

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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"Nobody's ever seen the High Line"¹: Joel Sternfeld and the image of the High Line that led to its rehabilitation.

Oscar Barnay

Abstract

This article analyses the way in which a photographic work can participate in both the safeguarding and the transformation of an infrastructure whose heritage value was contested at the time. The article traces the importance of Joel Sternfeld's photographs in the process of safeguarding the West Side Freight Line, which has since become the famous High Line Park, one of New York's most visited landmarks. The article is based on an analysis of the genesis and course of the photographs (in order to analyse their dissemination strategies and reception) and on the discourses of various protagonists. In this example, the relationship between the photographer and his clients, as well as the way the photographs were exhibited and made visible, reflect a conscious desire to put the quality of a renowned photographer at the service of creating a positive collective imagination around a then little-known and little-appreciated infrastructure. While this approach did indeed help save the threatened building, it was also accompanied by a symbolic shift, in which images effectively replaced reality, directly influencing the High Line's restoration projects and their reception by both the general public and the sponsors.

Keywords: Photography ; Industrial infrastructure ; Heritage ; Image; Imaginary

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¹Joel Sternfeld, 2002. *New York Voices: Joel Sternfeld*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk> watched on 01.02.2023.

Today, the High Line urban park is one of the most visited sites in New York, welcoming over 5 million visitors every year. Its success is probably due to its unique configuration: an unreal, wild-looking aerial passageway in the middle of Manhattan. As a park, designed by renowned landscape architects such as Piet Oudolf, highly frequented and secure, the High Line has little in common with the wild. But it nevertheless evokes a pristine imaginary world, in stark contrast to the feverish, mineral urban context of Manhattan in which the aerial promenade unfolds.

This imaginary is no accident, nor is it the logical result of a slow, natural feralization of the site. It is the product of a patient, well-informed design, inspired by a transitional state that had passed into a slightly more authentic wildness, at a time when the wasteland was threatened with destruction. One of the factors that helped save the High Line is certainly the photographic work by Joel Sternfeld, which helped shape the new imaginary created by the High Line's architects and landscapers in the 2010s.

From the West Side Freight Line to the High Line Park

The High Line, or High Line Park, is currently an urban park in Manhattan that occupies a former overhead section of the West Side Freight Line, a rail line that linked the St. John's Park freight station to the West Side Yard (now covered by the Hudson Yard real estate development). Built between 1925 and 1934, it was meant to separate the flows of rail freight from the street. Previously, freight trains had used ground tracks along 10th Avenue, causing numerous accidents with other users and earning the avenue the macabre nickname of Death Avenue. The substantial investment required to build an overhead track was justified by the high level of industrial activity in the neighbourhoods it passed through, such as the Meatpacking District. As a feeder line, the West Side Freight Line passed through a number of industrial buildings, and featured a number of spur-rail terminal installations, enabling warehouses to be directly connected to the rail network. Running overhead from West Side Yard to its southern terminus, the line is built on a steel post-and-beam structure and surprisingly passes through the heart of city blocks, rather than following the line of a street.

From the 1960s onwards, the importance of freight traffic declined, with the relocation of many industrial activities to outlying districts and, above all, the development of road transport. The southern section of the track, from the St. John's Park terminus to Bank Street, was demolished in the 1960s, before train traffic came to a definitive halt in 1980. The 1980s and 1990s saw a clash between property owners and investors (who wanted to demolish the track to free up land) and local activists such as Peter Obletz, who tried to restore rail traffic or propose new uses for the structure. The status quo remained unchanged until the end of the 1990s, not least because of the high cost of total demolition, estimated at several million dollars. In 1991, however, a portion was dismantled to the south, from Bank Street to Gansevoort Street. Despite attempts by real

estate developers and Rudolph Giuliani (Mayor of New York City from 1994 to 2001) to demolish the entire elevated track, 2.3 km of track remained in place, left to lie fallow, between Gansevoort Street and West Side Yard. On the remaining section, spontaneous vegetation gradually gained ground, taking advantage of the thickness of the ballast and the absence of human activity. This abandonment of maintenance changed the city–nature balance, as defined in particular by Mike Davis:

Nature is constantly straining against its chains: probing for weak points, cracks, faults, even a speck of rust. The forces at its command are of course as colossal as a hurricane and as invisible as bacilli. At either end of the scale, natural energies are capable of opening breaches that can quickly unravel the cultural order. Cities, accordingly, cannot afford to let flora or fauna, wind or water, run wild. Environmental control demands continuous investment and systematic maintenance: whether building a multi-billion-dollar flood control system or simply weeding the garden².

