wilderness that deliberately mixes and overlays plants, tracks, and park structures such as walkways and benches. The plants that had developed between 1980 and the early 2000s were the major inspiration for the renaturing of the High Line and several of them were in fact harvested before reconstruction and later replanted (David and Hammond 100). When the first of eventually three sections opened in 2009, the old elevated railroad had become a giant habitat for over 200 different kinds of plants “chosen for their hardiness, sustainability, and textural and color variation, with a focus on native species” (“Planting”). These plants are not arranged in neat and symmetrical flowerbeds, but rather in a deliberately lush and disorganized fashion that imitates organic growth. These and other areas of the park are curated by gardeners, and detailed information on the different species can be found on the park website (“Planting”). This naturalistic approach to landscaping is also reflected in the architectural design, for instance with park benches that “rise organically from the planks of the walkway” (Friends 124). In a constant change of emphasis between walkway, vegetation, and recreational spaces, the visitors stroll on paths that consist of concrete planks that simultaneously evoke urban sidewalks and rural paths. Or, as one critic put it: “it navigates between street life and the Hudson River” (Haber). In the words of the design team:

The surface is built from individual pre-cast concrete planks with open joints to encourage emergent growth like wild grass through cracks in the sidewalks. The long, gradually tapering units are designed to comb into planting beds creating a ‘pathless’ landscape where the public can meander in unscripted ways. (32)

This particular phrasing and design highlights the history of the structure between industrial use, natural reclaiming, and the current use as a hybrid between “hard” urban spaces and “soft” rural elements (David and Hammond 77).

The specific kind of pedestrian movement of visitors is another crucial element. Facilitated, among others, by the federal “Rails-to-Trails”- program, the High Line defines new spaces of interaction with the city. By using the original advantages of its elevated structure, it creates a pedestrian flow uninhibited by traffic, similar to a leisure walk in the

country, at the same time that one never leaves the city. In a city so often lauded for its urban verticality, the High Line emerges as a decidedly horizontal space that evokes more rural settings. This is also reflected by the names of the different sections one encounters when walking through the park. A visitor who starts on the southern end of the High Line, Gansevoort Street Entrance, would walk through the "Gansevoort Woodland," later pass the "Northern Spur Preserve" before entering the "Chelsea Grasslands," "Chelsea Thicket," and finally the "Wildflower Field" before reaching the end of the structure. After 1.5 miles, this visitor, who started in the Meatpacking District, would have passed Chelsea and exit the park in southwestern Midtown without crossing one single traffic light. Incidentally, the High Line connects old, pre-grid Manhattan with the newer part that is dominated by the grid, and because of its original industrial design, it runs through buildings and over streets and avenues, traversing the tight structure of Manhattan's rectangular streets and avenues in an organic fashion. Opposed to Central Park, which is a comparatively enclosed space within the grid, the High Line thus interacts more thoroughly with the city it is located in. And while the grid's main objective was to subdue nature in favor of man and economy, the High Line's attempt to integrate nature and city emphasizes the idea that nature is no longer a hindrance to urban development, but rather provides urban planners with new, 'creative' opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

## II. The Garden in the Machine

Especially when viewed in juxtaposition with the historical railroad structure, the High Line's rural elements are instrumental in signifying non-conformity and creativity in the context of urban planning and development. But what is meant by 'rural' in this context? Instead of an agriculture emphasis<sup>4</sup> (as for instance in urban gardening projects), the emphasis is much more laid on the cultivation of nature and the transfer of the country into the city. In his study *The Country and the City* (1973),

- 3 For a detailed account of the grid and its relationship to nature, see Trachtenberg 23-41.
- 4 For a study that sees the history of the rural in the United States primarily along the lines of agriculture, see Danbom.

Raymond Williams already argued for the dynamic and mutually dependent relationship between these two spheres that so often have been conceptualized alongside “[p]owerful hostile associations” (1). According to Williams,

[t]he country and the city are changing historical realities, both in themselves and in their interrelations. [. . .] Our real social experience is not only of the country and the city, in their most singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of social and physical organization. (289)

Williams stresses “the persistence and the historicity of concepts” (ibid.) in his analysis of ‘country’ and ‘city,’ and both of these qualities are also central to my reading of the High Line as an urban space that consciously signifies the rural at a time when ideas of rural and urban living are redefined. The High Line primarily draws on four associations with the word ‘rural’: the rural as the non-urban, the rural as an authentic space closer to nature, the rural as a communal place, and the rural as an element of America’s past. Especially the last aspect is intricately tied to something that is traditionally understood to be in sharp contrast to nature: the industrial. In a city increasingly dominated by a post-industrial service economy, the High Line engages with a dialectical relationship that has a long tradition in American history and thought: the crossroads between nature and structure.

