

The Future Metropolitan Landscape

Guest-Edited by Peter Bosselmann and Deni Ruggeri

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Reuse or Abuse? Ethics in Requalification Design

Irene Curulli



The “recycling” of the ever-growing amount of abandoned land in contemporary metropolises has recently received much attention. The task of reintegrating these lands into their surroundings is particularly challenging because it requires repairing drastically altered landscapes and, at the same time, generating new activities. Furthermore, their enigmatic emptiness signals great potential.

A primary characteristic of wastelands is a certain indeterminacy of function, program and design. These are territories of transition, whose meaning is derived from association. They are forgotten places, black holes in the mental map of our cities. Yet their presence also invokes memories—real or imaginary. And they embody the inescapable passage of time, both the elapsed time of their past and the urgency of their imminent demise.¹

In many cases, regional identities are also tied to wastelands. Even when the forces that generated them are no longer viable, remnant structures retain their importance as sources of identity, such as in the bypassed port cities of Antwerp and Genoa.

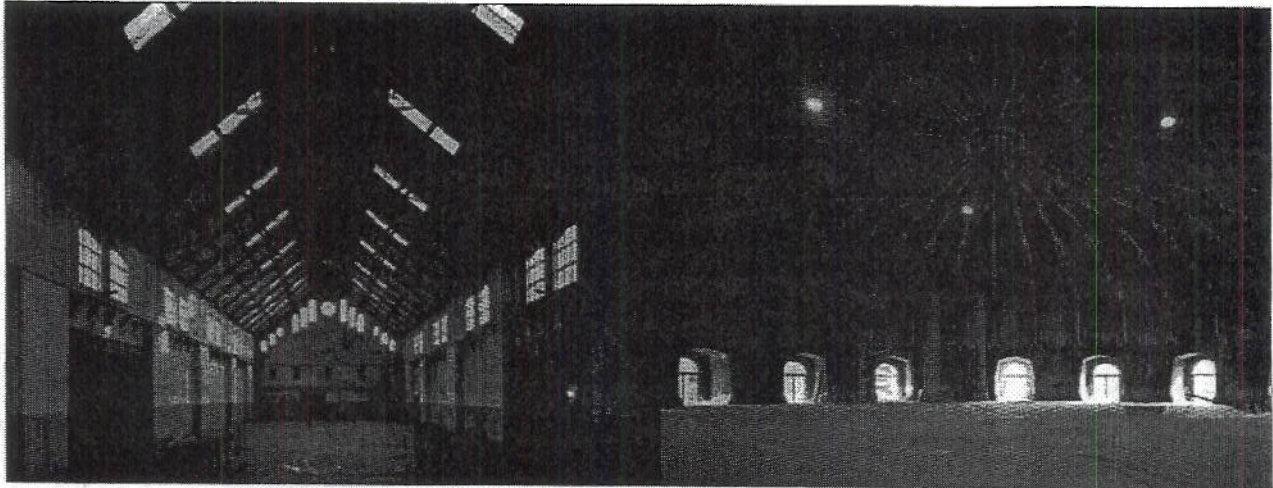
What does “recycling” these territories mean? Recent design trends emphasize the superficial facelift, “painting” them green and cramming them with new commercial

functions. But using old churches for bike storage and turning garbage dumps into sports parks raises questions of appropriateness. Camouflaging an abandoned site with a festive facade merely hides the causes of its abandonment, and fails to reconcile our sense of guilt.

True recycling changes perceptions and restructures judgment. Through provocation, it exposes the hidden value of the obsolete. It engages memory without nostalgia—but with distortion. It is a process that preserves essence without seeking to create a polished new product. Recycling allows inventiveness and creative manipulation. When the underlying strengths of a site are embraced, reuse can involve the most innovative proposals.

The issue of the ethics of recycling abandoned landscapes derives from research I started five years ago.² And the model I now propose focuses on process rather than product and welcomes new uses and dynamics while being respectful of the past. Several recent projects help illustrate the issues involved in developing such a framework.

Above: Hellenikon airport area, Athens, Greece. Photo by B. Strootman.



Product or Potential

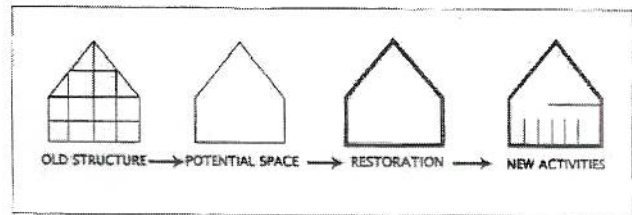
Recently, the site of a contaminated gas factory in Amsterdam, the Westergasfabriek, was completely rebuilt. The result of this particular transformation highlights the dire need for an ethics of reuse.

After a fifteen-year planning process, the winning design, by Kathryn Gustafson, transformed the site into a comfortable English-style park.³ Yet, what is left of the past? The interiors of old industrial buildings at what is now known as Westerpark have been cleared. Instead of enhancing the structures through design, they have been scrubbed of their past so that they can provide efficient, pristine envelopes for future, undefined cultural activities.

