

Facing the Future:

Dreams, Denial, and Compromise in the Contemporary City

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Synopsis:

This dissertation explores contemporary approaches to public space. My focus here is New York City; within it, the redeveloped Times Square, a new public park called the High Line, and proposals for the future of the World Trade Center. The starting premise is a personal belief that our world, and therefore our cities, are undergoing great change. This has provoked a profound existential uncertainty; as a result, our collective identity is newly insecure and needs re-forging. This dissertation investigates how our urban form responds to this insecurity, what it imagines for our new identity, and therefore what it conveys about our present one. The role of photographic and cinematographic media is explored in the process.

The first public space I discuss is Times Square. Jumping past its complex history, my focus is on its present form, given recent additions of the ruby-red TKTS booth and pedestrian plazas. Times Square takes a selective, and therefore anxious, approach to the future: attempting to harness new computer technologies for profit while resolutely maintaining the status quo. Its response to the world-in-transition employs coping mechanisms, notably consumption and aestheticisation of the city, in order to retreat from its overwhelming reality. My second focus is the High Line, an ultra contemporary (still unfinished!) public space. Its response to our changing world is to evolve indefinitely, and to forge our new collective identity by healing the wounds of the past. Most importantly, it seeks to bring about the future by compromising in the present: by catapulting (but attempted to control) the gentrification of surrounding neighbourhoods in order to retain its own integrity, public spirit, and imagination. My third focus is on the World Trade Center, a public space still raw with emotion. Though its actual redevelopment responds to the change with fear and denial, the many imaginative proposals that have emerged reflect a great optimism, viewing the future with possibility, and creating the fantasies that harness it. These three cases reveal a mix of dreaming, denial, and compromise in contemplating the city of tomorrow.

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Synopsis:

This dissertation explores our contemporary approaches to the urban environment through the lens of public space. My focus here is New York; within it: the redeveloped Times Square, a new public park called the High Line, and proposals for the future of the World Trade Center site. My starting point is a personal belief that our world, and therefore our cities, are in the midst of a great transformation. This transformation engenders a shared existential insecurity, and necessitates a re-forging of collective identity. I explore how our urban form both responds to this insecurity, and what it imagines and conveys for our new identity. The role of photographic and cinematographic media is explored in this process.

The first public space I will discuss is Times Square. Jumping past its complex history, my focus is on its present form, given recent additions of the ruby-red TKTS booth and pedestrian plazas. It takes a selective, and therefore anxious, approach to the future, attempting to harness the new computer technologies for profit while resolutely maintaining the status quo. Its response to the world-in-transition employs coping mechanisms, especially consumption and aestheticisation of the city in order to retreat from its overwhelming reality. The second case I study is the High Line, a very contemporary (still unfinished!) public space. Its response to our changing world is in 'perpetually becoming' and its attempt to change through compromise. It has catapulted (but attempted to control) the gentrification of surrounding neighbourhoods in order to retain its own integrity, public spirit, and imagination. It attempts to forge our new collective identity by healing the wounds of the past. My third focus is on the World Trade Center, a public space still raw with emotion. Though its actual redevelopment responds to the changing world with a mixture of fear and denial, the multitude of imaginative proposals for it reflects a great optimism that sees potential for the future, and produces the fantasies that capture it. These three cases reveal a mix of dreaming, denial, and compromise in contemplating the future of tomorrow.

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Conclusion

Introduction

Change is afoot. The violence of the neoliberal era has come to light; its ideology is waning. In many ways our world is spiralling ever more out of control, and though many still bury their heads in the sand, seeds of optimism have emerged to tackle it. This dissertation takes as its basis this world-in-transition, and seeks to identify its central characteristics by analysing three examples of contemporary public space. In the emerging world, cities will play a greater role than ever before—public space has become the site of coping with, ignoring, and attempting to harness this transformation. Public space represents our collective hopes, fears, anxieties, and fantasies about the future; as such, understanding the nature of public space can lend insight into our collective self. Ultimately, this dissertation asks “who are we now? Who are we becoming? How are we shaping our world?”

I have chosen New York as my focal city for several reasons. Firstly, as a New Yorker, it is a city I know and love. My home-grown perspective gives me not only first-hand experience of the public spaces I discuss, but implicates me personally in its future as a city. I care deeply about New York. I hope it shows. Secondly, New York has been, and still is, a global magnet, a true *cosmopolis*. The architects who imagine it come from far-flung corners of the earth. It is at its best, a beacon for the world. So it is also at its worst. New York and the United States have been pivotal players in the brutal spread of neoliberalism; I hope we can lead the efforts to curtail the mass poverty, indifference, and brutality that has come in its wake. Though there are many who still champion the policies of tunnel-vision accumulation and self-interest, and many who remain unaware or unquestioning of its devastation, there are signs that a change is coming. Change is messy, change is slow, change involves compromise. That much we have learned from the past.

And change brings insecurity. An underlying theme here is the presence of a profound existential anxiety over the character of our present and past worlds, and the future we know is inevitably coming. There is uncertainty over how to shape our identity,

both collective and individual, in the face of transformations. The causes of this anxiety are many, but all rooted in the sense that our world is bigger and more complex than any of us can conceive. This is fundamentally linked to the advent of digital technologies, which as Elizabeth Grosz says, “threaten to disrupt and refigure the very nature of information and communication, as well as the nature of space, time, community, and identity”.¹ They, and the changes they bring, are not only beyond our control but are transforming our very *perception* of the world, “the way that bodies are conceived, their sphere of imaginary and lived representation”.² The resulting existential anxiety is expected, and manifests itself in our public spaces.

Yet there is considerable optimism: all three cases I look at reveal a new understanding of change, which entails a broader historical awareness, sensitivity to context, and tolerance (and appreciation) of diversity. There is increasing acceptance of forces beyond our control, of our own mortality, and that our public spaces must imbue change in order to stand the test of time. Contemporary public space takes as its mantra evolution, or “perpetually becoming”, choosing to set guidelines for indefinite growth, and thereby render us relevant in an increasingly transient world. It is the first of two characteristics of contemporary public space, linked through our underlying existential anxiety, that have emerged from writing this dissertation. The second is what I call the *aestheticisation* of the urban realm. This is informed by photographic theory, particularly Roland Barthes and more recent theories on digital photography and virtuality. Photographic theory has lead me to believe that the advent of Photography marked a radical change in our perception of the world, the nature of vision, and therefore of understanding. Its digitalisation has taken it one step further, the consequences of which we are currently living. Central to this changed perception is the relationship between the subject and the object. With Photography, the subject first saw itself as object. With

¹ Grosz, Elizabeth, 2001, “Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space”, MIT Press: Cambridge—London. pg. 51

² *Ibid.*, pg. 52

digitalisation, we invest an equal (or greater) part of our subject *in* the object-image of ourselves. This is illustrated by the feverish rise of new media such as Facebook and our addiction to digital cameras, both of which help us construct object-identities that we believe, through our stubborn belief in photographic realism, are somehow windows onto our ‘true’ selves. I believe this investment in our object-selves is a coping mechanism for the increasingly virtual, ephemeral nature of our world. We attempt to create stable effigies of ourselves that we believe holds some piece of our identity; as such, we are not so mortal, not so fragile, not so irrelevant as this new world constantly reminds us. That these effigies lie in mutable technology is clearly ironic, and amplifies our insecurity.

The omnipresence of images and our increasing investment in the object-world has resulted in a shift in our perception. Fundamentally, however, an image is an image, and its nature as *aesthetic* rather than *embodied* necessitates its consumption in a detached, passive manner.³ The experience of it is lived by its own set of rules. My argument here is that as our identity becomes experienced along these same rules, so do aspects of our real, embodied experience, in which our subject still resides. Here embodied experience is analysed as urban experience—that of the city which has become aestheticised, in its fears and fantasies of the future, and the image it presents of the present.

The outpouring of creativity post 9/11 has triggered a new optimism, which when stunted at the site, has sprouted in other New York projects, notably the newly remade Brooklyn Bridge Park and the current exhibition at the MoMA, *Rising Currents*.¹ Such proposals are, though highly idealistic, not utopian. They accept the grim realities of the world and attempt to respond to them with a positive, creative, and progressive spirit. The future they imagine is one I look forward to living in.

³ Though of course it necessitates various physical ‘bodies’ such as chemically treated paper or pixelated screen to convey it, and a visual appearance, normally understood as ‘reality’. As Barthes says, a photograph is not “immediately or generally distinguishable from its referent”, Barthes, Roland, 2000, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, pg. 5

I: Times Square

Times Square has always been a contested space. Spun with the yarn of mythology, it has been the perpetual urban emblem of America's fantasy about itself—from its reputation as a dazzling strip of bright lights and jazz hands, to its darker corners of rampant lust and pacts with the devil. A contradictory, messy, and symbolically charged place, it has consistently provided a canvas for the desires of the capitalist dream. Today, these desires provide the coping mechanisms for deep-rooted existential anxiety. The redeveloped Times Square, initiated to cure a perceived diseased and morally threatening urban core, represents a new experience of public space, based in consumption and a detached, aestheticising experience of the city.

Rebecca Robertson, director of the 42nd Street Development Project from 1987 to 1997, has attributed the failure of previous development proposals to an 'absence of vision'; the final plan, hatched by her coalition in 1991, was carefully constructed, presented, and disseminated—an effective 'branding' of place—that succeeded in attracting investment to the area. The 42nd Street Development Project set the course for the new Times Square in seeking to "[preserve] its raucous energy while removing the danger".⁴ Their six design principles aim to orchestrate the 'essence' of Times Square, defined as, "aesthetics, chaos, layers, un-planning, juxtapositions, icon".⁵ This schema was supported by the state's strategy concerning the area, which sought to "reorient the plan towards entertainment; develop and implement an aesthetic vision for the block that shouted chaos and dazzle and would make the street as recognisable as the Statue of Liberty".⁶ Architect Robert AM Stern, who had served on the board of the Disney

⁴Foreword', Balfour, Alan, 2001, *World Cities—New York*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., pg. 51,

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Robertson, Rebecca, 'The Remaking of 42nd Street', in Balfour, Alan 2001, *Ibid.*, pg. 206

Corporation, was chosen to construct a framework within which the site would develop ‘naturally’—meaning, along the prescribed guidelines.