In one of the essays that accompany Sternfeld’s photographs in *Walking the High Line*, John Stilgoe describes several literary positions on discoveries through train travel, and particularly focuses on Henry David Thoreau’s thoughts on the relation between man, train, travel, and nature. On a similar note, Annik La Farge’s tourist guide *On the High Line* features, right at the beginning, a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson that captures similar ground. The quote “[r]eaders of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these ... the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider’s geometrical web” (22-23) is superimposed on the spreadsheet photograph of a medium close-up capturing an unreconstructed part of the High Line where wild plants and rail tracks intersect and -act. In the context of the cultural background of the High Line, this is a telling reference, as the original cultural impact of railways

in the United States was one of discovery as well as rupture and has a long and prominent place in American intellectual history.

Before and after Emerson and Thoreau, many prominent American scholars, writers, and artists have engaged with this dichotomy between railroad and nature. Probably the most famous depiction of the interaction of railroad and nature was created by yet another contemporary of the Transcendentalists: George Inness, whose *The Lackawanna Valley* (1855) depicts a train running through an idyllic rural setting. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964),<sup>5</sup> Leo Marx's classic study of the dialectical relationship at the heart of Inness' painting, the author describes the painting as a "striking representation of the idea that machine technology is a proper part of the landscape" and argues that "the trees of the middle distance gently envelop the industrial buildings and artifacts. No sharp lines set off the man-made from the natural terrain [. . .] the right of way curves gracefully across the center of the canvas" (220-21). For this kind of representation and thinking, for which Marx presents copious examples throughout American history, he coins "the image of the middle landscape, a version of the pastoral ideal which continues to engage the American imagination long after the 'take-off into the industrial age' to describe spaces that are neither completely natural nor dominated by technology but rather hybrid forms in-between (160).<sup>6</sup>

5 The current edition's cover fittingly features *The Lackawanna Valley*.

6 This relationship is probably best exemplified by Emerson's approach to the matter in his essay "Nature" (1836): "Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result" (1107, emphasis in the orig.). These words express profound skepticism when it comes to human interactions with nature. In this passage, not only the classic duality between nature and culture, but also the classic hierarchy is intact: divine nature is clearly valued higher than mankind's cultural tinkling with its resources. In classic Emersonian fashion, however, this initial impression changes in the course of his essay when he later claims that "the beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (1113). For Emerson, "the creation of beauty is Art" and "in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (1113-14). Here, Emerson seems to come to the



It is the continuing fascination with this particular kind of 'middle landscape' that also interests me with respect to the High Line's negotiation of urban and rural aesthetics. In the beginning of his study, Marx asks a very straightforward question: "What possible bearing can the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment have upon the lives men lead in an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society?" (5). For Marx, among the most prominent reasons are flight from civilization, idealization of nature, and a desire for simple, direct, authentic experience: "What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural" (9-10). This kind of pastoralism is soon dismissed by Marx as cheap nostalgia and false belief, and opposed to higher, say, literary, ways of expression: "The answer to this central question must start with the distinction between two kinds of parochialism - one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex" (5).

Where Marx managed to distinguish neatly between these seeming opposites, I claim that the High Line shows how all four terms can be applied to one object: the High Line's interaction between the urban and the rural is popular, sentimental, imaginative, and complex. And this has much to do with the time of its renovation and the kind of rededication. While Marx asked the question in a time of beginning urban decay and suburban sprawl, I want to suggest that in the early 21st century, this question has to be framed in a different context. Concerning the specific example of New York City, we witness a constant population growth since 1980, after a three decades long slump. Moreover, with the High Line, we do not only witness the idealization, but rather the integration of rural elements in the city. Thus, to rephrase Marx: What possible bearing can the urge to integrate a simple, rural environment have upon the lives men and women lead in an intricately organized, urban, post-industrial, alternatively powered society? Or, even shorter: What is the role of the garden in the machine? Is the High Line actually the introduction of the garden into the machine, or is it rather the final synthesis of rural, natural, industrial, and urban elements into a whole, the ideal middle landscape

conclusion that nature and culture form a mutual bond out of which concrete people in concrete times and specific surroundings create new forms: "All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life" (1115).

