

Title: Rebranding the Neoliberal City: Urban Nature as Spectacle, Medium, and Agency

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Abstract:

Post-industrial sites are frequently seen as aesthetically sublime, considered as iconic reminders of an ongoing de-industrialization, and interpreted as symbols of the failure of the industrial age. Simultaneously they are also locations to re-imagine, reinvent and recover landscapes as agents for essential, sustainable, and environmentally-just urban transformations. The most visible discourses on post-industrial urban sites emphasize issues of environmental justice, pollution mitigation, adaptive reuse, and, in the context of urban redevelopment and renewal, benefits and performances based on ecological functions and processes. On the one hand, current concepts such as “landscape urbanism”, “sustainable urbanism” and “ecological urbanism” (as conceptual and practical alternatives to the mainstream forces of urban development) suggest ecology as a redemptive agent. Conversely, established and new hegemonial agendas of global development and neoliberal capitalization focus on political and economic interests involved in the complex processes of urban renewal, gentrification, redevelopment.

These competing discourses construct post-industrial sites as highly contested terrains, and variously instrumentalize emergent ecologies and “urban nature”. Post-industrial sites themselves can be decoded as physical manifestations (material) – and representations (medium) – of such discourses. In this context, the present paper analyzes the High Line in New York City, one of the most recent iconic design projects on a post-industrial urban site. It draws on WJT Mitchell who frames city and urban space as “both represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified and uses the idea that spaces operates simultaneously as real place and a way of seeing. It will argue that the agency of physical and material change in urban spaces extends beyond its economic, functional and ecological performances into the aesthetic-representational practices of “seeing” and “being seen”.