Whether it is the consumption of Rogers and Hammerstein and bootlegged liquor in its ‘golden era’, or of cheap films, hot dogs, gay sex, and crack cocaine in its ‘decline’, Times Square has always been a site of consumption, legitimate and otherwise. With the successive luring-in of the Disney Corporation, Madame Tussaud’s and media giants Reuters and Condé Nast, corporate takeover was tinted with a veneer of family friendly entertainment, giving the area the millenium’s take on ‘razzle-dazzle’—pre-packaged, familiar, and easier than ever to consume. The redevelopment of Times Square has amplified its tradition as a site of consumption, but sought to eradicate all forms the neoliberal regime finds morally unacceptable. The newest form of consumption in this space is the unfolding spectacle of Times Square itself. Long famous for its spectacle, notably in its prohibition-era theatres and bright signage, the nostalgia for this ‘golden era’, combined with the prescribed ‘entertainment’ and ‘chaos’ of its redevelopment, have aggrandised and redefined spectacle in contemporary Times Square. Today, its urban space is not just *home* to spectacle, it and its crowds have *become* the spectacle. The new TKTS booth in Times Square exemplifies this; as Dunlap says, the developers of the new TKTS booth “have finally provided the bleachers that make it possible to take in this spectacle”.⁷ In 1963, Guy Debord proclaimed that, “all that was once directly lived has become a mere representation”⁸. Consumption in Times Square is indeed *all-consuming*; its role in the redevelopment of one of the most symbolically significant public spaces is indicative of the changing nature of the public, from a politicised to a consuming one, and as previously posited, acts as a coping mechanism for the underlying existential anxiety resulting from our newly transient, high-speed world.

⁷ Dunlap, David W., October 17th 2008, “Atop the New TKTS Both, Ruby-Red Stairs With a View of the Great White Way”, *New York Times*

⁸ Debord, Guy, 1994, *The Society of Spectacle*, MIT Press, Cambridge—London, pg. 12

Indirectly, the experience of Times Square as spectacle is now increasingly mediated through photographic and cinematographic images—all across the globe people experience Times Square through its representations. These images play a vital role in generating the ‘mythology’ essential to its success.⁹ An outstanding example of this is Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’ new music video for their track, *Empire State of Mind*. Topping the charts, this ode to New York has achieved cult status in pop culture. The new TKTS booth has its cameo appearance here, revealing its role as ‘icon’, and a key symbol in the promotion of Times Square—New York’s own scarlet, floating pyramid. The video symbolically unites male and female icons of the city to illustrate the birth of a new world.ⁱⁱ Associating Times Square with an urban renaissance and a remade Garden of Eden, it reinforces the mythology of New York with the new Times Square at its heart, exemplifying the dominant experience of Times Square as sold and consumed through its representation/myth rather than reality.

An underlying theme of the contemporary experience of Times Square is its passive, detached nature. The conversion of urban experience from acting to observing, from active to passive, signifies a dominant shift in our engagement with the city. As in the experience of Times Square as spectacle, contemporary theoretical discussions of the picturesque and the sublime can serve to further illustrate experiencing the urban through a detached gaze.¹⁰ The picturesque in relation to public space is understood here as an *aestheticising* tool which “gives license to edit, to refuse to see, to deny.”¹¹ As such, the picturesque renders comprehensible an incomprehensible urban fabric, giving the viewer a sense of control. The redevelopment of Times Square was explicitly designed along the

⁹ Robertson’s term and goal of redevelopment: “A necessary planning goal—generating mythology: Planning for a mythic place is like making an ‘art’ movie. In the long run, its success [is] in becoming part of the collective consciousness”, Robertson, Rebecca, in Balfour, Alan 2001, *op.cit*

¹⁰ Here I take Richard Williams’s discussion of the picturesque in *The Anxious City* as my basis

¹¹ Williams, Richard, 2004, *The Anxious City: English urbanism in the late twentieth century*, Routledge, London—New York, pg. 30

lines of the picturesque. As Rebecca Robertson says, it took as its basis the “analogy... with the English garden which (unlike the French formal garden) is planted and then cultivated as it grows, producing wild and random vistas. It is prodded, not forced.” The picturesque English garden was planted in a way that emulated “the free and adventurous march of nature, to the exciting variety of its tableaux, to the richness and charms of its scenes”.¹² Variety was said to be the key element that would stir the imagination and emotions of the viewer; in Times Square’s redevelopment ‘variety’ was substituted with ‘chaos’. The method of creating this urban garden was planned along the lines of ‘layering’, ‘unplanning’, ‘contradiction and surprise’, and ‘visual anchors’. Layers included “layers of time, layers of ideas, layers of signs”, which would induce a collage-effect, enabling “42nd Street [to] show its age lines, reminding us of its history”.¹³ ‘Contradiction and surprise’ was to be orchestrated through Times Square’s perceived essence of entertainment, and by assigning its space to a multiplicity of uses in order to preserve its spontaneity. Signage here played a crucial role: “chaos was also encouraged in the signage, where developers were prohibited from any kind of coordinated design and were required to provide at least five kinds using at least three different techniques or signage types”.ⁱⁱⁱ¹⁴ Lastly, Robertson identifies ‘visual anchors’ as part of the redevelopment scheme. Much like ‘visual anchors’ in picturesque town-planning, or those in the gardens of Capability Brown, two similar mechanisms are implemented in Times Square’s east and west ends, acting as “icons that would act as exclamation points to identify the area”.¹⁵

¹² Morel, Jean Marie, 1776, *Theory of Gardens* in Lefaivre, Liane and Tzonis, Alexander, 2004 *The Emergence of Modern Architecture: A documentary history from 1000 to 1810*, Routledge, London—New York, pg. 410

¹³ ‘Layering’, and ‘Unplanning’, Robertson, Rebecca, ‘The Remaking of 42nd Street’, in Balfour, Alan 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 207

¹⁴ Though how five kinds of signage can possibly emulate the natural chaos of the city’s core has never been explained. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ ‘Contradiction and Surprise’, Robertson, Rebecca, ‘The Remaking of 42nd Street’, in Balfour, Alan 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 207

The visual anchor of the east is the gargantuan Nasdaq sign, to the west it is the building by Arquitectonica of the Westin Hotel.

The aestheticisation of Times Square has recently been furthered by the creation of ‘pedestrian plazas’ at several key junctures: Broadway from 47th to 42nd street, Herald Square from 35th to 33rd and from 25th to 22nd streets where Broadway and 5th Avenue meet.^{iv} Implemented in June of 2009, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his plan to banish the traffic that has long rushed through Times Square. These plazas are outlined with green bike lanes, sprinkled with tables and chairs, with planters separating the pedestrian zones from the traffic. Ostensibly initiated to reduce congestion and pollution in the city centre,¹⁶ the plan sought to impact not only the level of carbon monoxide, but the public’s perception of this space. The plan was to “transform all of Broadway, visually and mentally... People [would] start thinking of the street differently. [They’d] start thinking of it as a destination where you can watch the world go by”.¹⁷ Passive watching is thus integral to the scheme, where once again the urban realm is understood as a phenomenon to be observed and marvelled at, rather than lived through direct experience. The experimental plazas were declared permanent in February of 2010. Nicholas Ourouskoff of *The New York Times* noted that, “a large part of the design’s success stems from the altered relationship between the pedestrian and the structures that frame the square. Walking down the cramped, narrow sidewalks, a visitor could never get a feel for the vastness of the place. Now, standing in the middle of Broadway, you have the sense of being in a big public room, the towering billboards and digital screens pressing in on all sides”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Neuman, William, July 11th 2008, ‘Closing Broadway: Two Traffic Lanes’, *New York Times*

¹⁷ Barbara Randall, executive director of the Fashion Center Business Improvement District quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, May 25th 2009, ‘Lose the Traffic. Keep That Times Square Grit.’, *New York Times*

This new sense of vastness ushers in the notion of sublime, itself similar to the picturesque and spectacle in its essence of detached contemplation, but differing in the emotions it inspires. The detached and observatory nature of the sublime is derived from its “contemplation of terrifying natural forces by a subject who is safe from immediate danger”.¹⁹ Anne Ring Paterson categorises the contemporary city’s effect upon the viewer as the “technological sublime”, the “awe and wonder, frequently tinged with an element of terror, [which] Americans have felt when confronted with tremendous architectural and technological achievements... [representing] ‘a way to reinvest the...works of men with transcendent significance’”.²⁰ The skyscraper, New York’s signature architectural mark, has since its inception been synonymous with the sublime, in its experience both below and within. Times Square’s vision as sublime has always been privileged to those who gaze from their office windows down on the electric madness below. The construction of the ruby-red steps of Times Square’s new TKTS booth brings this vision to the street, where pedestrians are encouraged to step back and marvel at the transcendent neon vista before them, sweeping out and around them like the parting of the red sea. The new TKTS booth is crowned with twenty-seven red glass steps, reaching sixteen feet and one inch above 47th street. As David W. Dunlap for *The New York Times* says, it inspires “nothing less than a new way of seeing”.²¹ Visitors who reach the top are bequeathed a “kinetic panorama: the perfect picture-postcard angle on the colossal sluice of entertainment, commerce and humanity that has bedazzled Americans and bemused foreign visitors for more than a century”.²²

¹⁹ As originally posited by Immanuel Kant, and applied to the city by Peterson, Anne Ring, ‘Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger at Times Square’, in Madsen, Peter and Plunz, Richard (ed.) 2002, *The Urban Lifeworld*, pg. 378

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Dunlap, David W., October 17th 2008, *op.cit*

²² *Ibid.*

I have been struck by the way this contemporary detached, passive form of experiencing the urban parallels the experience of the photographic image.²³ Our knowledge of Times Square is informed by Photography in three ways. Firstly, as previously discussed, it is primarily experienced indirectly through disseminated images. Secondly, the direct experience of the square is increasingly mediated through the image: the multitude of flashing screens and tourist cameras that mediate between the urban space and the visitor indicate that Times Square's real, physical space is more than ever dominated by the unreal, virtual one.^{vi} Lastly, Photography's impact on our perception has influenced our experience of the urban realm. As Barthes identifies, Photography "is the advent of myself as other: a cunning disassociation of consciousness from identity".²⁴ This results in a schizophrenic division of self, where part of one's subject lies partly *outside* oneself, in the object-world of images. Also, Photography, accentuated through digital technology, has expanded our vision beyond that of the human eye, through techniques such as simulation. These two photographic mechanisms, of a subject-object dichotomy and 'hyppereal', multi-perspective vision²⁵, are employed in the new Times Square. Given they belong to the realm of Photography, an aestheticising form of understanding reality, they are fundamentally detached and passive in nature. Two new additions to Times Square employ such mechanisms: the Westin Hotel, designed by Arquitectonica, and Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

The Westin Hotel, also home to the headquarters of Reuters and Condé Nast, was completed in August of 1999.^{vii} Herbert Muschamp's *New York Times* review points to the multiple-perspective and schizophrenic nature inherent in this building. Referring to her as 'Phoebe' (from *All about Eve*), he titles the four distinct facades of the building as

²³ As put forth by various theorists, such as Sontag, Kember, and Barthes

²⁴ Barthes, Roland, 2000, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, pg. 12