Marx speaks of? Without wanting to claim that this ideal is achieved, thinking in this direction may help to grasp why contemporary urban planning evokes the rural and attempts to create a middle landscape that is neither/nor as well as both/and rural and urban.

### III. Creative Cities

The label “creative city,” most prominently used by urban planners like Charles Landry and Richard Florida, is an attempt to conceptualize urban renewal in ways congenial to the kind of post-industrial knowledge workers, artists and entrepreneurs Florida subsumes under the (equally vague) label “creative class.” In an attempt to approach the matter less from the position of urban planning and more from the vantage point of cultural studies, I want to focus on Andreas Reckwitz’s understanding of creative cities as the description of the deliberate semiotic and aesthetic intensification of urban spaces - the “culturalization” of cities (274, transl. FG). In his take on contemporary urban developments, Reckwitz argues that contemporary cities in post-industrial Western societies increasingly abandon the functional impetus central to post-war urban spaces in favor of an aesthetic emphasis. Under the creative city paradigm, cities become “a space for the production of ever new signs, experiences, and atmospheres” (274, transl. FG).

In the culturalized city, new signs are constantly generated – for instance through a pastiche of architectural styles, the intermingling of work and leisure spaces, or the construction of modern facilities in old, urban structures. In the case of the High Line, rural and natural signs complement the mixture of different urban and industrial elements. All of these symbols are freely mixed, put in new contexts, and, quite literally, given its landscaping design, overlaid with each other. The city’s history is acknowledged and combined with the contemporary in ways that both highlight the people’s awareness and reimagining of it. These processes usually start with processes of “semiotic recoding,” as Reckwitz points out (290, transl. FG). For instance, if we take the case of the High Line, even a cursory look shows that we are hardly dealing with a perennially beloved structure. Much like the ‘gritty’ neighborhoods it traverses - Manhattan’s West Side, the Meatpacking District, Chelsea - many people despised the structure exactly for those reasons for which it is now

appreciated. Again Hammond: "To me it sounded romantic: a train running through your neighborhood. But to people who had lived there when the High Line was running, it wasn't romantic. They didn't just live on the wrong side of the tracks: they lived under the tracks. It was loud. It was dirty" (David and Hammond 19-20, emphasis in the orig.).

But why is mixing the various visible and invisible signs connected to the High Line perceived as a creative act, and how does semiotic recoding work? Using Guggenheim's approach to building conversion, it is possible to describe the redesign of the High Line as an act of defiance concerning both the original railroad structure as well as the conventional idea of what constitutes a park. Guggenheim uses the term "building type" to describe how buildings only exist as a mixture of their concrete form and use (163). Crucial here is the idea of the assemblage of individual "black boxes" to "locate and facilitate" specific uses connected to the building type (*ibid.*). Assuming that the same applies for structures, the High Line is such a type that we identify through different "black-boxes" associated with the structure type "elevated railroad": its original use as a right-of-way, the elevated steel structure, the bed, tracks, and railings, as well as materials such as steel, gravel, or wood. When it fell in disuse, nature took over and disrupted the structure type, and the restorers of the High Line and creators of the park took the codified, standardized (meaning of the) structure and put it to radically new uses by integrating the new elements found on and uses facilitated by the structure. When the Friends of the High Line reconstructed the High Line as a park, they consciously defied many expectations one has of a city park and used a different black box instead: nature. Alluding to the post-1980 growth rather than any other present park, the High Line plays with the expectation of a park by adding unforeseen elements. This act creates bliss in the users compatible with other current approaches to city planning: "Our very joy in rambling through a city derives from this fact: We orient ourselves with types and we enjoy being surprised by the failing of our own classification of types" (Guggenheim 175).