Is this truly reuse? Instead of continuation and evolution, all embedded potential has been washed away, removed, or covered up. There is no resilience or adaptability in such a new finished product. To remember here is not to make the past present, but to build anew.

Compare this with the reclamation of the open-pit coal mine of the Brikettfabrik Witznitz on the outskirts of Leipzig. Faced with uncertainty about the long-term ecological consequences of mining and the potential difficulty of attracting new uses to the site, the scheme by Florian Beigel Architects consists of a “mining garden” to enhance the attractiveness of the site for future developers and investors.⁴

The design features a series of activity fields that in their openness to unpredictable uses are the tangible expression



of the idea of indeterminacy. If development doesn't take place, the city will still have a garden for people to enjoy. This is a process-oriented scheme where at any point the development may stop or continue without detrimental consequences to the original vision.

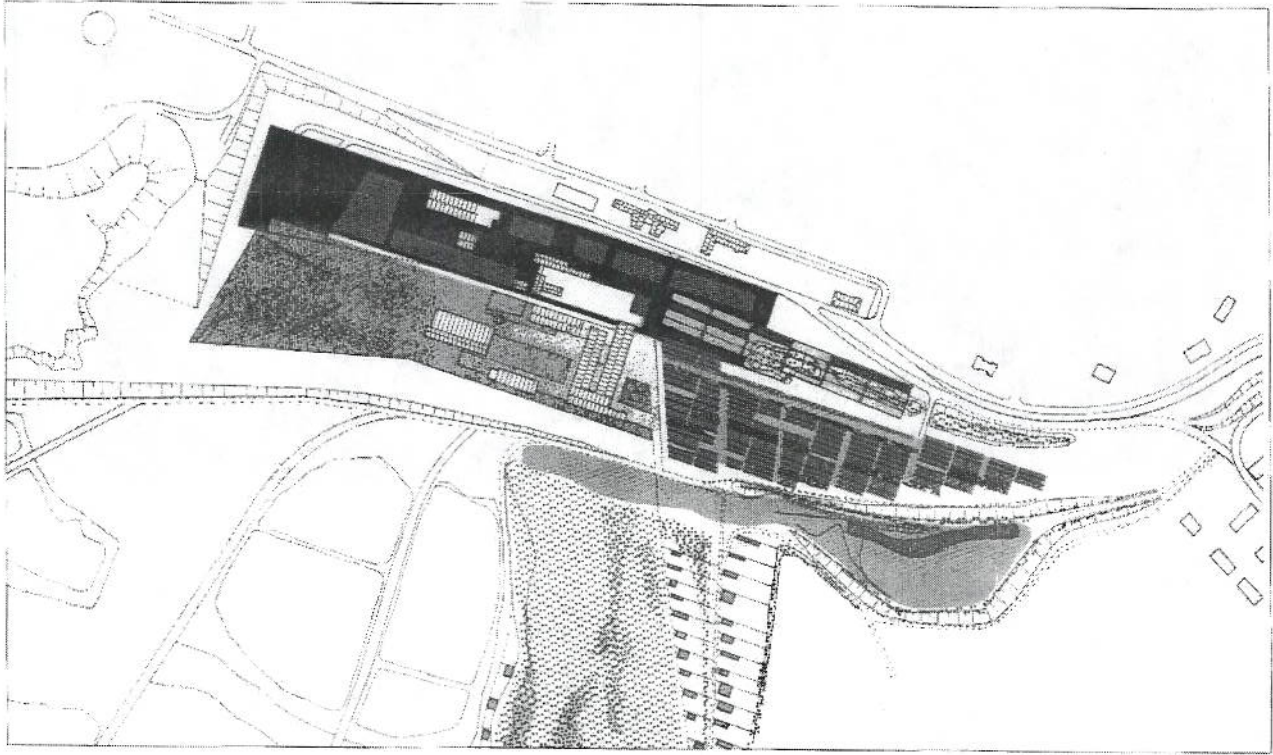
Such designs illustrate the difference between two types of reuse—one that transforms the old into a new product, another that maintains the potential of the old without committing to a predetermined solution.

Effective Divestment

Such projects also raise issues of “divestment” and “recovery.”⁵ Recovery implies historical reconstruction based on research on a specific time period. Divestment strategically erases traces of human presence on a site. Depending on the design strategy, divestment can result in a loss of essence, or, if done correctly, reveal new design possibilities. Two buildings in the same abandoned area on the west side of Zurich—Schiffbau and Puls 5—illustrate this fine distinction.

Originally a ship-machinery yard, the Schiffbau has been converted by Ortner & Ortner Baukunst GmbH into a

Above: Transformation of the old industrial buildings in the Culture Park Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam, 2005.



meeting space and theater hall.⁶ Through their design, the essence of the building is preserved, and divestment creates a subtle, revelatory effect.