²⁵ As elucidated by: "from the point of view of human vision it is hyperreal... It is simply a result of a different, more perfect than human, vision...it is a realistic representation of a different reality", Manovich, Lev, 1995, "The Paradoxes of Digital Imaging", *Photography After Photography, Exhibition catalog*, Germany, publisher unknown, pg. 248

'Phoebe by Day', 'Phoebe by Night', 'Weekend Phoebe', and 'Phoebe in Paris'. The basic structure is that of a rectangle 'sliced' by a curving beam of light, creating "two buildings, each with sculptural profile".²⁶ These two sides are indeed embodiments of the subject-object duality as triggered by a photographic image. Barthes describes his object ('image') as "heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it)".²⁷ The Westin Hotel's eastern front is firmly rooted in the ground, stable, fixed, a solid block of striated steel. The western front, in contrast, hovers five storeys above 43rd street, "[levitating]...in deviance of gravity",²⁸ and echoing Barthes' definition of his subject as "light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, 'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar".²⁹

A Wax Museum by nature induces the same effect as a photograph, translated into three-dimensional, tactile space. A famous *subject* (be it Angelina Jolie or George Washington) is rendered *object*: an effigy fixed in time and space. The 'trompe l'oeil' effect pushes these wax figurines into the grey area between sculpture and human, just as the photograph resides between painting and reality. In this museum the dead seem to come back to life, the living resist the gravity of time, and we are given the illusion of being granted a privileged window into something *of them*—a false sense of proximity to the subject, rooted once again in our stubborn belief in photographic realism.^{viii} Multiple viewpoints are a by-product of this subject-object schism, and accentuated by the impact of digitalisation, where simulations render reality increasingly malleable. This fluid, new 'hyppereal' reality is reflected in the architecture of Times Square's Madame Tussaud's. Its very construction rests on the premise of continual transformation and movement, with rotation of its theme restaurant every two years, constant changing of advertising,

²⁶ Foreword', Balfour, Alan, 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 54

²⁷ Barthes, Roland, 2000, *op.cit.*

²⁸ 'New York Projects: Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill—Times Square Site 2', Balfour, Alan, 2001, *op.cit.*, pg 232

²⁹ Barthes, Roland, 2000, *op.cit.*, pg. 12

and the continual revival of Madame Tussaud's image.³⁰ As such, "architecture becomes submerged in a fusion of reality-manipulation driven by media technologies"³¹, a synthesis of the imaginary and the real defined as spectacle. Times Square, a spectacle in its own right, is now also experienced through the same detached, passive mechanism one experiences other spectacles, the photographic and cinematographic image.

³⁰ Foreword', Balfour, Alan, 2001, *op.cit*, pg. 52

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 51

2: The High Line

An old elevated railroad track cited for demolition for two decades, the High Line's reinvention in 2009 as a public park represents the desire to transform collective identity through public space. Ribboned along the west side of lower Manhattan, the structure weaves above twenty-two city blocks, traversing the recently gentrified Meatpacking District and neighbouring Chelsea, and terminating at the 30th Street Rail Yards. The High Line's history (nay, emerging mythology) identifies it as an artery of the past, a recovered ruin of the industrial era. Its remade form attempts to heal the wounds of the past while compromising in the present, ultimately seeking to pave the way for a greener, brighter future.

The railroad came to the West Side in 1847; the chaos and destruction it engendered called for it to be lifted above ground. Stalled until the 1930s, for thirty years it ferried cow carcasses to the meatpacking warehouses below. By the 1960s, however, air and automobile travel had replaced most of the railroad industry, and the track fell into disuse. 1963 saw the demolition of its southern section, contemporaneous to the obliteration of the old Penn Station. The last train ran in 1980, carrying three boxcars of frozen turkeys. The remaining track was sentenced for demolition, pushed for by a coalition of property owners who wished to develop the underlying land. Their failure to meet extensive financial and legal requirements stalled its destruction for two decades; the High Line, once a beast of human invention, was nullified by the slow encroachment of nature and time, and became a ruin, slumbering above human awareness, unheeding of the clamouring city below. When it was 'rediscovered' at the end of the century, it had become a weed-choked wilderness, an overgrown 'green carpet' that lent it an enchanting quality: a melancholy beauty, reflective of the passage of time. Drawn by 'romance of its ruin', a non-profit group—the Friends of the High Line—formed in 1999, seeking to reclaim the track as public space. Their efforts came to fruition in 2001, when the Council of the City of New York passed a resolution favouring its re-use. The first phase of the

three planned for redevelopment, reaching 20th street, opened in June 2009. April 1st 2010 saw its two millionth visitor.

The remade High Line takes as its inspiration the “park-like setting created spontaneously by nature”³² that evolved in its years of disuse.^{ix} The park’s design team, Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, seamlessly integrate landscape architecture and urban design, creating “a subtle play between contemporary and historical design, industrial decay and natural beauty”.³³ Seeking the coexistence of nature and man, the High Line has emerged as an ancestor of Ebenezer Howard’s ‘Garden City’.³⁴ It is similarly related to the contemporary trend of ‘Restoration Ecology’, which “recognises the historic dichotomy between nature and culture and works towards healing the human relationship to the natural world and its ecosystems”.³⁵ Restoration Ecology is based on an awareness of human responsibility towards the earth; it represents a reaction to the profound destruction of nature since the Industrial Revolution, and seeks to “breed compassion” and heal the wounds inflicted by industry.³⁶ This new awareness is manifested in the ‘greening’ of the urban realm and integration of ‘sustainable’ design schemes.³⁷ In the case of the High Line, it was decided that,

³² David, Joshua, 2002, *Reclaiming the High Line: A Project of the Design Trust For Public Space with Friends of the High Line*, Design Trust For Public Space and Friends of the High Line, New York, pg. 79

³³ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, June 10th 2009, “Architecture Review: ‘On High, a Fresh Outlook’”, *New York Times*

³⁴ They seek “to find a way for humans and growth to coexist”: Diller, Elizabeth, quoted in Pogrebin, Robin, April 19th 2005, “Designers Detail an Urban Oasis 30 Feet Up”, *New York Times*

³⁵ Miles, Malcolm, and Hall, Tim (eds.), 2003, *Urban Futures: critical commentaries on shaping the city*, Routledge, London—New York, pg 140

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg 110

³⁷ As demonstrated in projects of the Design Trust for Public Space, N.A., *10 Projects*, 2008, Design Trust for Public Space, New York

“sustainability should be integral to design and material choices”.³⁸ The park’s harmony with nature is showcased through the healing medium of the arts. Its first public art commission, by artist Spencer Finch, presents a series of pixels from a single-day’s journey on the Hudson River; titled ‘The River That Flows Both Ways’, it refers to the Hudson’s natural flow in two directions, which physically mirrors the back-and-forth of the High Line’s trains.³⁹ In an ironic turn of history, the image of train-travel, once seen as the antithesis of nature, is now interpreted as a natural form in itself.

To convey its reconciling and newly ethical character, the High Line adopts a Modernist idea that equates morality with truth to materials, and consciously chooses structure over surface.⁴⁰ Though slightly altered, the gist of this concept carries through to the High Line, where the planned ‘30th Street Cut-Out’ will peel back the concrete deck of the park, exposing the muscles and bones of the railroad.^x The exposure of the metal skeleton underlying the garden-promenade, over which a glass walkway for pedestrians allow views through to the street below, lends the new park a sense of physical and metaphorical transparency. The designs for the park hark back to the much-criticised Modernist utopia. Citing explicitly the ‘City of Tomorrow’⁴¹, the inspiration for an elevated pedestrian-park is found in the nucleus of Modernist city planning: “this fantastic vision was predicated on the idea that transportation systems of the future should be separated from one another, and depicted tall towers connected by elevated skywalks beneath an armada of floating airships...the High Line is one of the last remaining fragments of that world view”.⁴² Additionally, the design embraces the vision of

³⁸ David, Joshua, 2002, *Reclaiming the High Line*, pg. 25

³⁹ Vogel, Carol, May 22nd 2009, “Seeing the Hudson River Through 700 Windows”, *New York Times*

⁴⁰ Frampton, Kenneth quoted in Williams, Richard, 2004, *The Anxious City: English urbanism in the late twentieth century*, (Routledge, London—New York), pg. 96

⁴¹ Illustrated by H.M Petit, also proposed by Le Corbusier and others

⁴² David, Joshua, 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 20

sunlight, fresh air, greenery, transparency, and leisure that was the core of Modernist dreaming, as exemplified in Le Corbusier's *The Radiant City*.

However, though it adopts certain aspects of the Modernist legacy, the park also recognises and attempts to reconcile its negative consequences, notably its destruction of the cityscape. Throughout the efforts to 'save' the High Line, the phantom of the demolished Penn Station looms large. Its symbol as a tragically lost city relic to ruthless developers triggered the Historic Preservation and Landmark movements, key shapers in New York's present-day form.⁴³ The High Line is part of this legacy, piece of the Postmodern city that views the Pre-modern city as a "haunting absence, not a haunting presence".⁴⁴ As such, the High Line Park explicitly embraces its industrial past, placing itself in the tradition of the Tate Modern and other industrial spaces converted to arts uses "while retaining their existing industrial character".⁴⁵ The re-made High Line follows what historic preservations title 'the grandfather clause', "only objects built outside of living memory—before 'our grandfathers' time'—take on a 'historic' aura".⁴⁶ As history moves on, even much-criticised Modernism is considered 'historic'; its aftermath, however, setting of the High Line's two-decade death sentence, is vehemently rejected. In reference to recent commercialisation of public space, the High Line founders have stated, "it must not become a mall."⁴⁷ Whether in embracing or rejecting elements of the past, the High Line shows a new sensitivity to historical awareness. Without resorting to pastiche, the park sets itself up as a timeline, in which human memory is preserved, but the future is allowed to take shape.

⁴³ Reichl, Alexander J. 1999, *Reconstructing Times Square: Politics & Culture in Urban Development*, (University Press of Kansas, Kansas), pg. 11

⁴⁴ Crinson, Mark (ed.), 2005, *Urban Memory: History and amnesia in the modern city*, Routledge, Abingdon—New York, pg. xv

⁴⁵ David, Joshua, 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 25

⁴⁶ Zukin, Sharon, 1988, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Radius—London, pg. 75

⁴⁷ David, Joshua, 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 27

The ‘reclamation’ of the new High Line Park is not just of an industrial structure threatened by demolition, but of a lost world and lifestyle. The High Line thus brings to life a sense of village and childhood, both deemed to have been lost in the contemporary fast-paced world. The ‘villaging’ of city centres has been pinpointed elsewhere;⁴⁸ with the High Line, Diane Cardwell has said it “already seems like a permanent fixture, almost a small town in the air”.⁴⁹ It offers a ‘feeling of belonging’ and ‘communal experience’ that have perpetually seemed threatened by the capitalist city.⁵⁰ Cardwell notes a change in behaviour among the park’s visitors, saying it “even inspires crusty New Yorkers to behave as if they were strolling down Main Street in a small town rather than striding the walkway of a hyper-urban park—routinely smiling and nodding, even striking up conversations with strangers”.⁵¹ The small-town, communal lifestyle desired is inherent in the High Line’s design plans. Sprinkled with ‘plazas’ and ‘squares’, and ‘gathering spaces’, it captures a distinctly village, even Mediterranean lifestyle, except that alcohol is prohibited (and strictly monitored).⁵² The design plans, notably the one for the 22nd Street Seating Steps, show groups of leisured people lounging on the grass, sitting on steps, and families strolling.⁵³ The figures are turned towards one another, their body language relaxed and welcoming, sharply differing from the stereotype of a stressed, poker-faced city dweller.

