

Chapter 13

Storyline and Design: How Civic Stewardship Shapes Urban Design in New York City

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Introduction

Our interest in reshaping the natural world to enhance human life can be traced back thousands of years to the earliest urban civilizations. From irrigation projects of the Indus Valley to the Roman aqueducts to designing integrated systems of landscaped parks and stream valleys, humans have sought to harness the capacity of nature to advance public well-being, prosperity and urban development. Throughout this history one finds a wide range of social actors in competition over urban land not only as it becomes scarce but as the meaning of nature shifts in concert with changing social and economic conditions.

Environmental historians have remarked that the period from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century is distinct as it reflects rapid and unprecedented changes in human settlements, technology, and global markets that have dramatically restructured the relationship between society and nature (Cronon 1991, 1995; McNeill 2003). Civil society and the state, at different historical moments, have united over a shared concern for the urban environment and the provision of public goods, noting that land use and consumption patterns have produced many benefits as well as unexpected risks to human health and prosperity.

Over the past century, local civic groups throughout the United States have worked alongside government agencies and the private sector to address a wide range of land use issues including access to parks, gardens, trails, waterways and other urban wildlife and habitat experiences (e.g. Burch and Grove 1993; Westphal 1993; John 1994; Weber 2000; Sirianni and Friedland 2001; Andrews and Edwards 2005;

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Sirianni 2006; Svendsen and Campbell 2008). In documenting recent civic innovation in the United States, Sirianni and Friedland (2001) suggest that the characteristics of today's civic environmentalism are best defined by collaboration among various communities, interest groups and government agencies through deliberation over relative risks and shared values. Multi-scaled governance is on the rise (Bulkeley and Betsill 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003) and diverse groups are creating new discourses within the field of environmental politics (Hajer 1995; Fischer 2003).

In this chapter, urban environmental stewardship groups are examined in an effort to better understand the adaptive capacity of social organizations to respond to a changing set of political, economic and physical conditions across the urban landscape. Specifically, the chapter explores the way in which these groups use urban design as part of a resilient and discursive strategy to advance specific program objectives. The clustering of knowledge by a group into a particular 'storyline' is thought to be one way for urban planner to understand and mediate complex issues of sustainability (Eckstein and Throgmorton 2003). Others have suggested that in light of an increasingly fragmented and contradictory discourse surrounding the environment, storylines have become political devices or tropes used by 'discourse-advocacy coalitions' to achieve their goals on an international and national scale (Hajer 1995: 58).

In this chapter, local stewardship groups subscribe to a specific storyline and set of discourse actions in an attempt to adapt to a changing landscape. The chapter centers upon three environmental stewardship groups in New York City engaged in, respectively, a waterfront greenway in Brooklyn, an elevated park in Manhattan and a neighborhood greenway in the South Bronx. The first case explores a greenway project along the waterfront in Brooklyn where neighbors and friends have joined forces with local government to reclaim public access using a design narrative to reclaim the local community's right to access the waterfront. The second case involves Manhattan's High Line Park, and, demonstrates how the physical form of the industrial era is reinvented through art and nature in order to challenge prevailing notions of economic development and urban planning. The last case centers upon the South Bronx and how charismatic leaders championing the cause of social justice and human dignity were able to use urban design as a mechanism for safer streets and improved physical connectivity for residents in a highly industrial setting.

In all three cases, coalitions were formed as civic stewards of these open space designs. Local stewardship groups demonstrated an adaptive capacity to mediate a complex political system in order to advance both program and principle through design. The adaptive capacity of these local stewardship groups depends upon a repertoire of actions that includes the deliberate use of urban design and a clear project narrative, or storyline, that centers upon some aspect or interpretation of the natural world. Often this interpretation of nature is resilient, restorative, therapeutic and egalitarian. These discursive techniques are not new to the field of urban design and development. However, this chapter suggests that future examination of these processes may lead to a greater understanding of how urban design outcomes vary across space, time and scale.

The Civic Landscape

Many civic, government and private sector groups have successfully used discursive techniques and ‘nature narratives’ to express and shape urban environmental policy (Hajer 1995; Fischer 2000, 2003; Ernston and Sörlin 2009). In fact, discursive strategies were vigorously deployed in the promotion and design of the first urban, landscaped parks in the United States. In revisiting the nineteenth century American conservation movement, it is often forgotten that preservation strategies for the country’s great forests and grasslands were adapted, in part, from the urban parks movement (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992). Building off the discursive tactics used by Fredrick Law Olmsted and others to create Central Park, national conservation leaders such as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt adapted narratives appealing to core values and anticipated risks associated with the industrial age to garner public support for the Yosemite Valley and the Hudson River Palisades (Taylor 1999).