Elsewhere on the site, a former metal foundry, Puls 5, has been converted into a shopping mall. However, to create extra volume, KGP Kyncl Architekten wrapped the original structure in a milky-glass curtain to create a second building skin.⁷ Office spaces and housing have also been built on top of the existing structure. From the outside, the building looks completely new; inside, only a few steel columns remain from the old structure, exposed as entry decorations in an otherwise modern shopping environment.

This represents “dressing-up” of architecture, rather than divestment. Effective divestment implies selective removal of the past to allow introduction of new elements that create distortion and drama, activating the potential of continuing transformation.

Appropriateness of New Programs

These projects point to an important question. How should the introduction of new programs affect an abandoned site or building?

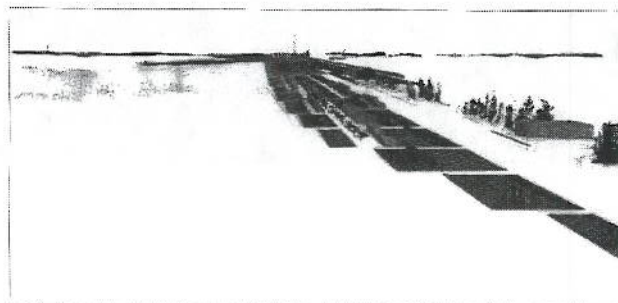
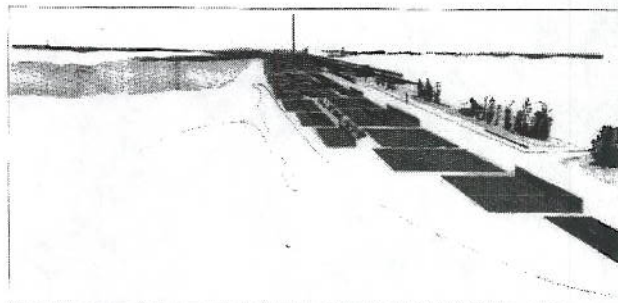
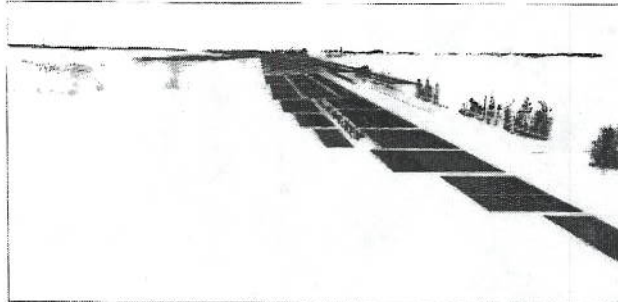
Consider, for example, the former dock area of Amsterdam, where a project by Kees Christiaanse Architects and Planners creates a “train of buildings” along the water that interlock and overhang three existing warehouses.⁸

From the urban point of view, the placement of the new volumes has destroyed the openness of the area, and the experience of the nearby waterfront is nearly obliterated.

From the architectural point of view, the warehouses have lost their autonomous presence, and their reprogramming (offices, apartments) fails to understand the generosity of space that the old buildings presented a priori. Large spaces have been subdivided into tiny units to gain more rentable space and to maximize profit.

Industrial buildings or abused landscapes are not empty containers or “blank” surfaces where “anything is possible.” In dealing with reuse, designers must understand the unique character of the given and how association with new programs should revive or enrich it.

Above: Brikettfabrik Witznitz: Plan of architectural landscape of activity fields. Design by f.beigel+architecture research unit. Competition stage two, drawing, October 1996.

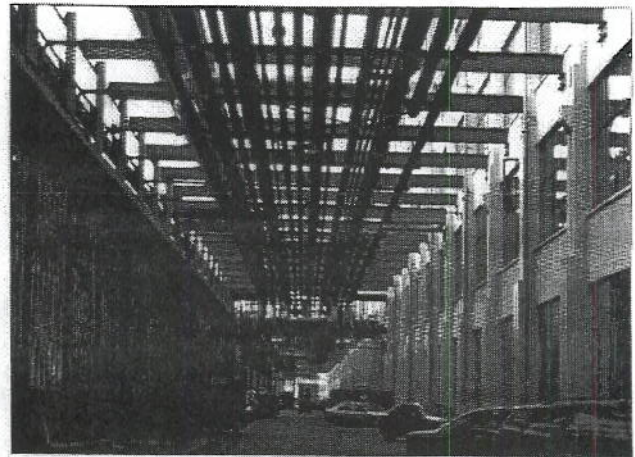


Pride of Rhetoric

So far I have considered three topics for a code of reuse. One might think of them as planned indeterminacy; the importance of memory (without nostalgia) and changes of perception; and the appropriateness of new programs to old spatial qualities. It is also important not to impose new forms of design rhetoric on the past.

Left: Briketfabrik Witznitz: View of the market gardening field. From top to bottom: short-term scenario with fruit orchards and narrow and long plots for horticultural cultivation; medium-term scenario with narrow and long plots for horticultural cultivation and infrastructural walls between plots; longer-term scenario with narrow and long plots used to build a carpet of patio houses built between long garden walls. Drawings by Marta Bayona Mas, ARU, September 1997.