⁴⁸ Crinson, Mark (ed.), 2005, *op.cit.*, pg. xi

⁴⁹ Cardwell, Diane, July 22nd 2009, “For High Line Visitors, Park Is a Railway Out of Manhattan”, *New York Times*

⁵⁰ Gopnik, Adam, “A Walk on the High Line/The Allure of a Derelict Railroad Track in Spring” in Sternfeld, Joel, 2001, *Walking the High Line*, Steidl, Göttingen, pg. 47

⁵¹ Cardwell, Diane, July 22nd 2009, *op.cit.*

⁵² Behaviour here follows a ‘civil’ pattern defined along lines of bourgeois leisure. See “The Architecture of Civility” in Williams, Richard, 2004, *op.cit.* for full discussion.

The linking of lost childhood to the decline in public parks has been discussed by Cindi Katz;⁵³ the High Line seeks to reverse this trend and to recreate childhood for those who have truly lost it— the adults. The notion of a ‘secret garden’, whose magic was found by the lucky explorer was central to the enchantment of the High Line ruin. The concept of a ‘found landscape’ is continued in the remade park, and the founders expressed an interest in retaining “that same sense of mystery and possibility even as we’re narrowing down to a singular vision”.⁵⁴ The multitude of children running around in the designs emphasises that the magic of childhood, full of mystery, discovery, and ‘boundless possibility’⁵⁵ is explicitly sought in the remade High Line, which reveals its hidden treasures only for those who take the time to look.

The High Line also seeks a more elusive, idealised form of childhood—the childhood of humanity, when we lived in a simpler time and the world was still unknown. Functioning on a slow-paced ‘High Line time’, it reflects the desire to be both a timeless Garden of Eden, and to function effectively in the passing time of history. Contemporary society seems to unfold with dizzying rapidity; this ephemeral nature, finds its urban reverberation in the need to constantly remake places to keep them relevant.⁵⁶ The High Line’s design, aware of the short lifeline of clearly defined, fixed structures, seeks to combat its own mortality by ‘perpetually becoming’: by “providing flexibility and responsiveness to the changing needs, opportunities, and desires of the dynamic context, the project will remain perpetually unfinished, sustaining emergent growth and change over time”.⁵⁷ This tactic seeks to achieve a sense of permanence in an ever-changing world:

⁵³ In Low, Setha and Smith, Neil, 2006 *The Politics of Public Space*, Routledge, Abingdon—New York

⁵⁴ David, Joshua quoted in *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ David, Joshua, 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 80

⁵⁶ Blum, Alan, 2003, *The Imaginative Structure of the City*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston—London—Ithaca, pg. 80

⁵⁷ Friends of the High Line et. al, 2008, *Designing the High Line*, pg. 31

by refusing to belong to one time or urban form, it seeks to definitively wedge itself into the urban landscape, a rock that is moulded, but never obliterated, by the currents of time.

The desire for permanence is reflected in the metaphors relating the High Line to a book, and the notion of reading both the structure itself and the city viewed from it. In comparison with the ephemeral nature of the Internet, books have taken on a symbolic permanence and durability, carrying forth voices from the past and inscribing ours into the future. The book is likewise linked to the printing press, the first truly industrial invention, the cradle of modernity. The metaphor of the High Line as a book was employed by Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic of *The New York Times*: he describes the completed first phase as “a series of low scruffy gardens...that unfold in a lyrical narrative”; as such, the park emerges “as a series of interwoven events, like chapters of a book”.⁵⁸ The design for the Gansevoort section confirms this, giving titles to the phases of the promenade, such as ‘Gansevoort Overlook’, ‘Gansevoort Woodland’, and ‘Washington Grasslands’. These titles reveal this narrative to be a visual and experiential one, with clear ‘starts and finishes’.⁵⁹ The explicit remaking of the High Line as a story being told, as “both a place and a process”,⁶⁰ redefines Habermas’ identification of civil society as the ‘reading public’⁶¹: here it indicates not just the bourgeoisie, but one that is sensitive to and respectful of history, nature, culture, and community—a public imagined

⁵⁸ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, June 10th 2009, *op.cit.*

⁵⁹ David, Joshua, 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 21

⁶⁰ James Corner quoted in reference to *Lifescape*, also applicable here; in Linder, Christopher (ed.), 2010, *Globalization, Violence, and the Visual Culture of Cities*, Routledge: London and New York

⁶¹ ‘Civil society’ is a public imagined as educated, or a ‘reading public’, Habermas 1961, quoted in Williams, Richard, 2004, *op.cit.*, pg 140

in opposition to greedy developers who, like vultures, devour the carcass of society for personal profit.⁶²

The new park re-tells the founding myth of the High Line as an emblem of the industrial picturesque.⁶³ Prior to its reinvention, Joel Sternfeld's photographs, published in *The New Yorker*, enchanted a wider public with the High Line's imagery as picturesque ruin, lending support to the efforts against demolition.^{xii} His photographs evoke a discovery by the poet-photographer of a secret world, where the great monuments of man have been reclaimed by nature and mystery abounds. The photographs portray misty landscapes, where giant, industrial carcasses lie abandoned, the urban realm graffitied, empty, and crumbling. Nature has stepped in where humanity is no longer: gently, sometimes, with soft flowers breathing colour into the frame; fiercely at other times, tall trees and bushes pushing over edges, Mother Nature's *reconquista* of the earth. Taken over the course of one year (2001), the cyclical pattern of the seasons is represented, lending a sense of both passing time and timelessness as the world reverts to its original state.

The designs for the new park, though fundamentally restructuring its physicality, attempt to retain this picturesque sensibility. The experience of the High Line functions on a similar level as the picturesque garden, notably in its unexpected and seemingly unarchitected landscape, at times opening up to dramatic vistas. As in the picturesque garden, the underlying theme is that of 'variety', here understood in the type of landscaping as well as visitor experience. Taking the theme of evolution as its basis, the designers sought to create a framework within which the character of the space would organically grow. 'Diversification' was sought in the variety of plant life, including species that grew there during its disuse, and a strategy of 'agri-tecture', which "combines organic

⁶² Ouroussoff, Nicholai, December 24th, 2006, "On the High Line, Solitude Is Pretty Crowded", *New York Times*

⁶³ Discussed by Zukin and Williams in reference to loft-living and the industrial-gallery phenomenon in Zukin, Sharon, 1988, *Loft Living* and Williams, Richard, "Remembering, forgetting and the industrial gallery space", in Crinson, Mark (ed.), 2005, *Urban Memory*

and building materials into gradients of changing portions that accommodate a variety of natural and programmatic conditions”.⁶⁴ To complete the sense of the picturesque, this ‘wild’ landscape is combined with fragments of the High Line’s past, such as the ‘Art Deco’ bolted steel plates have been conserved purely for aesthetic purposes, due to their status as “industrial folk art”.⁶⁵

As in Times Square, the High Line aestheticises the urban realm through the lens of the picturesque. As Adam Gopnik says, “high is to New York what wet is to Venice—the necessary condition that has become the romantic condition”.⁶⁶ Its unique perspective of an elevated, open space evokes echoes de Certeau’s view of New York: the city as seen from the High Line stretches out, immobile and peaceful from the distance, offering the “view of a lesser angel...that little height makes even ugly things below look orderly and patterned”.⁶⁷ This beautification of the ugly, and the comprehending (and thereby controlling) the incomprehensible belongs in the realm of the picturesque. Once again, the city is aestheticised, to be viewed and understood from a distance, in a detached, passive manner. Constant reference is made to the ‘new perspective’ offered by the High Line’s aestheticisation of the city: “it allows you to make entirely new visual connections between different parts of Manhattan while maintaining a remarkably intimate relationship with the surrounding streets”.⁶⁸ This intentional newness of vision harks back to the desire for a simpler form of modernity, whereby new mechanisms of train-travel and cinema epitomised a changed human perspective—the fleeting, ‘kinetic imagery’ embodying nothing less than a new way of seeing and understanding the world.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Friends of the High Line et. al, 2008, *op.cit.*, pg 32

⁶⁵ Collins, Glenn, January 2nd 2008, “In Winds of Winter, Midair Park Takes Shape”, *New York Times*

⁶⁶ Gopnik, Adam, in Sternfeld, Joel, 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 47

⁶⁷ Gopnik, Adam, in Sternfeld, Joel, 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 49

⁶⁸ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, June 10th 2009, *op.cit.*

⁶⁹ Stilgoe, John, “Steganography Photographed”, Sternfeld, Joel, 2001, *op.cit.*, pg. 34

In today's world, our vision is digitally expanded by photographic and cinematographic means;⁷⁰ therefore, to instil this 'new perspective', the High Line is designed to echo these mechanisms. In the completed section, the 'amphitheatre' at 10th Avenue Square, like the new TKTS booth in Times Square, provides seats to watch the spectacle of the city itself.^{xiii} Rows of wooden benches cascade down, terminating at a great glass window overlooking the rushing highway below. Literally framed, and seen from a distance, the view becomes cinematographic, in which the window evokes a screen, the seating an outdoor cinema. The spectatorship is reciprocal, looking up from the street, the visitors are illuminated; framed by the window, they become like J.K. Rowling's moving photographs.^{xiv} The planned 26th Street Viewing spur echoes this effect.^{xv} Less a theatre than a window, the spur takes its inspiration from "the billboards that were once attached to the High Line."⁷¹ This effect converts both the city and its spectators into images: "now the frame enhances, rather than blocks, views of the city, showcasing High Line visitors instead of advertisements".⁷²

The importance of the gaze and voyeurism, employed in reality-TV shows, is likewise manifested in the integral people-watching nature of the park, which provides distanced views into the glitzy self-aggrandised lives of the rich and famous. The lightning gentrification of the meatpacking district below provides a setting for the trendy, the glamorous, and those with bags of money pretending to be both. From the height of the High Line it is possible to snap "pictures of the creative types sipping champagne at an open-air lounge",⁷³ or witness exhibitionist displays at the upscale new hotel of André Balazs, which promotes itself "as a sleek sex palace".⁷⁴ The form of gazing

⁷⁰ Manovich, Lev, "The Paradoxes of Digital Imaging", *Photography After Photography, Exhibition catalog*, Germany, 1995, pg. 248, publisher unknown

⁷¹ Friends of the High Line et. al, 2008, *op.cit.*, pg. 102

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Cardwell, Diane, July 22nd 2009, *op.cit.*

⁷⁴ ("And now, the floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the High Line at the Standard New York offer direct views to your most intimate moments", read a notice on its blog)", *Ibid.*

encouraged in the High Line, as in Times Square, is therefore mediated by photographic and cinematographic means; here, it is manifested in the architecture and forms of behaviour that bring the photographic 'window-pane' to life and the cinema/television screen into our embodied experience of the city and its public spaces.