Civil society has a long history of protecting, preserving and promoting open spaces in American cities and towns. The social history of these groups has been studied from a number of perspectives including urban parks (Cranz 1982; Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992; Cranz and Boland 2004), urban gardens (Lawson 2005), public health (Duffy 1968), environmental justice (Bullard 1993, 2005; Campbell 1996; Taylor 1999, 2009) and political influence (Schlosberg 1999; Scobey 2003). Civic groups have responded to public problems through direct action and oppositional politics as well as seeking to work along with and outside of government agencies (Carmin 1999; Brulle 2000; Carmin and Balser 2002). Urban environmental groups, in particular, have shaped politics and planning as they are increasingly recognized for their role in determining the location and quality of land use (Pincetl 2003; Prell et al. 2009).

Nineteenth Century Urban Design and Storyline

In the early nineteenth century, urban parks were most commonly private spaces serving the needs of a select group of property owners and an elite class. The wealthy enjoyed the use of private park-like estates, courtyard squares, gardens, and even hunting and racing grounds, while the urban working class used tenement alleys, public sidewalks and streets as public parks and playgrounds. As the working class population of cities grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of an urban park shifted from a private playground to large, public spaces such as Central Park in New York City and Grant Park in Chicago.

For the urban poor and new immigrants, these tranquil experiences were intended to help with assimilation and inspire cultural behaviors deemed favorable by the middle class (Fein 1972, 1981; Cranz 1982; Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992). The idea of a large, public park in New York City was popularized as a democratizing space where the urban working class could enjoy fresh air, open

lawns and quiet solitude among newly planted trees and water features. The notion was that the pastoral and artistic design of Central Park, combined with proper rules of behavior would serve to civilize and, ultimately, improve the lives of the working class (Fein 1972, 1981; Cranz 1982).

In this narrative, nature was used as a form of social control and was deployed most successfully by famed landscape architect and Superintendent of Central Park, Fredrick Law Olmsted (Taylor 1999). The desire for social reform, combined with the underlying fact that many local property owners stood to benefit financially from the construction of Central Park, helped to persuade public decision-makers to invest in one of the largest capital construction projects in nineteenth century New York (Taylor 2009).

At the same time, the design of the park gave rise to an innovative form of civic organization. The ‘Park Board’ was established in the 1850s and comprised of shareholders representing the interests of an elite class of artists, politicians and capitalists (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992). Considered to be a ‘democratic experiment’ by Olmsted himself, the Park’s Board of Directors was a new form of urban governance designed to protect public property interests from political patronage (Olmsted 1870). While the Park Board was far from equalitarian in terms of membership, it was a new organizational form that adapted to the politics of a changing urban regime that included fiscal responsibility and large-scale capital development. The Park Board was replicated in other cities as city managers and the urban elite clambered for Olmsted-inspired parks and similar open space investments. Today, many cities still have an active Park Board that can trace its lineage back to the nineteenth century and Olmsted’s efforts (Foglesong 1986).

The Urban Century

As the park movement expands into the twentieth century, its history is replete with great triumphs and tragedies as tensions continue between capitalist interests and the democratic use of urban space. There is an outcry of new voices, concerns and contradictions that give rise to distinct urban park eras (Cranz 1982). During the Progressive Era (1890s–1920), a new park advocate emerges who champions the desire for smaller, neighborhood parks. Designs favor active recreation and the physical needs of the poor and immigrant communities. These new park advocates become effective at framing messages and create strategic narratives that, again, evoke the restorative power of nature. Moving further along into the century, park advocates abandon the pastoral ascetic in favor of ball courts, swimming pools and what might be considered functional urban space (Cranz 1982).

Several decades later, during the 1970s fiscal crisis, persons living in poor or underserved communities take control of their own experience – weaving together highly personal accounts of place into a call for environmental and social justice

(Bullard 1993, 2005). Many could not identify with the design aesthetic of Central Park or were unwilling to conform to the rules of the park. As a result, new ethnic and cultural groups redesigned vacant lots and create pocket parks in their community to grow food, cook, and play games and socialize (Shiffman 1969; Francis et al. 1984; Carr et al. 1992). As the city continues to serve a diverse population through its open space network, urban park advocates in the 1980s and 1990s introduce new narratives including sustainable development, food security, community gardening, urban forestry and the like (Fox et al. 1985; Cranz and Boland 2004). Thousands of urban environmental groups are formed. Major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston prove to have robust and resilient civic actors capable of promoting new urban design models for parks, gardens, waterfront access and tree planting initiatives (Svendsen and Campbell 2008).