However, this did not happen in a cultural vacuum, but was anchored in a relatively safe and stable set of signifiers, namely those pertaining to a decidedly positive rural imagery and connotations on the one hand and elements of the neighborhood's history on the other. Guggenheim

introduces the concept of “mutable immobiles” to highlight two central aspects of buildings. They are singular and reside in a fixed location:<sup>7</sup>

Once a building is built, by being used in specific ways and by being locally stable and thus connecting to its changing environment, it inevitably acquires a biography that makes it distinct from all other buildings. (167)

It is here that the different aspects of the history of the High Line converge to connect the rural with the urban. With its quintessentially urban history between the rise and fall of industrial and manufacturing America and New York, its location in a part of Manhattan that became particularly bohemian and gritty after its industrial heyday, as well as its rural heritage between the rural goods once transported on it and the natural comeback that defined much of its recent past, the High Line emerges as an alternatively inflected urban space that functions as a symbolic bridge to rural America.

This has much to do with the kind of stories a city tells about itself, and about the country it is located in. The High Line emerges as a museum of America's and New York's rural and industrial past; a relatively nondescript structure becomes significant through reference to interesting, overseen, or non-standard aspects of its or its city's history. To put it differently: Building a park on an anonymous lot seldom yields stories about the location; building a park on an old elevated freight railroad invariably activates numerous historical associations, especially given the specific place this dichotomy has in the American cultural imaginary. The High Line's association with a historical dimension is connected to contemporary notions of urban planning that stress the advantages of working with what is there, of creating something new through reimagining the old.<sup>8</sup> As Reckwitz notes with respect to the conversion of old industrial buildings and structures, it is their continued

7 This insight applies even though New York City itself provides an interesting counterexample with the iconic Moondance Diner, which was relocated to Wyoming in 2007 (Reiss 141).

8 In New York City, this is especially significant for the lessons learned from earlier projects related to the treatment of historical buildings. Ever since the contested demolition of the historic Penn Station in 1963 to build the current Madison Square Garden, public opinion in New York has become increasingly sympathetic toward the merits of preserving historic buildings and structures.

use as well as the seemingly (more) natural materials from which it is built that constitute an authentic effect (272). Reckwitz cites the New York loft projects since the 1970s, and just like lofts turned tum-of-the-century industrial architecture into living spaces and merged work and leisure, the High Line turns an industrial artifact into a park space and merges the urban and the rural. The High Line is an example of urban development that does not just carve a space out of a given city and erects something completely new instead. In this case, old urban structures are preserved and renatured, and the idea of sustainability is favored over obsolescence. Stressing the historical dimension of the artifact, the sustainability of the construction, and the durability of the plants that took over since 1980 are therefore instrumental in the construction of the High Line's authentic effect.

Both traditional rural America and industrial America are things of the past, and both are now reassembled to form a new thing that appeals to contemporary tastes and practices. However, the reassembling of historic artifacts is less the expression of an unbroken yearning for simpler times than the productive creation of new urban spaces that create aesthetic affects. This boils down to the question of what constitutes newness: This is not newness as progress or quantitative maximization, but newness as aesthetic appeal (Reckwitz 40). The High Line is not something new because it constructs something not possible before or because it invents a style not there before; it is not new because it is the largest, highest, or most expensive park. It is new because it takes a certain set of signs and combines them in a way that is both perceived as new and congenial to the residents living in and associated with its neighborhood. In this case, elements of the rural as the non-urban function as markers of non-conventional, out-of-the-box, in short, creative thinking. The High Line emphasizes its non-conventionality by consciously mixing old industrial, wild natural, and sleek modern visual style in a postmodern fashion. What Hammond describes as "unusual" is of course also interesting, since mainstream conventionality is anathema to those artists and creatives that supposedly live around the High Line and function as the avant-garde of contemporary urban renewal.

Maybe more importantly, in a city where virtually every square meter is privately owned, the non-profit community structure and the public ownership signifies more communal and public openness. Ideally at least, the High Line project appeals to community building at the same time that

it provides urban individuals with a space in which work and leisure are combined - similar to the nostalgic picture many people have of country living. The emphasis on community and sustainability is also visible with the art projects, and most prominently with the food vendors on the High Line. Food on the High Line can be bought from a handful of selected New York vendors who sell food with ingredients that are "local," "authentic," and "artisanal" ("High Line Food").<sup>9</sup> This is crucial to the kind of 'rural' that we are dealing with here. Staying with Guggenheim's terminology, the rural in this setting becomes a 'mutable mobile,' as it is both transported into the city and considerably redefined and reimagined along the way. On the one hand, it is used as material to redefine the structure High Line in a creative way; on the other hand, certain connotations with the country are emphasized and a very specific understanding of what constitutes rural in the context of the High Line emerges. Through alluding to something considered old and historical, it is transformed into something new, something new with a very particular, alternative and non-mainstream inflection.