3: Proposals for the World Trade Center site

The morning of September 11, 2001, dawned a bright and brilliant blue. The staggering events of that day unfolded with surreal precision: two jet-planes, colliding with our steel towers and dethroning them as easily as punctured balloons. The black plume of smoke and the stench that clung to the air remained for days—a vestige of the bodies and buildings that had been buried in the fire. The destruction of the Twin Towers was globally recognised as an attack on the most powerful symbols of global capitalism⁷⁵. In the pure geometry of their form and the arrogance of their height, the towers had represented the supreme indifference of the neoliberal regime to the devastating global consequences that sprouted in its wake.⁷⁶ Many mourned not only the tragedy itself, but the history of violence in the towers' construction and consequent shift to a bigger, badder status quo. As Zukin says, “we mourn an older city, a bustling and gritty urban that didn't have chain stores or welfare reform or companies that do business just as easily from New Jersey, Trinidad, or Hyderabad as they do from Lower Manhattan”.⁷⁷

For architecture critics, the aesthetic form of this new status quo reflected a “feudal” outlook to urbanism.⁷⁸ Yamasaki's Twin Towers were much debated over their

⁷⁵ Harvey, David, “Cracks in the Edifice of the Empire State”, in Sorkin, Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City*, Routledge: New York and London

⁷⁶ Such as global poverty, for a full explanation see Peter Marcuse's chapter in Graham, Stephen (ed.), 2004, *Cities, War, and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics*, Blackwell Publishing: Malden—Oxford—Carlton

⁷⁷ Zukin, Sharon, “Our World Trade Center”, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 14

⁷⁸ Muschamp, Herbert, September 30th 2001, “Art/Architecture; Filling the Void: A Chance to Soar”, *New York Times*

architectural merit.⁷⁹ Yet his “abstract sculptural ethos”⁷⁹ lent them a clear power: in their simple geometry and singular domination of the skyline, the towers were a severe embodiment of the dehumanising power of corporate world. As Mark Wigley points out, their interiors were never shown in images;⁸⁰ they were imagined as facades, rendering invisible all that went on inside, appearing as “two seamless screens side by side”.⁸¹ This identification of the towers as *screens* calls to mind the previously discussed mediation of the city through photographic and cinematographic means—home to the detached, passive gaze. When combined with a potent symbol of indifferent, global capital, this detached gaze takes on a morbid form, evoking death. De Certeau’s view of the city from the tops of the towers is described as “[producing] a depopulated and immobilizing image of the city frozen in a state of suspended animation, caught somewhere between the living and the dead”.⁸² This parallels Barthes’ identification of the ‘microdeath’ in which “the Photograph...represents that very subtle moment when... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a microversion of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre”.⁸³

The notion of abstraction as constituting a form of death is echoed in Wigley’s identification of the “kindred spirit” that links the terrorist and architect of these buildings. Drawing parallels between architect Yamasaki and the “mastermind” behind the attacks, Mohammed Atta, he states, “to attempt creation or destruction on such an immense scale requires both...to view living processes in general, and social life in particular, with a high degree of abstraction. Both must undertake a radical distancing of themselves from the

⁷⁹ Darton, Eric, “The Janus Face of Architectural Terrorism: Minoru Yamasaki, Mohammed Atta, and our World Trade Center”, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 88

⁸⁰ Wigley, Mark, “Insecurity by Design”, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 80

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Linder, Christopher (ed.), 2010, *Globalization, Violence, and the Visual Culture of Cities*, Routledge: London and New York, pg. 111

⁸³ Barthes, Roland, 2000, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, pg. 14

flesh and blood experience of mundane existence ‘on the ground’.⁸⁴ As such, the detached, passive gaze of understanding the urban here takes on a morbid quality, resulting from its extension from mere *consumption* of the urban environment to its active role in its *creation* and *destruction* as well.

The immediate aftermath of 9/11 witnessed many pessimistic predictions concerning the future of the urban realm. Those negative reverberations that did appear amplified existing tendencies of tunnel-vision accumulation and its resulting aesthetic—fear-driven and banal, and are manifested in the official rebuilding process of the World Trade Center site. After the public rejection of the Beyer Blinder Belle schemes in 2002, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey⁸⁵ held an “Innovative Design Study” which showcased nine schemes in December 2003. Daniel Libeskind’s “Memory Foundations” was declared the winner and appointed “master planner”; his original vision since has turned sour due to financial cut-backs and the inclusion of other architects, notably developer Larry Silverstein’s architect, David M. Childs. As Nicolai Ouroussoff has said, “a rebuilding effort that was originally cast as a symbolic rising from the ashes has long since turned into a hallucinogenic nightmare: a roller coaster ride of grief, naïveté, recriminations, political jockeying and paranoia”.⁸⁶

Two key aspects of the plan, the so-called Freedom Tower and the memorial for the victims of 9/11, cater to a culture rooted in fear, distraction, blind consumption and intolerance. The Freedom Tower itself, much decorated in political rhetoric, presents a fortress swathed in empty symbols of ‘democracy’ and ‘American values’: its height of 1776 feet a facile reference to the American Declaration of Independence and its spire an echo

⁸⁴ Confirmed by Atta’s training as an architect and urban planner. Wigley, Mark, “Insecurity by Design”, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. 89

⁸⁵ The two agencies responsible for rebuilding

⁸⁶ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, September 10th 2005, “A Deepening Gloom About Ground Zero’s Future”, *New York Times*

of the Statue of Liberty. As Ouroussoff says, any fascinating potential is “fascinating in the way that Albert Speer’s architectural nightmares were fascinating... The Freedom Tower embodies, in its way, a world shaped by fear”.⁸⁷

Michael Arad’s winning memorial scheme has long since veered off memorialising loss through silent abstraction.^{xvii} The original scheme presented two sunken ‘reflecting pools’ at the footprints of the original towers. Its strength lay in its simplicity, and the slow, contemplative descent from the realm of the living into the realm of the dead. This has since been lost: instead of the snaking descent underground, the descending ramps were moved into the central space—a tactic which allows people with short attention spans, to quickly pop in and out.⁸⁸ Ouroussoff compares this to “the drive-through funeral parlors that become briefly popular in the Midwest a decade or so ago, in which mourners could pay their respects through a video screen from the sealed wombs of their cars. Both cater to a culture of distraction, which prefers its emotional experiences carefully sanitized”.⁸⁹ In 2006, the underground gallery of the memorial was scrapped altogether, bringing the names of the victims up to the plaza, which now could belong to any corporate skyscraper. More shockingly, the initial decision to randomly display the victims’ names has been revoked in favour of keeping co-workers together. They will now be sorted according to lieu of death: the north pool shall list the names of those who died in the north tower, the plane that hit it, and those of the 1993 bombings; the south pool, those who died in the south tower, the plane that hit it, those from the Pentagon, and those in the jet that crashed in Pennsylvania. The simple power of a random ordering, which equalises all human life through the shared experience of death, has been perversely twisted, so that the emphasis lies in their death itself.

⁸⁷ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, June 30th 2005, “A Tower of Impregnability, the Sort Politicians Love”, *New York Times*

⁸⁸ Ouroussoff, Nicolai, June 19th 2005, “For the Ground Zero Memorial, Death by Committee”, *New York Times*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

That said, these negative reverberations emerged in tandem with surprising optimism, generosity, public spirit, and creativity in re-imagining the public realm. The rush of official, unofficial, and independent proposals for the World Trade Center reveals the emergence of an openness, sensitivity, and desire for a more balanced world order.⁹⁰ Various design competitions for the new site pit this mentality against the ruling approach of market indifference and fear, reflected in the actual redevelopment. This battle over public space (and through it, our collective identity) has continued beyond the World Trade Center design schemes—an indication the winds of change are brewing. The tragedy of September 11 and the inability of the status quo to respond respectfully to it, prioritising office space over the dignity of the dead and replacing hollow, aggressive symbols for true meaning, seems to have reinforced the sense that the neoliberal regime has finally reached breaking point and a reassessment of our city and ourselves is in order.

Post 9/11, our newly insecure identity manifested itself in two ways: in the emphasis on memory and in a new awareness of our own mortality—as built environment, imperial centre, and bodies. Keller Easterling’s design envisions the site as a simple green void that reminds us of our loss, revealing a new emphasis on memory. Memory, not only of the tragedy, but of memory itself is needed here. The public spirit in the aftermath of 9/11 acted as a reminder of our collective values, forgotten in the pursuit of individual self-interest; as this forgetting lead to destruction, to reconstruct we must first remember. As with Icarus and the tower of Babylon, the tragedy of September 11 also reminded us of our own mortality. As Zukin and Sorkin say, “it remained hard to believe these buildings were mortal, let alone the instrument of the death of thousands”.⁹¹ This humbling revelation finds its expression in Peter Eisenman’s proposed office towers, where each skyscraper suddenly compresses at the centre, echoing the “moment in frozen time while

⁹⁰ The following discussion will be based on the official LMDC & PANYNJ competition, unofficial ideas presented by the *New York Times Magazine* and by *New York* magazine, and several independent proposals.

⁹¹ Introduction, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg. vii

these buildings were collapsing”.^{xviii92} Intended as a memorialising feature, the visible mortality of these soaring buildings, caught in a perpetual state of construction and destruction, warns us against presuming ourselves immortal.