A number of urban environmental groups are active in advocacy campaigns, participatory park design (Calthorpe 1993) and what has been termed by Carmin and Balser (2002) as 'bucket brigades' of volunteers to plant trees and clean shorelines. A growing number of urban environmental actors have become directly involved in policy and governing practices of transboundary spaces including watershed areas, 'foodsheds,' large parks and reforestation and afforestation sites (Salazar 1996; Koontz et al. 2004). Some urban environmental groups are functioning more like business regimes than single-issue, environmental advocates (Pincetl 2003). And many urban environmental groups have adapted an integrated language of sustainability (Agyeman and Angus 2003; Cranz and Boland 2004). In 2007, the Stewardship Mapping and Assessment Project (STEW-MAP) found that there were at least 2,500 active civic organizations dedicated to conserving, managing, monitoring, advocating for, or educating their friends, neighbors, or public officials about the local, urban environment in New York City (Fisher et al. 2012). D. Taylor (2009) developed a typology reflective of these civic environmental groups. These include volunteer and professional *assistance providers* and *catalyst groups* that assist with basic needs for fundraising, design and construction, *co-managers* and *sole managers* such as conservancies and alliances with longer-term legal responsibilities over a specific park site and *city-wide partners* that support an overall issue or campaign.

In this sense, the nineteenth century 'park board' model is alive and well in cities; however, it has expanded its scope, diversified its message and broadened its membership. As the urban park movement moves into the twenty-first century, there is evidence that urban environmental groups are becoming more professionalized and engaged in multi-scaled organizational networks reflecting a range of urban ecological issues and perspectives (Fisher et al. 2012). Not unlike the nineteenth century Park Board, these organizations have a strong interest in meditating the effects of private capital and public interest through the use of urban design and narratives depicting nature as restorative and resilient. At the same time, the persistence, diversity and changing scope of these organizations throughout the course of urban park history suggests the need for closer look at design and discourse within the framework of urban planning.

Case Studies

In an effort to understand, in part, how a diversified and resilient civic landscape of urban stewardship groups gives rise to unique urban design, I conducted open-ended interviews with neighborhood leaders, designers, city planners and developers in three different New York City neighborhoods from 2007 to 2009. All three areas involve park and open space projects along or near New York City's waterfront communities in Brooklyn (Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway), the Bronx (South Bronx Greenway) and Manhattan (the High Line). Although not directly on the Hudson River waterfront, the High Line is considered a waterfront project in that it is part of the larger redevelopment taking place along the west side of Manhattan near the Hudson River. This particular phase of redevelopment began along the waterfront and has expanded into adjacent neighborhoods along the west side. All three projects include a linear design in terms of spatial form and can be considered transboundary as they cross multiple political and property jurisdictions. All three neighborhood sites are located in post-industrial, waterfront communities that have been zoned for residential and mixed use.

The Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway

Opening up the Waterfront

With a clear intent to reclaim Brooklyn's post-industrial waterfront for its local residents, the founding members of the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative began their work in the late 1990s as 'street corner' activists. The group established its claim on the waterfront on behalf of the public by deploying visible acts of stewardship including site clean-ups, festivals and bike tours. Their message was clear: open up the waterfront to local residents. Not unlike Jürgen Habermas' depiction of eighteenth century bourgeoisie debating politics of the state in Parisian salons (Habermas 1989), greenway supporters raised the issue of the waterfront revitalization in coffee houses, bars and restaurants. The group used discursive tactics to persuade local residents, business owners and city representatives to support a 14-mile greenway that spanned several neighborhoods and included a complex assembly of public and private land.

"It's such an intense, thick world in the city between neighborhood groups and the bureaucracies, you know, given the funding process and the competition for space. You put just as much effort in moving a curb out an extra four feet in the city than you do in other places where you are working with hundreds of thousands of acres" (interview #4 2007).

The group often noted that the construction of the greenway would make sections along the Brooklyn waterfront publically accessible for the first time in half a century. The larger context of Brooklyn Greenway Initiative (BGI)'s messages was to advocate for the rights of a diverse community through collaboration with government and business interests.

