

The High Line: Model for a City or Not?

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December 10th, 2010 • 2 comments

High Line, parks, public space, recap

Wednesday night at CUNY's Graduate Center, a packed room listened to four influential people discuss whether the development of the High Line can or should be considered an exemplary or replicable model for the intersection of public and private interests in the development of a public amenity. The panel assembled for "The New York High Line: Is it a Model for the City or Not?" was comprised of a writer, the *New Yorker's* Malcolm Gladwell, one of the visionaries behind the project, *Friends of the High Line's* co-founder and president Robert Hammond, a leading expert on affordable housing and community development, the *Citizens' Housing and Planning Council's* Jerilyn Perine, and a political scientist, CUNY's own John Mollenkopf.

Mollenkopf, who directs CUNY's *Center for Urban Research*, started off the conversation by recalling the West Side of his youth and comparing his memories to the area's complete transformation today. At first, the dialogue was predictable. Mollenkopf asked the panelists to reflect on the rapid development of the park, keeping in mind that it usually takes decades for the City to adopt any project. Robert Hammond talked about the early opposition he faced from City authorities and how that galvanized early supporters to fight to build their own constituency; he also praised the Bloomberg administration for its help in building and operating the High Line and for bringing the vision to life so quickly. Malcolm Gladwell and Jerilyn Perine talked about the project as an example, on a national scale, of successful public-private partnership.

Of course, the panel pondered that universal question, What would Jane Jacobs think? Would she celebrate walking through the city on the High Line? Gladwell reminded the audience of Jacobs' mixed feelings for parks, but all three panelists guessed that she would appreciate the park as a success of adaptive reuse, a symbol of post-industrial transformation and a reminder of the inherent history of the area — even if it is a large, planned urban intervention.

Mollenkopf's next question — about how people use the High Line and how it has affected the neighborhood — prompted Hammond instantly to rattle off some facts: 2 million visitors per year, 15,000 visitors on a busy Saturday, 50% of people who visit are New Yorkers, 25% are from Europe and Japan. He mentioned that some businesses in the neighborhood said that the recession ended when the High Line opened. But beyond its appeal to tourists, he stressed that he sees the High Line as a neighborhood park with programs planned for the local community. Gladwell added that he includes the High Line in the wave of recent efforts to reclaim the city from the automobile, along with Hudson River Park and the

9th Avenue bike lane. And Perine pointed out the unique perspective of the city one gets while standing on the High Line, unlike any you can get from your apartment window.

The conversation turned towards economics when Perine raised concerns about the building and maintenance cost of the park, emphasizing that the High Line can't and shouldn't be a model for other urban parks. Though supported in great part by private money, it has also received significant public funding, while other public spaces in the city don't have enough backing even to expect regular trash collection. Economic spillover arguments are weak, she argued, maintaining that there are too many factors involved to attribute all positive effects to the High Line alone. Hammond, citing a comprehensive study that identified the statistics he mentioned, argued that parks like the High Line, which are based on public-private partnerships, actually free up city money. He also pointed out that the City's budget for parks is one half of one percent, far too little to support the City's parks no matter what. While Hammond and Perine debated, Gladwell proposed that, rather than rezone neighborhoods, we aim to curate them. For him, an engineered capacity of surprise is what a successful city of 21st century needs.

So, is it a model for a city or not? No consensus was reached, so Mollenkopf asked each panelist to name another project that inspires a certain standard of urban design. Perine referred to a number of parks in the US, including [Bloomingdale Trail](#) in Chicago, and then singled out the brilliance of German efforts at creating open spaces in postindustrial landscapes such as Emscher Park, a project she admires for its innovation and creativity at low cost. Hammond agreed and gave the example of City Nature Park in Berlin, a 30-acre park that cost about \$1.5 million. Both Perine and Hammond admire the way Europeans appreciate and adapt their industrial past while Americans have been slow to reclaim such landscapes. Perine felt that the United States' regulatory framework has not caught up with the changes happening in its socio-economic framework.

Though the discussion tended toward the many examples of how America has been inferior to Europeans in this regard, Malcolm Gladwell managed to bring the evening to an end on a positive note, celebrating that, when our cities present challenges, we can all agree to look for the potential for innovation.

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