The mortality of buildings is often evoked in the metaphor of buildings as bodies. Damaged buildings represent damaged bodies.⁹³ The aftermath of such a tragedy must therefore heal these bodies, literally a process of “re-membling, a putting together of pieces that have been violently torn apart”.⁹⁴ The building/body correlation results from a strong identification between individuals and the built environment. By applying psychoanalytic theory to architecture, Neil Leach reveals how the process of identification functions like a camera, involving a ‘mirroring’ process of both ‘projection and introjection’ in which one “[grafts] symbolic meaning onto an object and then [reads] oneself into that object, and [sees] one’s values reflected in it”.⁹⁵ The appropriation of a building into one’s sense of identity is a process of creating two relationships: a relationship between the self and the built environment, and a relationship between that identification and all previous identifications. Identity here is understood as a synthesis of all such identifications. The destruction of the Twin Towers, appropriated collectively in our national identity,⁹⁶ severs the identification between self and building, but cannot erase the *fait accompli* of its relation to our previous identifications—its appropriation into our identity. As such, our identity is newly insecure and needs re-forging. The destroyed World Trade Center site becomes representative of our cracked collective

⁹² Eisenman, Peter, in Muschamp, Herbert (curator), *New York Times Magazine*, “The Masters’ Plan for Ground Zero”, September 8th 2002, Interactive Feature, *The New York Times Online*, last accessed April 18th, 2010, 2:05 pm
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/w/world_trade_center_nyc/

⁹³ Wigley, Mark, “Insecurity by Design”, in Michael and Zukin, Sharon (eds.), 2002, *op.cit.*, pg.72

⁹⁴ Muschamp, Herbert, August 1st 2003, “At Ground Zero, an Architectural Void No Longer”, *New York Times*

⁹⁵ Leach, Neil, “9/11” in Crinson, Mark (ed.), 2005, *Urban Memory: History and amnesia in the modern city*, Routledge (Abingdon—New York), pg. 174

⁹⁶ National identity, according to Leach, likewise creates such relationships. *Ibid.*, pg. 80

identity and the canvas for imagining a new one. This is represented in Eisenman's proposal *Shattering Vision*, where standard-looking towers, emblems of our old self, are frozen in a tableau of shards.^{xix} The central metaphor here is that of a broken mirror: "if architecture is a mirror of society, the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11 shattered the narcissistic reflection. [Eisenman] proposes transforming that idea into a permanent structure."⁹⁷ This re-forging of collective identity goes hand-in-hand with the healing of our collective body, which co-exist in the desires of many design proposals.

Many design schemes seek to heal the wounds of 9/11 and all those inflicted by past destruction. As in the High Line, the proposals seek to reconcile man and nature, and to reclaim Modernism's collective utopian spirit lost in the individualist greed of neoliberalism. Sustainability is a recurrent theme; some such as Ken Smith use the regenerative power of nature as the primary tool for both healing and re-imagining the new cityscape. The revival of Modernism's utopian sense of collective betterment is reflected in several housing schemes, which resuscitate the Modernist ideal of decent housing for all. Charles Gwathmey's West Street housing unit is intended as a prototype for all of New York.^{xx} The concept and form of the proposal reveals this to be a renewed version of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*. By adding a commercial hotel, Gwathmey is compromising its ideal with the reality of a market-driven society. This sense of compromise between the market and societal betterment is key in the public/private partnerships of post 9/11 public space.

The designs likewise reveal the integral role of community in the post 9/11 urban realm. As Anthony Vidler says, "real community... is bred in cities more strongly than suburbs. The street...the square... the corner store... without romanticism or nostalgia,

⁹⁷ Giovannini, Joseph, "Rising to Greatness", N.D., *New York Magazine*, New York Media LLC, last accessed April 18th 2010, 2:08 pm, <http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/proposals/architects/> on Peter Eisenman, Eisenman Architects: "Shattering Vision"

still define urban culture”.⁹⁸Urban community is defined by diversity and tolerance; its revival is manifested in Koning/Eizenberg’s plan for a Community/Senior Center, which would include a bookstore, a child-care centre, a coffee shop, a senior-citizen centre, retirement housing, and a public gym. These activities suggest a desire to re-value ‘non-productive’ members of the community, the children and the elderly, and re-instil a sense of public spirit lost in the neoliberal regime. Collective spirit appears in *The New York Times*’s proposed towers by “[presenting] an ‘unauthored’ symbol, an image of collective imagination. The symbolism is mutable: people can project a variety of meanings on these shapes, and they are all equally valid.”⁹⁹

Some designs seek to build awareness and tolerance within society, resulting from the recognition of devastation caused by abdicating the public realm. This is manifested in Nordenson and Cobb’s Broadcast Tower, and David Rockwell’s *Hall of Risk*, whose purpose is “to educate the public about the social trade-offs caused by modernization”.^{xii100} Rockwell’s design re-imagines the public as a political entity, and the city as *polis*. Presenting a series of debate areas, it is “intended partly as a theatre and partly as a public forum”.¹⁰¹ The architects of the Nordenson/Cobb tower seek to forge an open, outward-looking identity rather than the closed, insular one of the past. According to them, the structure must “express some larger idea about the world, something that was not simply about being self-referential, about being autonomous, but rather we wanted this tower to express interdependence rather than autonomy, equality rather than hierarchy, and openness rather than exclusion”.¹⁰² This openness is echoed in the multiple

⁹⁸ Vidler, Anthony, September 23rd 2001, “Aftermath; A City Transformed: Designing ‘Defensible Space’”, *New York Times*

⁹⁹ Muschamp, Herbert, September 8th 2002, “Don’t Rebuild. Reimagine”, *New York Times*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Rockwell, David in Muschamp, Herbert (curator), 2002, *New York Times Magazine*, “The Masters’ Plan for Ground Zero”, *op.cit*

¹⁰² Cobb, Henry N., *Ibid.*

proposals that imagine a unified, collective identity that reaches out to the contemporary, global world. Richard Meier's school design proposes a World Institute, where people can "look into, take part in".¹⁰³ Drawing scholars from around the world, it seeks to combat American isolationism, serving to foster greater global understanding and prevent future violence through unity and dialogue. Additionally, by embracing the global community, these architects hope to revive New York's architecturally retrogressive image, bringing it "in step with the level of architectural ambition in Vienna, Tokyo, Rotterdam and many other cities overseas".¹⁰⁴

This image of an aesthetically competitive, forward-looking New York often takes on metaphors of computer vision and communication, aspects seen to embody the future. Zaha Hadid's housing proposal presents a 'pixelated tower', which is multi-use and incorporates 'multi-views'.^{xxiii105} The imaging here clearly takes as its referent digital imaging techniques and the expansion of our vision—and therefore of our understanding.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the THINK team's reincarnated towers replace the Twin Towers with open, lattice structures that create a "subtle virtual gesture".^{xxiii107} The sense of the immateriality of the virtual, and therefore of the city of the future, is facilitated by computer imaging techniques which bring these fantasies to life.

Beyond its representation in architectural fantasies, the ephemeral, virtual reality of our new world has fundamentally changed our conception of architecture. Elizabeth Grosz has suggested that architecture is "reconceptualising itself as that movement of

¹⁰³ Meier, Richard, *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Muschamp, Herbert, September 8th 2002, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁵ Hadid, Zaha, in Muschamp, Herbert (curator), 2002, New York Times Magazine, "The Masters' Plan for Ground Zero", *op.cit*

¹⁰⁶ Lev Manovich's hyperreality, discussed in reference to Times Square

¹⁰⁷ Viñoly, Rafael in New York Times: New York Region, "Envisioning Downtown: The Architects Speak", December 18th 2002, Interactive Feature, The New York Times Online, last accessed April 18th, 2010, 2:05 pm
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/w/world_trade_center_nyc/

time which is duration: a concept of time as perpetual becoming.... this becoming is that of the becoming embodied.”¹⁰⁸ This ‘perpetual becoming’, discussed elsewhere, appears in the proposals for the new World Trade Center. THINK team’s lattice structure hopes to imbue the works of other architects over time, and Lebbeus Woods vision *The Challenge* proposes a structure perpetually under construction in which “the community crowns the World Center with a continuously evolving network of interior and exterior spaces”.¹⁰⁹ One of the most interesting proposals to combine ‘perpetual becoming’, virtual reality, and the healing power of nature, is James Corner and Field Operation’s “Life Forms: Growing a New Urban Landscape”.^{xxiv} Expanding upon the High Line’s awareness of time and the reclamation of the city by nature, its architects imagine four stages, ending in 2200, where trees, grown on the destroyed site, become the basis for an urban environment completely married to the natural world. James Corner asks, “how might landscape go beyond its traditional role as a passive, benevolent... and become something that might carry us into a future that we have yet to imagine?”.¹¹⁰ After the first two stages of Propagation (2005) and Reforestation (2020), the third stage—Landscape Urbanism (2050)—offers “radically new amalgams of nature and urban life. Building skin that respond to air and temperature changes, ecological roof gardens, gardens that recycle water and air, geothermal heating and cooling systems, solar and wind energy producers, biochemical super-decomposers of waste and other ecotechnologies”.¹¹¹ In relating the productive nature of landscape to a machine, they echo the correlation established in the High Line between natural and manmade forms of production. By 2200, the site will be a complete ‘Bio-Urbia’, which responds responsibly to changing climate and sea levels, to

¹⁰⁸ Eisenman, Peter, “Foreword”, in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2001, “Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space”, MIT Press: Cambridge—London, pg. xi

¹⁰⁹ Giovannini, Joseph, “Rising to Greatness”, *op.cit.*, on Lebbeus Woods, Lebbeus Woods: “The Challenge”

¹¹⁰ N.A., May 16th 2004, “Why Not a Park?”, *New York Times*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

become the “nucleus of a global Earth”.¹¹² This highly imaginative scheme emphasises the importance of out-of-the-box thinking with regards to the future of the city. Maya Lin’s memorial proposal takes this to heart, exploring the impact of different approaches rather than dictating a fixed idea. Her intent is to push the role of memorial beyond remembering, and try to gear it towards the future. She proposes a centre for peace and conflict resolution, attempting to transform the aftermath of tragedy into a beneficial force for society by asking, ““what can we learn? What can we come away from and help try to prevent?”¹¹³ Underlying all this imagining is a communal sense of optimism about the potential of the future city: architects “do not, as in years past, regard the city as a problem to be solved. They see it as a stimulus for continuing re-creation”.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Lin, Maya, in Muschamp, Herbert (curator), 2002, New York Times Magazine, “The Masters’ Plan for Ground Zero”, *op.cit*

¹¹⁴ Muschamp, Herbert, September 30th 2001, *op.cit.*

Conclusion

In looking at Times Square, the High Line, and proposals for the new World Trade Center, I hope to have shown we are living in a moment of metamorphosis. Our public spaces embody the denial, compromise, and optimism about the future that such change inspires; they are likewise the contemporary battleground for asserting rival collective identities. At its start, this dissertation sought to answer: “who are we now? Who are we becoming? How are we shaping our world?” It is clear that much of this remains to be explored. It seems, as our public spaces attest, that we no longer imagine ourselves as fixed identities; like our cities, we seek flexibility, embrace change, are an amalgam of various and contradicting selves. That, then, is who we are: open, diverse, ever-changing—paradoxically definite in our indefiniteness. We wish to be greener, while harnessing the urban for a better future. We wish to reap the growth of capitalism, but remain tolerant, spontaneous, out-ward looking, imaginative. To achieve both, we are willing to compromise. Given our increasingly complex, virtual world, we seek to conserve the simple, the tactile, the human. Yet the virtual world is fundamentally transforming our perception, the basis by which we know and experience everything. Its impact on direct experience is clear in our aestheticisation of the city. Though this dissertation has focused on the positive changes that come with this new perception, there is no doubt that negative ones will emerge as well. There is more to explore in the impact of aestheticisation: particularly, given its detached and passive nature, how impacts our human relationships, based on contact, and on our empathy, which necessitates a direct engagement with the ‘other’. The compromise with market realities, and the merging of public and private entities in defining public space, is another effect to consider. Though undoubtedly pragmatic, I feel it betrays some fundamental value—that through compromise, we compromise ourselves. Ultimately, time will tell.