In many ways, this inclusive and collaborative approach reflected the transboundary design of the greenway. The proposal for this greenway design coincided with the appearance of powerful market forces that led to a change in land use along the Brooklyn waterfront, creating opportunities for large-scale, residential and mixed-use redevelopment. Neighborhood rezoning paved the way for a dramatic rise in new residential construction along with new parks and open spaces. While redevelopment created tension and uncertainty for those unsure of how a changing neighborhood would affect them, representatives of the greenway faced opposition to their plan as the entire Brooklyn waterfront was “up for grabs” and a number of contentious public meetings ensued (interview #4 2007).

In the neighborhood of Sunset Park, representatives of a local environmental justice group feared a greenway would actually concentrate activity along the waterfront leaving the neighborhood streets devoid of new opportunities for economic development and further isolate its working class community. An urban planning consultant working in Sunset Park voiced similar concerns that the greenway had potential to cause harm in the community.

Sure, the greenway will fill in that missing link along the waterfront and that is an important goal of the Sunset Park community. But linking the waterfront to the upland residential community, is if anything, much more important. It wouldn't do the Sunset Park residents a bit of good to have just a waterfront greenway. It would be almost an anti-community project because it would serve other people who simply want to go through Sunset Park (interview #7 2007).

BGI countered this claim ensuring that much like the design of the greenway, the process of implementing the greenway would be participatory and accessible to all members of the community. The opposition to the greenway was quieted in Sunset Park as a result of BGI's decision to pull back as neighborhood groups took the lead in their community. The group in Sunset Park held a series of community meetings and participatory design sessions on the greenway while BGI played the role of an interested observer. In the end, this strategy slightly altered the design but, in return, inspired joint accountability among civic, government and business sectors for the greenway.

With the election of Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2001, the group found allegiance to their cause among government planners. In this case, civic and government actors were aligned through a shared sense of historic purpose. Government planners were fundamentally aligned with BGI as they too wanted to find a way to knit together various waterfront projects and properties. The linear design of the greenway satisfied this desire.

Fully aware of their need for each other, the BGI and government planners soon established a ‘give and take’ style of negotiation in developing a waterfront greenway. As greenway supporters settled on an urban design that encompassed several neighborhoods, BGI rose to the forefront of community-based planning along the waterfront. BGI staff worked directly with government planners to overcome a ‘trained bureaucracy’ of experts and technocrats who often lacked incentives to work in partnership with other government agencies and the public. While BGI continued to represent public interests, the organization's staff became

expert in understanding the structure of government agencies and the nuance of individual personalities.

In the case of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, civil society was less oppositional and more collaborative in their interaction with government. They developed what has been described as a form of ‘counter-expertise’ in relation to government (Fischer 2003). In one instance, BGI’s tactics were highly criticized by local residents as being too flexible as they were forced to compromise on a section of the greenway design. Compromise appeared to be a small price to pay for the support of a 14-mile greenway that runs through valuable industrial and residential real estate in New York City. A founding member of BGI reflects on the organization’s contentious decision to accept the City’s plan to alter the greenway plan in the Red Hook section.

Our goal was to have the greenway go down Van Brunt Street in Red Hook but it just didn’t work out that way. Sometimes you have to realize to take your winnings and go home. So like we hit a triple but why make it a homer? We figure that you consolidate your gains and come back to fight another day (interview #12 2007).

In another area along the greenway, local shopkeepers protested the design of the greenway claiming it would interfere with customer parking and deliveries. The debate simmered down as the BGI, local residents and the Department of Transportation encouraged local business owners to understand the larger scope of the project and how greater connectivity among neighborhoods would become a greater benefit to business. At the same time, the multi-jurisdictional design of the greenway allowed the group to pull back from local skirmishes in favor of a grand and integrated vision for the waterfront.

Intent on overcoming bureaucratic barriers in developing the greenway, BGI would use tactical language and messaging that positioned the group not as an agitated civic organization but as a partner or a ‘friend’ to government and business. Hosting fundraisers and parties throughout the waterfront area, BGI provided a platform for government officials and business owners to restate their commitment to community and to be publicly congratulated for their efforts. In turn, government planners rewarded BGI by recognizing the group as the lead civic organization working on behalf of the greenway. Such recognition helped BGI to establish a positive reputation among private and public funders. Design became a critical part of the greenway narrative, and ultimate success of the project, as the group used each and every opportunity to engage and adapt to people, plans and projects along the Brooklyn Waterfront.