Right: Strijp S: plans call for an existing "pipe street" to be demolished.



The strategically located Strijp S industrial area of Eindhoven was formerly occupied by a Philips Electronics factory. In 2000 West 8 proposed transforming this site, once known as the "forbidden city," into a round-the-clock living place and "creative heart" for the southern Netherlands.⁹ The plan features a green avenue as the main axis of alignment for a series of "icon buildings." However, it fails to acknowledge the nature of existing obsolete structures and landscapes, ignoring their potential for reuse. Instead, completely polished surfaces and normalized spaces create typified areas that force a new architectural image onto the site.

Why the need of such a statement that sets up a competition between existing and new? The decay of the old structures, a kind of ugliness we experience as beauty, is not accepted as a quality of place.¹⁰ There is no adaptation, no recycling. Rather than suggesting a free appropriation of place, revitalization seems to proceed according to a kind of amnesia for existing buildings and landscape qualities.

Will the Strijp S project really miss such a powerful reuse opportunity? Designers should not forget how abandoned places hold special qualities of attraction. Incremental design schemes that retain the best qualities of the given while infusing entirely new and innovative elements are the best response.

A Design Code for Abandoned Sites

The design approaches I discuss may provide a general code, but the designer will always be responsible for interpretation. This means searching for specificity of context, using materials that incorporate the history of place, and recording the past while building an identity for the future.

Above all, the crucial value of design for progressive reuse



lies not in creating new finished products but in a process of elaboration and an openness to diverse interpretations.

Wastelands can be revived and transformed from derelict to desirable, from unsuitable to suitable, from past to future. But this needs to be done without abusing them. We must learn to observe, feel and listen to place. We must see the potential of a site and be careful not to create the garbage of tomorrow.

Notes

1. On this topic, see M.S. Roth, C. Lyons, and C. Merewether, eds., *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1997).
2. The research described here was made possible through a Cornell University fellowship.
3. For details on the park, see http://www.westergasfabriek.com/engels_welcome.php. For the design competition, see VVAA, "Een park voor de 21ste eeuw, vijf visie voor de Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam," Uitgeverij Thoth, Bussum, 1998.
4. For details on the design, see Florian Beigel Architects, Brikettfabriek Witznitz, Leipzig, in *2G International Architecture Review* 3 (1997), issue on "Landscape Architecture," pp. 88-95.
5. As in N. Gregson and L. Crewe, "Transformations: Commodity Recovery, Redefinition, Divestment and Re-enchantment," in N. Gregson and L. Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 143-72.
6. For details of the design, see <http://www.ortner.at/schl.html>. Also see http://www.schauspielhaus.ch/www/160_479.asp; and <http://www.schauspielhaus.ch/www/160.asp> (with downloads).
7. For details of the design, see <http://www.kgp-architekten.ch>; and http://www.puls5.ch/wohnen_arbeiten/projektetails/architektur.html.
8. For details of the design, see <http://www.keap.nl/indexfinal.html> (see Oostelijke Handelskade, Amsterdam).
9. For details of the design, see West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture, "Definitief ontwerp stedenbouw Strijp S Eindhoven," January 2004 (submission booklet of definite design to Municipality). Also see <http://www.parkstrijp.nl/hetplan.htm>; and <http://www.strijp-s.nl/nieuws.php/downloads>.
10. As in R. Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable: In Pursuit of Architectural Meaning* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

Images courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

Above: Strijp S: the plan fails to explore reuse of an existing "white spine" of buildings along a proposed new "green avenue."



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To Rally Discussion: The Chelsea High Line

Hugh Hardy, FAIA

New Yorkers are known for their aggressive and pragmatic view of the world, but their countervailing romantic outlook is seldom recognized. When a place, such as Times Square, reaches the apogee of commercialism, rather than acknowledge its raw commitment to pushing products, they romanticize its electric splendor and call it “the Crossroads of the World.” Although the commercial structures of downtown Manhattan have been built as a random jumble of towers and boxes that compete with one another for height and corporate identity, the public voices concern about new development’s “effect on the skyline.” They believe these existing buildings represent a sacred profile that defines the city, instead of representing the venal results of marketplace dominance.

It is in the city’s parks where New Yorkers’ pragmatic and romantic sides most obviously confront one another. A balance between recreation and contemplation is not easily achieved, and with the advent of private entities operating public city parks, the tussle between commercial and noncommercial uses of parkland becomes intense. Add to this struggle the desire to prove the urban environment can offer a progressive forum for solving environmental problems, and you get passionate public debate. Converting the Chelsea High Line for public use has been no less contentious, and resulted in a multiphased design-team selection process administered by Friends of the High Line and the City of New York.

This redefinition of what were once elevated freight-train tracks from a utilitarian right-of-way to a community amenity is taking place during a time of a great change on the West Side of Manhattan. After decades of inertia, developers are converting vacant lots and warehouses into new high-rise housing, and property adjoining the High Line itself is undergoing major transformation, with unpredictable results. All this requires a plan of considerable flexibility.