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Notes and Illustrations



Imagination takes on the future, photo from *The New York Times* of “Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront”, by Architecture Research Office

ii The music video begins with a black-and-white photo-montage of New York and Jay-Z rapping against an architectural backdrop. At 0:50, the camera sweeps down to Alicia Keys, playing her piano in the middle of Times Square. She is clad in hard, black clothes, and sings on a raised platform, the New York skyline projected onto her piano. Onlookers gaze up and photograph her performance; elevated above them, she takes on the role of the female idol, an urban Madonna. This role is furthered by a painted Statue of Liberty on her piano—her mirror-image, associating the singer with the iconic female symbol of the city. Jay-Z, in contrast, is always portrayed against skyscrapers, an obvious phallic architectural symbol. The camera alternates between viewing him head-on, and sweeping underneath; as such, Jay-Z plays the part of both man and king, citizen and ruler of this great city. As 2:35 Jay-Z is shown in an office, the Empire State Building by his side but separated by a window. Its slightly blurred quality at 2:45 identifies this most iconic of all skyscrapers to be his reflection. At 3:19, the screen bursts into colour as the ruby-red steps

at Times Square appear, the camera sweeping up them to the silhouettes of Jay-Z and Alicia Keys, male and female icons of the city, united in its heart. The neon lights of Times Square are aflame in colours of red, white, and blue—those of the American flag. At 4:02 a brief glimpse of Alicia Keys at her piano reveals her Statue of Liberty effigy to be holding a New York Yankees cap, symbol of Jay-Z and the contemporary city—the fusion of the male, female, and urban representing the birth of a new world. The lyrics’ emphasis on renaissance—“these streets will make you feel brand new, big lights will inspire you”—point to an urban Garden of Eden where anything is possible: “concrete jungle where dreams are made of”. Jay-Z and Alicia Keys are the Adam and Eve of this brave new world. Fittingly, at 4:18 the sky is illuminated bright blue, as if the sun is rising, and at 4:33 Jay-Z places his arm around Alicia, and the two become one as morning dawns over the city (4:36). The video ends with the camera sweeping back to frame the entire red TKTS booth, the two figures silhouettes against this new icon.



Alicia Keys and Jay-Z with their mirror-images, stills from the music video *Empire State of Mind*



iii

Hallucinatory signage in Times Square, photo by Stephen Wilkes, www.stephenwilkes.com, last accessed April 19th 2010, 1:27 pm

iv



Times Square as Pedestrian Plaza, photo by Damon Winter for the *New York Times*

v



Beholding the spectacle of Times Square from its new TKTS booth, photo by Fred R. Conrad for the *New York Times*



vi

Direct experience mediated through the image, photo by Jennifer S. Altman for *The New York Times*



vii

Multiple perspectives in the Westin Hotel, photo taken from <http://www.re-presentation.com/>, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 1:47 pm



viii

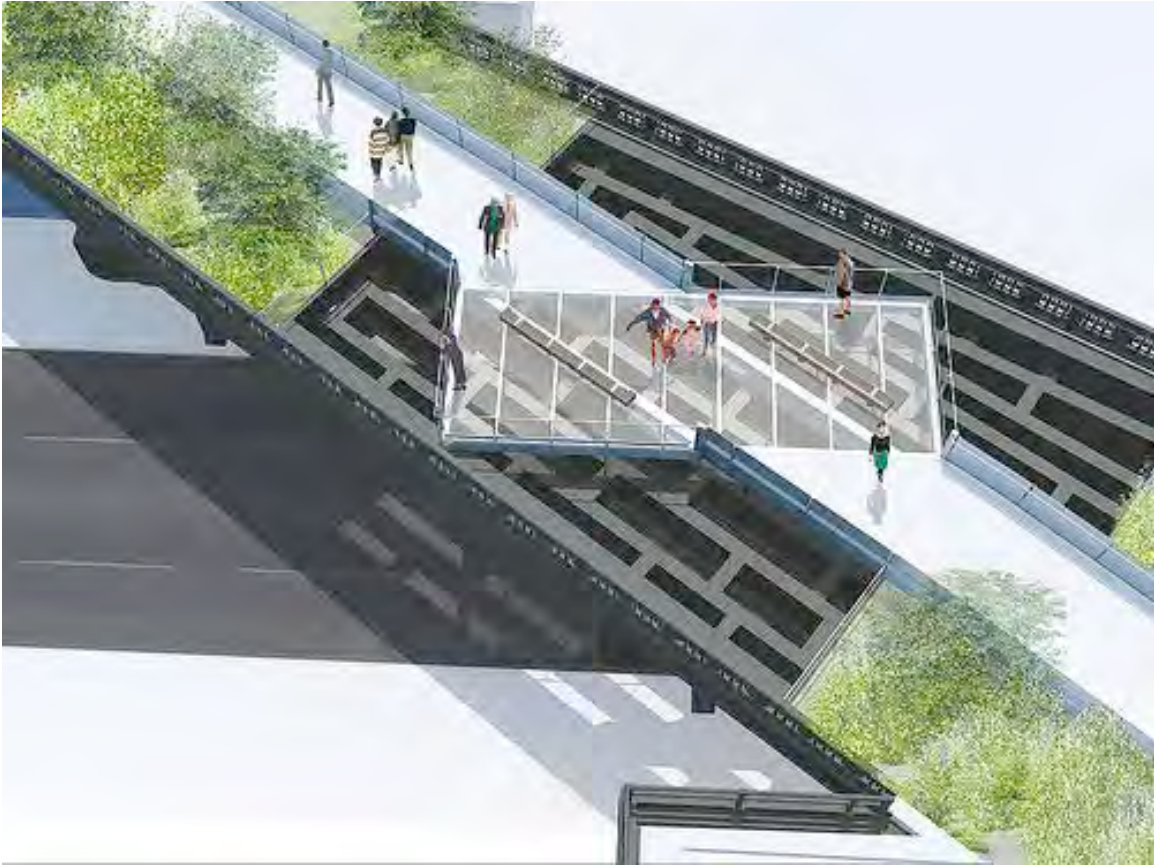
Subject-object schism as seen in Mr. Sean "Diddy" Combs posing next to his *Madame Tussaud's* wax figurine, photo from <http://www.madametussauds.com/>, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 1:44 pm

ix



Reconciliation of man and nature as shown in the "Gansevoort Woodland", photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm

x



Revealing the muscles and bones of the High Line in the 30th Street Cut-Out, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm

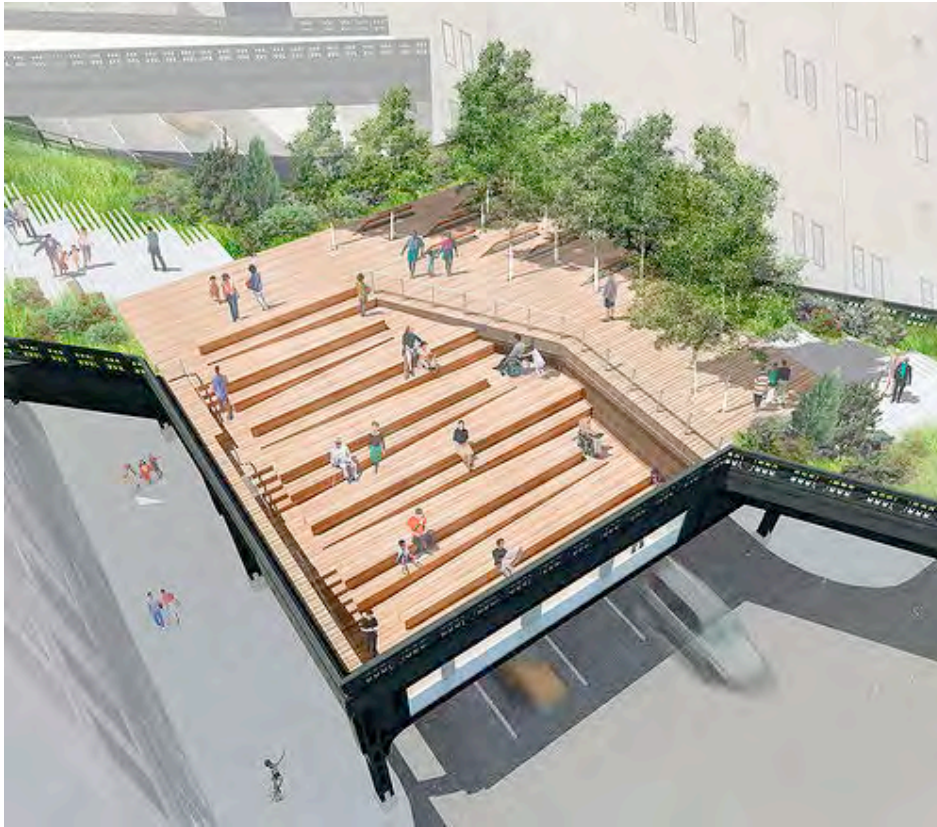
xi



Village lifestyle, 22nd Street Seating Steps/23rd Street Lawn, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm



Joel Sternfeld, "Walking the High Line", 2001, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm



xiii

Aestheticising the city, 'Ampitheatre' at 10th Avenue Square, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm



xiv

Reciprocal spectatorship at 10th Avenue Square, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm



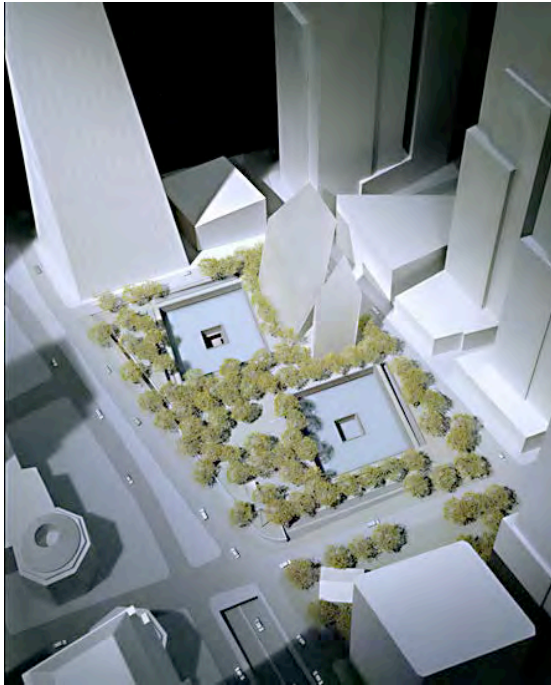
xv

26th Street Viewing spur, photo from www.thehighline.org, last accessed April 19th 2010 at 2:26 pm