The High Line

Building upon Ruins

The High Line is an elevated, urban park that was converted from a freight railway built in the 1930s to facilitate the flow of goods through the dense streets along the Westside of Manhattan. The High Line is situated in a relatively compact

post-industrial area nestled between Manhattan's West Side Highway and the greater Chelsea neighborhood. Similar to the Brooklyn waterfront, the 1990s was a period of significant transformation in the neighborhoods of far West Chelsea and the Meatpacking District. The area underwent a local renaissance as artists, business entrepreneurs, and real estate developers flocked to this community comprised primarily of warehouse spaces, delivery garages and parking lots. Drawn to the area's waterfront views and emerging art scene, investors envisioned many exciting opportunities for redevelopment. The rail road was considered blight and many local business owners and politicians were in favor of demolishing the line to make way for new development. A major rezoning effort began in the 1990s by the City of New York's Department of City Planning heightened investment interest in the community during this time. Art galleries, trendy bars, and restaurants replaced warehouses and vacant lots seemingly overnight. Established in 1999, Friends of the High Line (FHL) created a campaign to save the old rail line and convert it for public use.

The High Line project attracted a great deal of media attention that offered centered upon its unique elevated design. As Adam Sternberg wrote in *New York Magazine*,

...The High Line is, according to its converts (and they are legion), the happily-ever-after at the end of an urban fairy tale. It's a flying carpet; our generation's Central Park, something akin to Alice in Wonderland...through the keyhole and you're in a magical place. It's also the end product of a perfect confluence of powerful forces: radical dreaming, dogged optimism, neighborhood anxiety, design mania, real-estate opportunism, money, celebrity, and power. In other words, it's a 1.455-mile, 6.7-square-acre, 30-foot high symbol of exactly what it means to be living in New York right now (Sternbergh 2007).

The discursive strategies used by FHL to support the High Line park design centered upon the uniqueness of this space. As FHL co-founder Robert Hammond has publically remarked, "At first we just wanted to raise the flag and to let people know that this incredible place existed in New York – to have some discussion about it" (public lecture by Hammond 2007). The 'incredible place' to which he was referring to was atop the rail line's viaduct, where 20-years of self-seeding red sumac, milkweed, Echinacea and smoke bush had grown over the rail road tracks. This miniature secondary growth wilderness in Manhattan was out of sight to those at street level. However, for those walking on the line, thirty feet above the ground, the High Line offered peaceful and rare 'mid-canopy' views of the city as it wound its way through, around and alongside buildings between 9th and 10th Avenues. Today, the High Line has been converted from a defunct freight rail line into an elevated, urban park (Fig. 13.1).

In the case of the High Line, Friends of the High Line was shaped and motivated by securing an aesthetic vision of 'celebrating the ruins of the city' thought to be transformative to contemporary social and economic life of the larger community. With the intent of creating a "work of art" and a "park to rival Central Park," the campaign created a clear niche for the FHL, not only in the future development of the park but in expanding a particular design aesthetic in and around the surrounding community (public lecture by Hammond 2007; interview #27, 2007).



Fig. 13.1 The High line. The High line was an elevated, freight rail line running along the west side of Manhattan that has been recently converted into a linear, public space (Photo credit: Edgar Almaguer)

However, civic actors did not entrust the state to carry forth this vision with precision. Using highly innovative strategies and developing significant counter-expertise, Friends of the High Line directed the public discourse through the use of strong images depicting nature overcoming the industrial machine and a design that attracted new development along its boundaries.

The fight to Save the High Line was highly spirited and contentious. For over a decade property owners and developers advocated to demolish the line and in only a few years, Friends of the High Line turned this opposition into full support for the park project. Not unlike the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative, Friends of the High Line sought to re-direct and engage rather than compete with market forces. However, the momentum behind this small group of individuals grew to include some of the city's wealthiest residents and well-known celebrities. Artists, capitalists, and politicians, New York City's glitterati flocked to lend their support to The High Line.

Although entirely different in design and material structure, the story of the High Line is reminiscent of the development of New York's Central Park. The design of the High Line was based upon an aesthetic vision favored by an elite class of urban designers and developers and modeled after the Promenade Plantee in Paris. In the area surrounding the High Line, a large portion of Chelsea had been rezoned in 1999 in accordance with the neighborhood's 197-A plan and in hopes of an \$85

million public and private redevelopment of the High Line. The rezoning procedure ensured the preservation of light and air as well as views around the old rail line. At the same time, rezoning paved the way for the High Line as it encouraged new developments to engage with the park corridor (interview #34 2007). Central Park had the same impact of significantly increasing the tax base along its perimeter over 100 years ago.