At ground level, the High Line’s 1.5 miles of elevated, linear structure pass overhead without attracting much notice, bridging streets with beefy steel frames. On top, however, an astonishing vista appears, as the former trackbed glides through the city independent of its street grid. A remarkable metamorphosis occurs here, as the traffic roar and the city’s noise abate. Built to sustain heavy loads, the structure has survived without maintenance since the 1930s and also now sprouts a healthy growth of weeds, which offer a tempting alternative to conventional ideas of parkland.

As set out in the High Line competition the challenge of converting this space involved a number of tasks: proposing a vision that could be realized incrementally; exercising

environmental awareness; offering access in all seasons of the year; and considering what happens underneath as well as on top. In their responses, the design proposals of the four finalists were quite different. One promoted nature over structure (TerraGRAM Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates with D.I.R.T. Studio and Beyer Blinder Belle). Another was more concerned with built form (Zaha Hadid). The two others (Steven Holl with Hargreaves Associates and HNTB, and Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro) better balanced the natural world with the physical structure to produce a sequence of places for varied activities. The latter team’s winning entry, in particular, represented a thorough series of alternative environments with multiple access points that could be realized in phases.

Stephen Holl Architects with Hargreaves Associates and HNTB

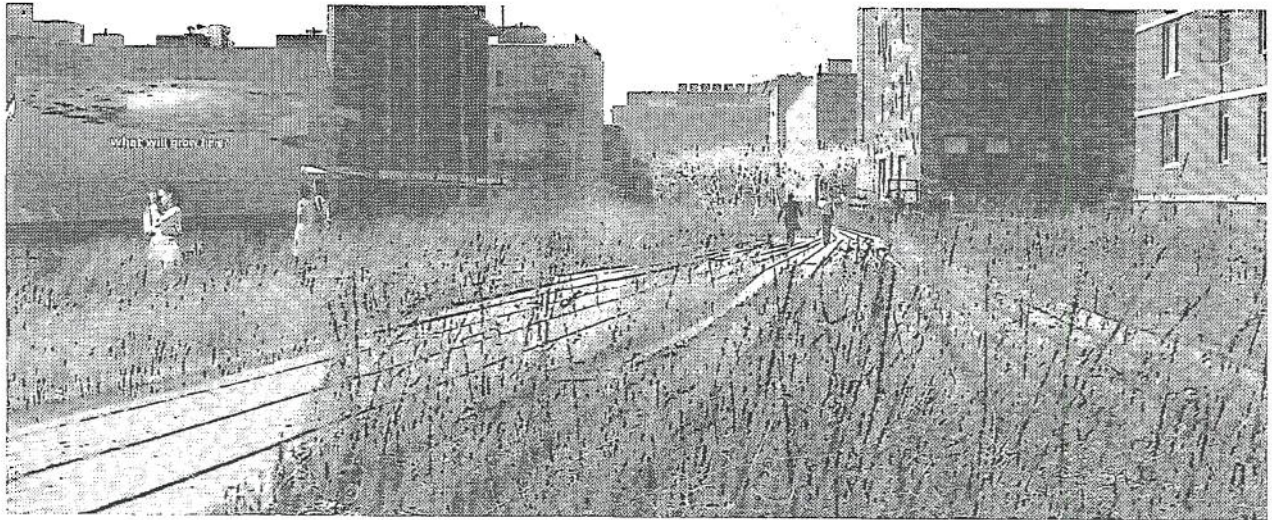
This design connected the High Line with the Hudson River, giving access from the water inland as well as leading from the new park to the river. It addressed the experience of being underneath the roadway by both opening up portions to the sky and illuminating others with LED programming. A series of incidental landscape events, some temporary, enlivened the length of the structure on top, using the existing roadway as a base. Contemporary artists were included, to respond to various community uses. This proposal enjoyed an ad hoc character, implying that the place will change over time, adapting to different activities — some not yet imagined. An ambitious groundwater treatment plant was also included to filter and recycle water for use in the park and the neighborhood.

TerraGRAM Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates with D.I.R.T. Studio and Beyer Blinder Belle

Taking a more matter-of-fact approach, this team was more concerned with giving the structure back to nature, encouraging the growth of forests, meadows, and grassland along the roadbed. Staircases and elevators would bring visitors up to the trackbed level, where nature would take over. Recommending techniques that apply to cleaning up “brown fields” instead of superimposing a new identity, this proposal worked directly with the existing nature of the place.

Zaha Hadid Architects

The existing structure was to be used as an armature for a totally new environment. A ribbon-like curvilinear structure made of an unknown material would wrap around the High Line’s steel bridges. It would create changes in spatial



volumes along the roadway, but remain a consistent, seamless whole. Experimental art organizations would be given places to explore their ideas, and the general nature of the result would unfold as something in direct contrast with the surrounding urban environment, making new public spaces for “the everyday life of local residents.” More a built intervention than a landscape solution, this proposal to a large extent ignored the natural world.