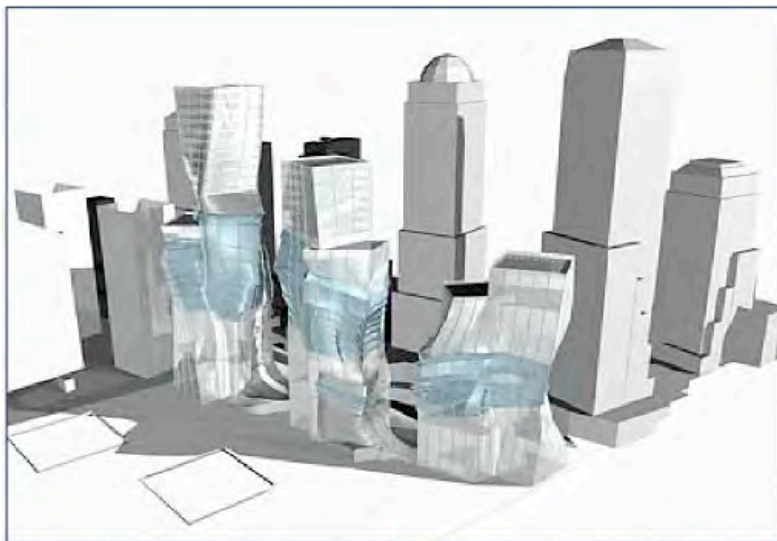
xvi

Yamasaki towers, “two seamless screens”, in Vergara, Camilo José, 2001, *Twin Towers Remembered*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York



xvii

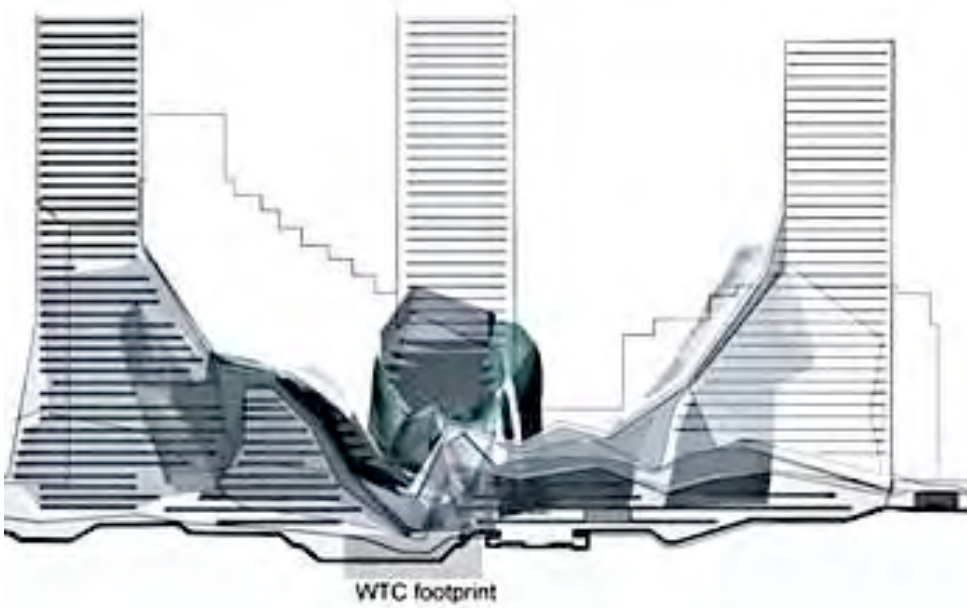
“Reflecting Absence”, Michael Arad, New York, NY and Peter Walker, Berkley, CA: first revision of Arad’s winning 9/11 memorial scheme, from <http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/>, last accessed April 19th 2010, 10:52 am



AUDIO: Peter Eisenman
play | stopped

xviii The crunched profiles of Peter Eisenman’s three office towers suggest partly collapsed structures.

Peter Eisenman’s Office Towers, “Don’t Rebuild, Reimagine.”, September 2002, *New York Times Magazine*



xix

Peter Eisenman "Shattering Vision", Joseph Giovannini, N.D., "Rising to Greatness", *New York Magazine*

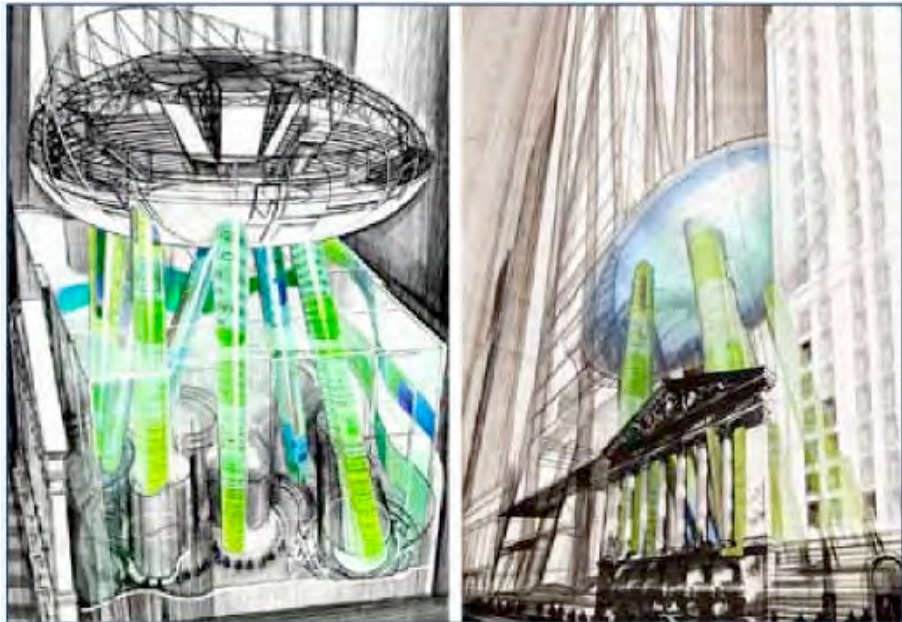


AUDIO: Ch. Gwathmey
.....
play | stopped

This combination of housing and a hotel suggests a new model of urban living.

xx

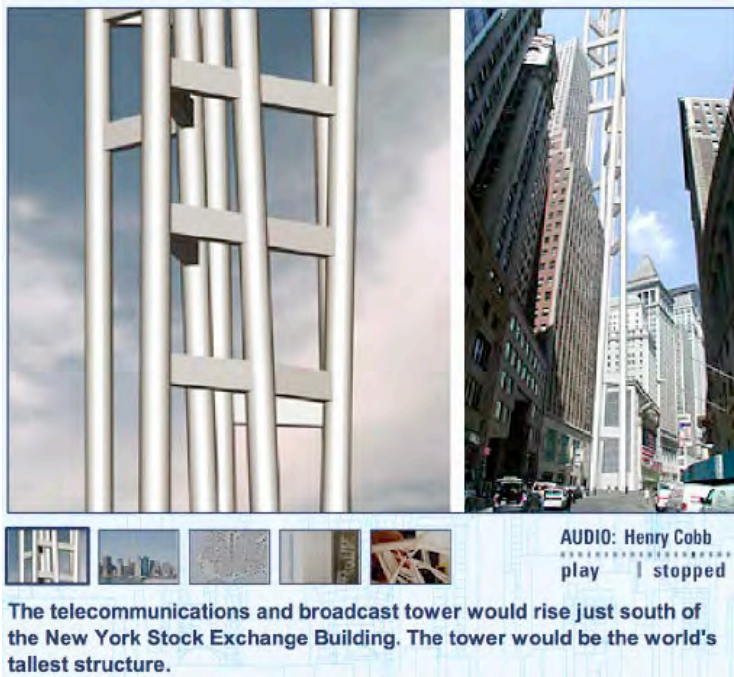
Charles Gwathmey Housing Unit, "Don't Rebuild, Reimagine.", September 2002, *New York Times Magazine*



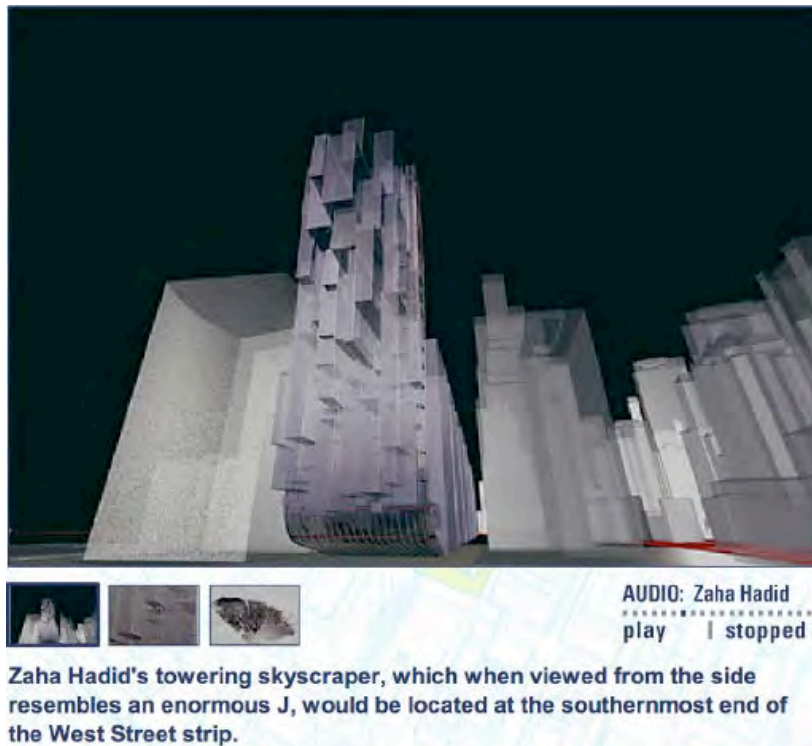
AUDIO: David Rockwell
.....
play | stopped

The Hall of Risk, a conceptual space devoted to debate.

xxi



Proposals for the Stock Exchange: David Rockwell “Hall of Risk” and Nordenson/Cobb Broadcast Tower, “Don’t Rebuild, Reimagine.”, September 2002, *New York Times Magazine*



Zaha Hadid Housing Proposal, “Don’t Rebuild, Reimagine.”, September 2002, *New York Times Magazine*



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