Set apart by a century, supporters of both projects used a similar rhetoric that combined the artistic and social virtues of a public park to its visitors. Friends of the High Line founders Joshua David and Robert Hammond, as stewards presiding over a highly popularized urban project, are reminiscent of Olmsted and Vaux as they navigate the realm of well-placed politicians, decision-makers, popular artists, private donors and investors. The High Line drew a strong base of political and economic support reminiscent of Central Park. In this case, we find the same “civic-minded capitalists” who supported Central Park, eager to benefit from a rise in local real estate values and to be a part of a creative public enterprise (Scobey 2003). And not unlike D. Taylor’s (2009) depiction of Minturn’s Circle, a group of established business owners, partners and friends in support of Central Park, the FHL drew upon elite social networks to advance their ideas and interests over the use of urban space and social order.

Early in the project’s history, Friends of the High Line held an international design competition that included ideas to convert the old rail line into a lap pool, a prison, a prison-park, or a roller coaster – all of which brought significant public interest to the project, yet, the fanciful nature of these designs did not call for serious opposition. The High Line became the favorite issue of politicians, in part, because they could ascribe to it any number of positive visions for New York City. As one government staffer reflected, “They were distracting people with crayons” (interview #16 2007). While developers, decision-makers, politicians and the public alike mused over the design of the High Line, FHL pressed ahead with legal action to stop the demolition while raising significant private dollars to finance its reconstruction. New York’s business elite including local real estate owners and financial investors operated with fluidity, shifting their position seemingly overnight.

The magnitude of this effort, and the language used to describe it, reflected the need for a professionalized group to serve as its long-term steward. The project itself, as well as the high-level and fast-paced redevelopment along the West Side, propelled this group to become one of New York City’s leading park conservancies. Bolstered by an incredible opportunity to turn a profit for both the public and private sector, the project gave rise to a multi-million dollar urban park stewardship group within the span of a few years. The right combination of real estate, urban design and discursive tactics gave rise not only to a new park but a social organization.

The responsibilities of open space management have shifted from government to a hybrid entity as Friends of the High Line has accepted significant fiscal responsibility for the park raising nearly seventy percent of the annual operating budget. Local government has not relinquished its authority or its responsibility for urban parks. Instead, government has transferred its expertise to the private sector in exchange for secured funding and support from the private sector. Each entity has

become dependent upon the other. The High Line is an innovative, twenty-first century urban design that is reminiscent of the nineteenth century park movement. In both cases, design was used as a discursive tactic that inspired proclamations by government officials, campaigns by civic boosters and significant financial investment through public subsidy and private capital.

A potential concern in terms of the High Line is that the project has become a significant story of popular interest and, therefore, it tends to overshadow other neighborhood needs for public space, quality of life improvements and rezoning in the surrounding community. Some residents living near the High Line have lamented that although it is a public park, the High Line is better suited for tourists, real estate investors, and students of landscape design rather than children or the elderly, for example (interview #3 2009). Storylines and counter-narratives are a critical part of a group's ability to adapt to changing perspectives. From this story one can see that design can be used as a powerful, discursive tactic by civic groups to achieve their goals, yet, it must be coupled with the ability to mediate public discourse as it evolves overtime.

The South Bronx Greenway

Greening the Ghetto

The Bronx River flows for 23-miles from suburban Westchester and through the Bronx making a long run through neighborhoods in the South Bronx before emptying out into the East River. Many long-time residents of Hunts Point, Longwood and Port Morris in the South Bronx avoided the river entirely as the riverbank was notoriously trash-strewn and inaccessible (interview #25 2007; interview #43, 2007). By the late 1990s, the Bronx River Alliance, a not-for-profit organization working in collaboration with the New York City Parks & Recreation Department, was making great strides in restoring the river's health and inspiring a number of waterfront parks and new organizational partnerships with local industry. Community-based efforts and government support inspired the creation of new, local organizations such as Rocking the Boat, a group dedicated to helping empower young people through boatbuilding and on-water education (Fig. 13.2). A representative of the Bronx River Alliance observed, "It was like when environmentalists and hunters find that they have the same things in common, we too found that the river and the environment brought together rather unlikely partners" (interview #38 2007).

The notion of a South Bronx Greenway would emerge through combined efforts of local civic organizations dedicated to improving conditions in and around the Hunts Point Peninsula. Organizations such as Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, The Point Community Development Corporation, Sustainable South Bronx, and the Bronx River Alliance were working together in response to a growing concern over unsafe and unjust conditions in one of the poorest Congressional districts in the country.