Field Operations with Diller Scofidio + Renfro

The winning design proposed a systems approach that layered various types of places with different natural environments to create a rich series of experiences. Perhaps offering the greatest variety of spaces, the proposal included a thoughtful combination of physical and natural components. Its physical elements included pit, plains, bridge, mound, ramp, and flyover, while the natural environments were marshland, tall meadow, wetland, woodland thicket, mixed perennial meadow, and young woodland. All these places and ecologies would be connected by an angled series of boardwalks along the length of the composition, offering a diversity of access points.

A lively panel discussion and presentation of the four schemes was held with the designers at the Center for

Architecture. It was a sold-out success, proving that New York benefits from the public’s interest in the design of communal places. Although the winning scheme will take time to realize, its flexibility permits phased implementation that will, over time, bring a novel amenity to public life in New York.

The chosen solution seems to strike a balance between recreation and contemplation, public and private, commercial and noncommercial, urban and environmental. The public’s newfound interest and participation in the city’s design is well served at the Center for Architecture, with a mini-exhibition that encapsulates New Yorkers’ penchant for both confrontation and romance.

Editors’ Note: *Places* first reported on the High Line in the Fall of 2001 (Vol. 14, No. 2), when we published a portfolio of photographs of this remarkable urban space by Joel Sternfeld. Since the above commentary on the design competition was written, the city has signed a contract with Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro to produce a master plan, and it has committed \$43 million in capital funding for the project.

Above: The winning High Line proposal imagines an elevated landscape interweaving places of activity with a variety of natural environments. Competition images courtesy of Friends of the High Line.

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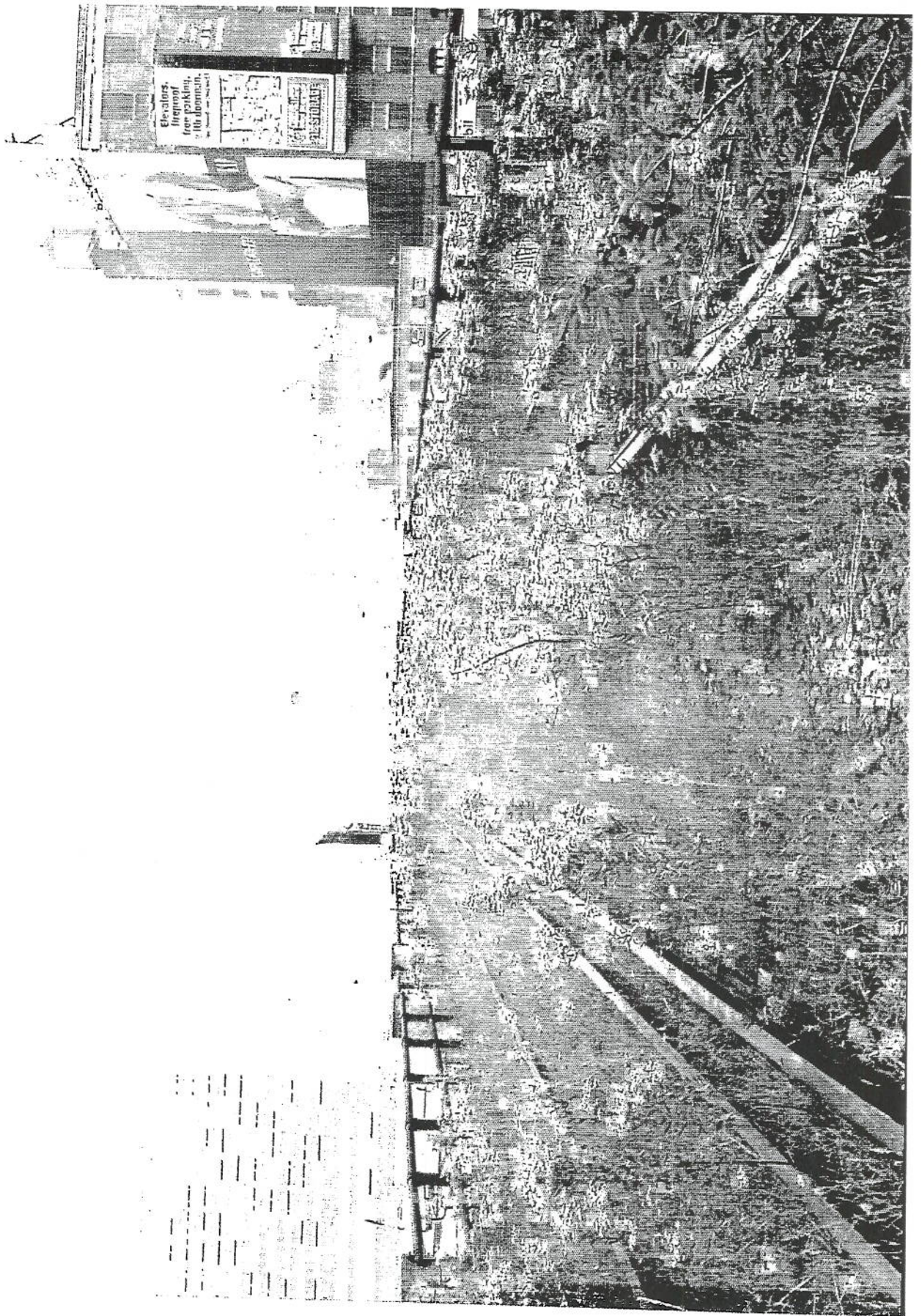
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The High Line

