Open Space

BERLIN GLEISDREIECK PARK • MELBOURNE RENEWAL OF LONSDALE STREET • NORD-PAS DE CALAIS LOUVRE-LENS MUSEUM PARK • NICE PAILLON PROMENADE • ISTANBUL THE GEZI PARK REVOLUTION • PARIS LA DÉFENSE BUSINESS DISTRICT • ATHENS REVITALISING THE CITY CENTRE • DALLAS NEW URBAN SPACES • CHRISTCHURCH OPEN SPACE AND DISASTER RECOVERY • AUCKLAND BARRY CURTIS PARK • HELSINKI BAANA PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE PATH • UTRECHT KROMHOLT BARRACKS • ESSAYS DEMOCRATISATION OF URBAN SPACE • PLACES FOR EVERYDAY IN EAST ASIA
The High Line in New York City can be seen as an example of a far-sighted design intervention that is putatively oriented towards expanding and activating the urban public sphere but accelerates processes of gentrification, displacement, and exclusion at the neighborhood and urban scales.

Neil Brenner

**OPEN CITY OR THE RIGHT TO THE CITY?**

Henri Lefebvre once postulated “the right to the city”, which was a radical demand for a democratization of control over the collective means of producing urban space. But designed open spaces like the High Line Park in New York obey the rules of neoliberalizing capitalism and result in gentrification. Designers should think about their responsibility for a democratic redesign of the city.

Around the world, progressive, critical-minded architects, landscape architects, and urban designers are engaged in place-making projects that propose to create a more “open city” – one that can be accessed by all inhabitants rather than being reserved for ruling-class elites and the wealthy. While such initiatives are generally steered by state institutions, as well as by real estate developers and corporate patrons, they have often emerged in response to local struggles against the forms of privatization, gentrification, displacement, and sociospatial exclusion that have been unleashed under post-Keynesian, neoliberalizing capitalism. In the context of an ongoing global financial crisis, in which market fundamentalism remains the dominant political ideology of most national and local governments, proposals to counteract the deep social and spatial divisions of early 21st-century cities are surely to be welcomed by all those committed to promoting more just, egalitarian and democratic forms of urban life.

But how can relatively small-scale design interventions, such as those cataloged in this issue of *Topos*, confront the monstrously difficult task – as Richard Sennett poses the question – of “heal[ing] society’s divisions of race, class, and ethnicity”? Even the most radical designers are seriously constrained by the politico-institutional contexts in which market fundamentalism remains the dominant political ideology of most national and local governments, proposals to counteract the deep social and spatial divisions of early 21st-century cities are surely to be welcomed by all those committed to promoting more just, egalitarian and democratic forms of urban life.

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which they work, and today these are gener-
ally defined by the naturalized imperatives of
growth-first, market-oriented urban eco-

nomic policy and by approaches to urban
governance in which corporate and proper-
ty-development interests maintain hege-
mocratic control over local land-use
regimes. In practice, moreover, the interventions of
designers concerned with “opening up” the
city via project-based initiatives have often
intensified the very forms of spatial injustice
which, at least in rhetorical terms, they as-
pire to counteract.

This is because the conditions associated with “urbanism” – the effervescence of dense
zones of centrality, interaction, exchange and
spontaneous encounters – also frequent-
ly generate major economic payoffs, in
the form of privately appropriated profits,
for those who own the properties surrounding
the project site. While many places have pro-
visionally experimented with instruments of
community reinvestment, local land trusts
and profit-sharing mechanisms in relation to
such newly created arenas of urbanism, the
predominant global trend is for growth-
machine interests – often linked to specula-
tions and resources shared by all. Any design
intervention that claims to promote the open
city without purging these core goals will be
seriously incomplete, if not delusory.

From my point of view, the above formula-
tions offer an insufficiently critical perspective
on the role of the designers, and the design
professionals, whose expertise, creative capaci-
ties and labor-power are recurrently harnessed
to mask, manage or soften the sociospatial
contradictions of neoliberal urbanism.

The position outlined above implies, rather naively,
that design is insulated, both as a professional
practice and as a form of social engagement,
from the broader systems of market-based land-use,
investment and displacement at larger spatial
scales, across multiple sites, places and terri-
tories. Operationally, there is a danger of pro-
gramming the design intervention using an
epistemology that is fixated upon consumer-

ism, “quality of life” and the provision of
urban amenities, rather than opening up
spaces to appropriation, self-management and
ongoing transformation “from below,”
through the users themselves. To the degree
that design interventions for an open city are
restricted to formal, aesthetic elements or
merely precluded at a larger, city-wide or
metropolitan scale, often by the very politi-
co-institutional forces and coalitions that
brought such sites into being. The “open
city” thus becomes an ideology which masks,
or perhaps merely softens, the forms of top-
down planning, market-dominated govern-
ance, sociospatial exclusion and displacement
that are at play both within and beyond
these redesigned spaces of putative urban
“renaissance.”

T he case of the High Line in Chelsea/
Manhattan exemplifies this quagmire.
A brilliant, far-sighted design interven-
tion, initially spearheaded through a commu-
nity-based initiative, opens up a long-inac-
cessible, derelict space for public appropria-
tion, to great popular acclaim. In so doing, it
intensifies earlier, more sporadic forms of
gentrification through a wave of new invest-
ment oriented primarily towards elite con-
sumers in surrounding blocks – luxury hotels
and housing; high-end restaurants, cafes and
shops – that can only be accessed by the
wealthiest residents and tourists. In this way,
the design intervention is that putatively ori-
ented towards expanding and activating the
urban public sphere accelerates processes of
gentrification, displacement and exclusion at
the neighborhood and urban scales. The con-
struction of a supposedly “open” urban space
thereby creates new barriers to a genuinely
democratic, egalitarian urbanism, not only
within the site of intervention, but
across the surrounding fabric of buildings,
blocks and neighborhoods. With all respect to
the specifics of national and local context,
some version of this narrative could, alas,
be elaborated with reference to a long list of
prominent project-based design interven-
tions in major cities around the world,
including many of those in which quite imag-

inative, skillful and ostensibly progressive
design schemes have been implemented.

To what degree, and in what ways, is the
practice of design implicated in such retro-
grade outcomes? At first glance, such prob-
lems may appear to result less from the intri-
cacies of the design scheme itself, than from
the broader system of rules – for instance,
regarding land-use, property ownership,
financing, taxation, investment and public
goods – that govern the city, region and terri-
tory in which the project-based design inter-
vention happens to be situated. Surely the
designers cannot be faulted for working as
imaginatively as possible within the con-
strants imposed by such rule-regimes. After
all, what other options might they have, since
they generally lack control or influence over
investment flows, property ownership struc-
tures and political decisions? And, even if
the conditions imposed by the client are
less-than-ideal, isn’t it far better to see a
good, creative, imaginative design implemented
than a bad, derivative, boring one?

For further reading see bibliography page 111.