Fig. 13.2 Bronx River. As a result of community-based organizations and government support, public access to the southern portion of the Bronx River has improved and the river is well-used by local residents (Photo credit: Joaquin Cotten, Rocking the Boat)

The design for the South Bronx Greenway differs from more traditional waterfront greenways that adhere to the water's edge. The South Bronx Greenway is anchored along the Bronx River Waterfront yet extends onto streets and sidewalks within the neighborhood of Hunts Point. As one planner stated, "The greenway's point of origin came not from the river but from the streets with the focal point being the people who live in this South Bronx community" (interview #7 2007). The South Bronx Greenway will connect people through neighborhood streets, parks, businesses and highlight public access points along the Bronx River (Fig. 13.3).

The South Bronx Greenway was proposed during a time when the local community was seeking new ideas for urban redevelopment. These ideas were buoyed by a robust real estate market and growing public discourse in support of "green" communities. Like the case of the High Line and the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, residents and community-based organizations strategically positioned themselves within the context of a post-industrial neighborhood poised for redevelopment. Juxtaposing the gritty, noxious and industrial landscape of the South Bronx with the restorative qualities of nature, civic groups advocated for a cleaner, greener and more economically viable community.

Under the banner of environmental justice, a local and charismatic civic leader named Majora Carter was able to attract national and international attention to the Bronx River, the South Bronx Greenway and larger community development concerns in the South Bronx. In 2005, Ms. Carter was awarded a prestigious



Fig. 13.3 Local boat launch along the Bronx River. The South Bronx Greenway is designed to connect to the waterfront areas along the southern sections of the Bronx River as well as neighborhood streets, parks, and businesses (Photo credit: Joaquin Cotten, Rocking the Boat)

MacArthur Foundation Fellows Award for her efforts as an “urban revitalization strategist.” This award led to a number of high-profile speaking engagements, honorary titles and the creation of a National Public Radio Program, hosted by Ms. Carter and entitled, “The Promised Land.”

Decades earlier, Jose Serrano, another local charismatic leader, became a member of the United States Congress. ‘Congressman Serrano and his staff,’ with: His staff have unabashedly claimed the environmental and economic revitalization of this South Bronx district to be an issue of high national interest (interview #2 2007). To the Congressman and his constituency, the Bronx River became an iconic symbol of the area’s revitalization and the South Bronx Greenway soon established itself as its tributary weaving its way into the heart of the community. Both the river and the greenway are used to symbolize, as one respondent put it, the “promise of things to come” in the South Bronx.

Ironically, the design of greenway served as a mechanism for social control, but it was not programmed by traditional elites seeking to modify the behavior of others. In this case, one finds the redress of industrial and market behavior rather than the moral reform of the working class as the impetus for new parks and greenways. The South Bronx Greenway is tied to a much larger planning process that encompasses safe transportation, affordable housing, improved public health, and quality education, access to jobs, and the enjoyment of parks and the environment.

Despite the deployment of an urban design that signified the pursuit of human dignity and resilience, at certain points during the course of the development of the South Bronx Greenway, tensions ran high between individual personalities, civic organizations, industry and government. In the words of government planners on this

project one finds evidence of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ acting and reacting to intrapersonal relationships rather than serving as an impartial technocrat (Jones 1998). At the same time, civic groups often retreated to traditional modes of adversarial politics rather than collaboration and compromise. This led to high levels of contention as local groups and individuals used discursive tactics to claim ownership of the greenway design. Many civic groups refused to use conciliatory language in public meetings in fear of relinquishing their role as outspoken civic activists (interview #3 2009). This type of discourse did little to help a greenway design that flowed through neighborhood streets, open spaces and industrial sites, and as such, led to uncertainty over who would ultimately be responsible for the project.

As discordant harmonies grew in the South Bronx, a private planning consultant was hired to develop a business plan for the greenway and associated open spaces. A key recommendation of the plan was to create an entity that was neither civic nor government. The South Bronx project differs significantly from the other two cases in this chapter as the High Line and the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway were both clear tools for community redevelopment. In the South Bronx, there remained a great deal of ambiguity over whether the community should favor residential or industrial concerns. In fact, the design of the South Bronx Greenway was so provocative that it raised the issue of re-development and ‘greening the ghetto’ to a level of public discourse that was beyond the actual project. While the South Bronx Greenway design will be implemented, the process has been slower than in the other two areas with, perhaps, more uncertainty over the final design. In this case, the call for environmental justice has been heard by local decision-makers. However, there is more work to be done in terms of sustaining a unified urban design message that addresses concerns for community livability and supports an industrial sector in the South Bronx.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the three case studies, stewardship arrangements tend to have a particular sphere of influence that is a physical space as well as abstract space, within the realm of the market economy and governmental decision-making. Who leads the campaign, who directs the project and who receives kudos for its design and construction often dictates who governs alongside government. Therefore, in addition to the other kinds of space enumerated above, there is also a space of ‘stewardship turf’ that can result in competition between organizations creating tensions or synergies.