Photographs by Joel Sternfeld

The former New York Central Railroad elevated freight route that runs through the west side of lower Manhattan has the potential for being an unusual public amenity. Now owned by the city, the Chelsea High Line is a once-utilitarian structure that has become, although raised thirty feet in the air and neglected, a recreational walkway. It wanders through the city street grid with the same quirky assurance as Broadway, offering unusual vantage points from which to view and discover the surrounding city.

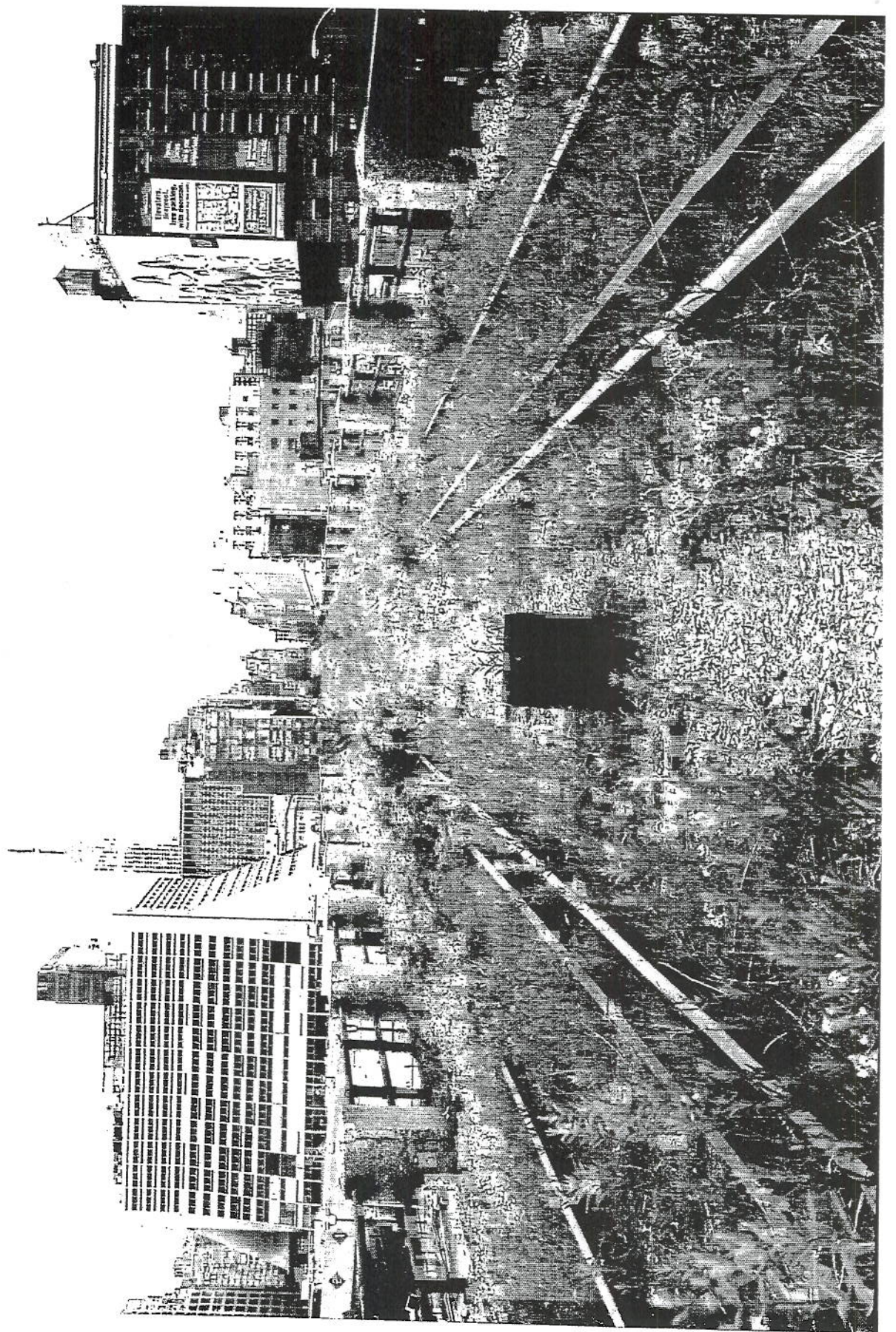
11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east. Spring



Photographer Joel Sternfeld has been documenting this mile-and-a-third long aerie for several years. He began when the Canadian Centre for Architecture, familiar with his work photographing the Campagna Romana, asked him to explore the area in conjunction with an urban design competition it was organizing for the West Side Rail Yards, around which the High Line loops.