#### IV. Country Cool

Next to the semiotic interaction of city and country, the High Line's specific affective appeal is also connected to a remarkable transformation concerning the possible understanding of rural America. Instead of being exclusively identified as the red-state homestead of hicks and yokels, the rural, nature, and wilderness are reimagined and romanticized in a way that blends it with liberal, alternative America: "country cool." I borrowed this term from a newspaper article by Ralph Martin, in which he used the term to denote the increasing exodus of young, urban, creative New Yorkers to upstate New York, a process he calls the "realization of bohemia" (transl. FG). For Martin, rising living costs in Manhattan and Brooklyn drive 'true' bohemians out of the city and into the country; "trustafarians" dressed as bohemians are the only ones remaining in the

9 A very vivid example is provided by the description of The Taco Truck: "The three central principles that guide The Taco Truck in every aspect of their business are authenticity, sustainability, and community" ("High Line Food").

city while the artists and authors that developed the neighborhood in the first place move to the country. In this vein, Martin describes a "Brooklynization" of the Hudson River Valley as an outcome of rampant gentrification in Manhattan and Brooklyn (transl. FG).<sup>10</sup> With the Brooklynites, the element of cool is transferred to the Hudson River Valley: the aesthetic, ethic, and economic complex that poses as anti-mainstream, non-conventional and post-materialistic. This happens against the background of the rejuvenation of the Hudson Valley, marked by many projects that are similar to the High Line, such as renovated industrial spaces or picturesque walkways.

These parallels indicate that we are dealing with the same cultural logic that also forms the basis for the High Line. Developments like these are in fact the result of one of the main driving forces of consumer capitalism and one of the most prominent middle class imaginaries, as authors such as Thomas Frank ("hip consumerism") or Jim McGuigan ("cool capitalism") have analyzed. With the High Line, the idea of the country is rejuvenated by exactly the same cultural imaginary that also animates much of the thinking behind creative cities. To the same degree that urban cool has moved to the country, the country has become a part of this urban phenomenon. Together with other phenomena such as indie folk music, farmers' markets, organic food, urban gardening, or hipster fashion, the High Line is a phenomenon that quotes the rural but is largely located in rather affluent urban areas. As both Frank and McGuigan have shown, it is not possible anymore to sensibly distinguish between alternative and mainstream, between conformist and antagonistic approaches to capitalist consumer culture, as both have become increasingly integrated. While Frank speaks of the "commodification of dissent," McGuigan speaks of "the incorporation of 'the great refusal' of art in general into the capitalist ideology and market practices associated with the alleged panacea of 'creative industries' presented as offering solutions to the problems arising from the collapse of manufacturing and heavy industry in what used to be 'advanced' capitalist nations" (Cool 8). And this accounts for much of the High Line's impact, as we will see in the last section.

10 For a similar view (also quoted by Martin) that describes the Hudson Valley as "NoBro\NNorth of Brooklyn, see Applebome.

## V. The Rural Beast in the Urban Garden?

[T]he idea was enticing: a public park above the hubbub, a contemplative space where nature softens the city's abrasiveness. Today it's difficult to remember that initial feeling. The High Line has become a tourist-clogged catwalk and a catalyst for some of the most rapid gentrification in the city's history. (Moss, "Disney")

The High Line is not a part of rural America. Rather, rural America and associated ideas have become parts of the cultural artifact High Line, which shows how country and city can productively interact along the lines of creativity and cool. However, with its sometimes impressive, sometimes uneasy relationship between bottom-up and top-down processes, between individual, community, and capital, and between city and country, it also traverses precarious ground, and it may well become an agent of exactly those urban forces it seemingly alleviates. So, the question arises: are we dealing here with a fabricated predator in naturalized cloth that threatens organically grown neighborhoods?