In these examples, urban design becomes part of storyline that emerges from the hopes and desires of neighborhood stewardship groups. Social and ecological narratives proved to be an important adaptive capacity used by stewardship groups, city planners and urban park designers. Design was used as dialectic to bolster the importance of a group and its project. The resilient and restorative qualities of nature were drawn out by discursive processes to create accessible and democratic space in

Brooklyn, to give rise to artistic design and a new urban park constituency among the ruins of the High Line, and to improve the health and social welfare of people in the South Bronx. In all cases, the stewardship group advances a particular story through design. This discursive action brings different social actors together on a project. This new configuration of social actors, through urban design, helps to recreate, reshape and strengthen social organization.

Charismatic and dedicated civic leadership combined with a popular storyline and strong urban design resulted in the strategic accumulation of economic, social and political resources. Ideals associated with urban nature shaped public discourse, politics and ultimately, the hybrid arrangements governing each project. The community organizing efforts of the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative to '*open up the waterfront*' has resulted in an urban design that has inspired the integration of public and private redevelopment efforts. The expressive leadership of Majora Carter and Congressman Jose Serrano in '*greening the ghetto*' has brought about innovative ways to improve the lives of people through the restoration of the environment. And finally, in '*building upon ruins*,' two neighbors from the west side of Manhattan have channeled the spirit of Fredrick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux to create a public work of art that has transformed an entire community.

Civic groups used urban nature to create a common ground from which to form coalitions and collaborations. In all cases, civic groups used a particular social ecological design to express a storyline that extolled the virtues of urban greening and demonstrated their capacity to adapt as social forces for change in a complex urban setting. Ultimately, this tactic had the effect of disentangling a more rational and scientific approach to environmental planning. For example, an older, rational planning approach would use a percentage based upon the population to determine the amount of open space required in each neighborhood area. Because the Hunts Point residential population in the South Bronx is relatively small, rational planning might suggest that its open space requirements have already been met. In the case of the High Line, rational planning models would not have justified the amount of public money spent per square foot for the project. And in the case of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, rational planning models are not likely to have produced a linear design spanning over 14 miles through public and private developments.

At the same time, by engaging in a dialogue with designers, city planners and officials, the majority of civic groups studied here strategically positioned their organizations as working in collaboration with government entities. In all three cases, local government representatives were eager to collaborate with local groups, not only to make more efficient the process of redevelopment, but because they shared the same 'nature narrative' of restoring the city. The establishment of regional parks, neighborhood parks, pocket parks, playgrounds, community gardens, urban farms, greenways, and restoration areas are therefore the result of particular moments in the social ecological history of the city. These include changes in neighborhood demography and the built environment as well as civic actions, levels of contention, political regimes, and municipal budgets and real estate cycles. Taken as a whole, urban park design and open space planning reflect this dynamic history. In turn, the

processes and mechanisms of urban design tend to shape the form and function of a resilient civil society and the state as they create new modes of governance.

Over 100 years after the establishment Central Park's Board of Commissioners, there is evidence of a similar class of capitalists, politicians, and artistic elite who are active in urban park planning. However, new groups and alliances have risen to the fore of urban environmental stewardship through the saliency of their designs and discursive strategies. This chapter sheds light on professionalized urban environmental stewardship groups emerging from different neighborhood social ecologies. Some of these groups have ascended to power through rather traditional elite networks and others gained a foothold into urban planning processes through popular discourse and charismatic leadership. In order to achieve parity in the planning process, urban designers are encouraged to understand *stewardship as a system* and work to strengthen the capacity of different types of stewardship groups.

Urban environmental groups have grown less content to participate in urban environmental planning through traditional means of public participation preferring the 'hands-on' role of a civic steward. While stewardship still includes neighborhood clean-ups and plantings, in certain instances it has grown to include formal rule making, technical expertise, fiscal management and design over public space. For the most part, the socio-political rise in authority and expertise of any civic group depends upon how a particular design is framed, resource capacities, site history and personal degrees of trust. Although parks and open space have historically been part of the urban frame, this course of history suggests that the formation and success of urban stewardship groups emerges from moments where urban design and a compelling storyline are woven together to create the political momentum to envision and create new urban form.

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