Viewers of Sternfeld's pictures are often drawn to the layering and juxtapositions of urban form that being a few stories above street level reveals. But Sternfeld is just as apt to take pleasure in the unexpected layering and juxtaposition of time that one encounters in a place that has been largely left fallow in the midst of an ever-changing city. There is the cycling of seasons; the lethargy of a littered beer bottle that Sternfeld rediscovers, untouched, months after he first photographs it; the bushes blossoming in front of a sign for a defunct dot-com business painted on the wall of a building; a tended garden near a wild glade of allianthus.

11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Summer



The question of what kind of public amenity this place might be does not have a simple answer. The owners of the property through which the viaduct passes would just as soon have it torn down. Some observers believe this industrial artifact can generate distinctive recreational and commercial life along its route. The success of such a project would depend upon a partnership between public and private organizations, perhaps in creating a non-profit entity to operate this uncommon resource. To that end, a growing number of civic leaders and design professionals have lent their support to a non-profit group, Friends of the High Line, which is advocating that the structure be retained, refurbished and returned to the people of the city as singular open space.

11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Fall



Sternfeld has a subtler, potentially bolder, vision. He would like to see the High Line remain as it is—less in the spirit of Paris' Promenade Plantée, more in the spirit of a "railroad ruin" or a "time landscape," as he puts it. It is possible to find other time landscapes in a city such as New York, but none that offer the same quixotic combination of detachment and engagement—qualities that suffice Sternfeld's carefully studied, carefully controlled, views.

—*Todd W. Bressi and Haggb Hardy*

11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Winter

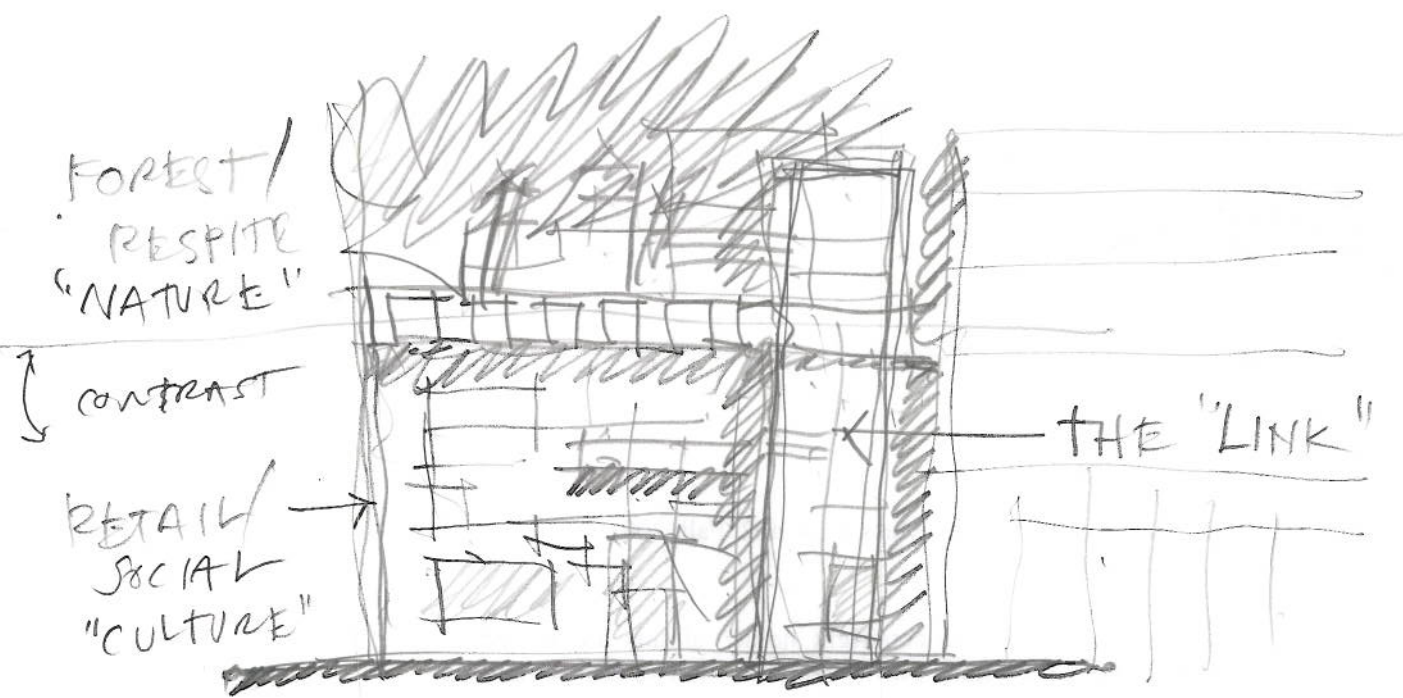


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