No major urban project exists without its proponents and its detractors, and no urban project without its effects on neighboring areas. This is also true with respect to the High Line, which is both an immensely popular and also an increasingly criticized public space. On the one hand, some critics are alienated by the park's naturalized design: "The new High Line is a simulacrum of the old. In its imitation of nature, it separates us from the natural. We're in Baudrillard's hyperreality territory here" (Moss, "New High Line").<sup>11</sup> The quotation of both its older and its more recent history makes the structure an 'authentic' space, but one that is completely redesigned for completely new uses and thus may also be perceived as fake.<sup>12</sup> However, even more critical than aesthetic effects are

11 To a certain extent, this stance seems to have been there from the start of the project. In his reiteration of the development of the High Line, Hammond quotes from a comment card submitted during the exhibition of the first design competition: "The High Line should be preserved, untouched, as a wilderness area. No doubt you will ruin it. So it goes" (David and Hammond 61).

12 This reminds us of one of the basic insights concerning authenticity: "While definitions of authenticity routinely refer to its immanence and naturalness, its being found not created, recent engagements with authenticity highlight that it is necessarily the result of careful aesthetic construction that depends on the use of



the socio-economic ones, as the epigraph of this section illustrates. According to its critics, the High Line has had a tremendous economic impact on the neighborhoods it traverses. Moss criticizes how the park became a part of the Bloomberg administration's attempt to gentrify the city, and among other aspects was instrumental in the "creation of a new, upscale, corporatized stretch along the West Side. As socialites and celebrities championed the designer park during its early planning stages, whipping community support into a heady froth, the city rezoned West Chelsea for luxury development in 2005" (Moss, "Disney"). Moss' criticism touches on a phenomenon described by McGuigan in the context of urban regeneration strategies:

'elite consumption practices' in deindustrialised cities are especially salient features of what are described as culture-led regeneration strategies in a great many places. Civic boosterism and 'postmodern' festival and spectacle generally are especially congenial to the professional managerial class, renamed recently 'the creative class.' (Cultural 124)<sup>13</sup>

The aforementioned aspect of community building is central here. On the one hand, the project was built within a community formed by neighborhood residents and continues to stress this aspect to this day. On the other hand, it was the product of the cooperation of a very different kind of community, namely the political and business elite of New York City. Saving a structure like this is of course no small endeavor, nor is it cheap. Funded and facilitated by the city as well as the state of New York, aided by federal programs and considerable private donations, the High Line was developed into its present state with the help of members of the socioeconomic and political elite. Among the names prominently featured in the history of the High Line park, we find City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, socialites Lisa Maria and Philip Falcone, media executive Barry Diller and his wife, the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, deputy mayor for economic development Dan Doctoroff, actors Ethan Hawke and Edward Norton, and of course mayor Michael

identifiable techniques with the aim of achieving certain effects for certain reasons" (Funk, Groß, Huber 10).

- 13 Thomas Frank has subsumed these strategies all around the United States as a misguided struggle for "vibrancy" as a means to increase the popularity of any given city ("Dead End"). For an application of "vibrancy" to the High Line, see "The High Line and 'Vibrancy'."

Bloomberg - names one does not necessarily connect to the image of a small upstart non-profit organization.

Cultural pose and economic reality do not have to coincide, especially in New York, where it all boils down to one thing: real estate value. According to Hammond, economic advisor and urban development expert John Alschuler made it clear how to entice city officials: "parks increase the value of nearby real estate, which leads to higher property taxes, and thus the addition of a new park on the High Line could create an economic benefit for New York City" (High Line 45). And indeed, the Bloomberg- administration was convinced to preserve the High Line because they recognized that a public park would increase real estate value in the neighborhood so much that it outbalanced the costs of renovation. It comes as no surprise that already in 2000, when he was still running for mayor and the High Line park wasn't even properly planned, Bloomberg said that preserving the High Line is "a no-brainer" (David and Hammond 38, cf. Brash). The ambivalence of the High Line is also visible with the Friends of the High Line themselves, an organization somewhere between amateur community group, highly professionalized advocacy organization, and real estate developers. With two very identifiable and vocal organizers behind the entire project, the High Line seems to work well within romanticizing discourses that highlight the individual's power to create something meaningful in defiance of greater social and economic forces. Moreover, the reuse of an old structure for a non-profit park instead of land use for the development of new buildings signifies the defiance of commercial imperatives. This, however, does not mean that the organization is anti-capitalist, as Hammond freely acknowledges:

People assume that any preservation or community group is going to be anti-business, or anti-development, but we were pro-business. We recognized that the High Line was going to be good for business, and that those businesses could be our supporters. A lot of local businesses were start-ups like us. (David and Hammond 55-56)

What the Friends of the High Line accomplished, consciously or not, is to turn the structure from a real estate impediment into a catalyst. It is significant to see how real estate values on Manhattan's West Side rose in the last 10-15 years, with an increase in property value of 103 percent between 2003 and 2011 for neighboring lots (Moss, "Disney"). Quite ironically, even the Friends of the High Line "got priced out of the

Meatpacking District" during the project and had to move to another location (David and Hammond 110). The communal effort behind the High Line thus has a two-fold effect: it develops a neighborhood and potentially strengthens its identity and cohesion on a symbolic level that is indeed compatible with romantic notions of the rural; but on the economic level, it may contribute to developments that threaten the very existence of this community by driving parts of it away. Jane Jacobs once famously claimed that it is the diversity of a city that is its biggest asset (Reckwitz 284). Nowadays, projects like the High Line signify diversity and creativity, but in fact may lead to rather homogeneously affluent neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the socio-economic developments that surround the High Line remarkably fit the standard narrative of gentrification as devised by Ruth Glass (Reckwitz 289). No doubt, in the overall rapid gentrification of New York City, especially concerning Manhattan and Brooklyn, the High Line is a prominent element. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the developments that were supposedly caused or at least exacerbated by the High Line started well before the development and construction of the park, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish cause and effect here.

## VI. Conclusion

The High Line remains a thoroughly urban project, but one that draws the lines between the urban and the rural less clearly than other park projects and thus signifies a city that is less different from the country than it used to be. 'New Urbanism' is one of the catchphrases that captures the

14 Jane Jacobs is of course the big name here, and it is small wonder that Richard Florida quotes from her extensively in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. David and Hammond also point out how influential her thoughts have been in the development of the park as a space that signifies diversity (97). Fittingly, David and Hammond received the Rockefeller Foundation's Jane Jacobs Medal for the development of the High Line in 2010, an annual award for people whose work "creates new ways of seeing and understanding New York City ... and creatively uses the urban environment to make New York City a place of hope and expectation" (qtd. in Lewis). Lewis also points out how Jacobs most probably would have appreciated the creation of public space, but would also have been skeptical about the public-private partnership at the basis of the entire project.

emphasis on communal living despite urban gigantism, the appreciation of short distances, and a style of living more in line with nature. Pedestrian living over individual car traffic and sustainability over obsolescence are further corollaries. And without any doubt, one thing is missing from both the rurally inflected versions of creative cities and the relocation of young, hip urban people to a countryside now redefined as cool. Mixing country with city both in the country and the city strengthens the appeal of either space and radically foregoes the quintessential hybrid space between city and country that has been so central to the 20th century: suburbia. Rather, these developments construct versions of the middle landscape on either end of the spatial spectrum. Therefore, instead of the non-urban, non-rural middle ground of suburbia, the High Line is an example for a synthesis of the rural and the urban and constitutes one element in the constitution of such a 'middle landscape' within the city of New York.<sup>15</sup>

This, however, has to be read against its concrete socio-economic and cultural context and it has to be seen which effects this project of urban renewal will have on the neighborhoods it is situated in. Maybe the High Line's most crucial test is yet to come with the final stage of the High Line that traverses the rail yard between West 30th and West 34th street. Currently in the stage of construction, it is also the site on which the so-called "Hudson Yards" project is located, one of the biggest and most spectacular construction projects in New York City (Hudson Yards). The full integration of the High Line with this massive project directly aimed at affluent avatars of the creative economy shows how the gritty and alternative functions smoothly with contemporary capitalism - and how the rural becomes a rather conventionalized part of the city in this scheme. Thus, the High Line is a highly innovative project of urban revival, but it is something considerably different from a small-scale engendering of community structures that move beyond contemporary capitalism. In the end, the High Line emerges as a space where the rural and the urban meet to recreate American cities in the 21st century - with all of its potential, but also with all of its contradictions.

15 For a study that views suburbia as a middle landscape, see Rowe.

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