From Davis's point of view, there is a permanent, invisible conflict at work in every anthropogenic structure, involving a city–nature relationship whose balance is constantly being called into question. A place deprived of maintenance gives ground in this “conflict” and allows flora and fauna to develop in unprecedented ways. In the heart of Manhattan, the abandoned High Line had a strange, supernatural quality. At once close to the city and yet isolated by its aerial location, it remained invisible from the street, yet particularly present to all the buildings above it. This unlikely situation refers to what Paul Arnould, Yves–François Le Lay, Clément Dodane and Inès Méliani propose to call (paradoxically) an urban “semi–natural space”:

This type of environment occupies vacant land, wasteland or small interstitial spaces, sometimes over large areas but discontinuously. These so–called “degraded”, undeveloped environments have undeniable landscape and ecological value, as they contain spontaneous vegetation capable of adapting more easily to urban conditions³.

It should be noted that, due to the High Line's particular linear shape, this occupation was, for instance, continuous. Officially closed and owned by a private company, the High Line's long viaduct was theoretically inaccessible to local residents and walkers. This condition, which favors the development of non–human inhabitants on the tracks, also attracted a few urban explorers, daring and privileged visitors, who enjoyed rare vistas and an unusual experience. This type of exploratory practice⁴ is often accompanied by a photographic motivation, stimulated by the

2 Mike Davis, 2002. *Dead Cities: A Natural History* (New York, NY: New Press,), 362.

3 Paul Arnould, 2011, et al., “La Nature en ville : l'improbable biodiversité,” *Géographie, économie, société* 13, no. 1 : 45–68. Personal translation.

4 Often referred to as “Urbex”, a contraction of “Urban Exploration”.

feeling of going where few go (and thus bringing back a photographic testimony) and by the particular aesthetics of suspended places, or even of ruins.

Many researchers have looked at how the perception of ruins has changed over time. We often note that these structures leave us with an almost romantic aftertaste of sadness and nostalgia. On the other hand, their persistence over time leads us to reflect on the resilience of cities and the resilience of human creation⁵.

In the early 2000s, the remaining overhead section of the West Side Freight Line was an abandoned infrastructure, a vestige of a historic industrial activity on the verge of extinction. It was a landscape of remnants with singular spatial and ecological qualities, but virtually invisible from the street. It thus seemed destined to fall progressively into oblivion, creating the conditions for its literal physical disappearance.

However, in 1999, the company that owned the tracks, CSX Transportation, finally opened the debate to proposals for transformations, an opportunity seized by local residents. Two of them, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, founded a nonprofit organization, Friends of the High Line, with the ambition of transforming the track into a park, a transformation inspired by that of the old Vincennes track in Paris, transformed into a park six years earlier (inaugurated in 1993) and known today as the "Coulée verte René-Dumont".

In this complex context, under constant real estate pressure in Manhattan, this transformation of use had first to involve a transformation of the way in which the railroad was perceived. The first step was to unlock the possibility of such a transformation: the first challenge was to transform people's imaginaries.

Joel Sternfeld, *Walking the High Line*⁶

With this in mind, Friends of the High Line approached American photographer Joel Sternfeld in 2000. At the time, he was already world-renowned, notably for his work *American Prospects*⁷, published in 1987.

Sternfeld's photographs, always in color, are taken by view camera. Some of his best-known earlier works, such as *American Prospects* (1987), *Hart Island* (1991–1994) and *On This Site* (1996), are characterized by a 5:4 format, great sharpness and clarity, and above all by a

5 Taika Baillargeon. 2013. "La ruine de l'en-attendant : un cas d'éphémère continu," *Sociétés*, no. 120 : 25–34, <https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.120.0025>. Personal translation.

6 Joel Sternfeld. 2001. *Walking the High Line*, ed. Adam Gopnik and John R. Stilgoe (Göttingen: Steidl).

7 Joel Sternfeld. 1987. *American Prospects*, 1st ed (New York: Times Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).

remarkable mastery of light and tonal variety⁸. His series include many landscapes, but also a few situational portraits. They mix scenes and elements of the banal and everyday scenes with more singular, intriguing and even disturbing situations, such as a car caught in a landslide, an elephant sprayed in the middle of a road to protect it from the heat, or the strange context surrounding a burning house. In Hart Island, Sternfeld also explores the question of the memory of place, photographing the landscapes and occupants of a 53-hectare island with a particular history in the Long Island Sound, by the New York Bronx. Sternfeld's approach combines historical research, field surveying and photography. In this sense, it can be described as an investigative approach, as Aline Cailliet⁹ understands it. Danièle Méaux describes the link between documentary production and the artistic process as follows:

The inquiry process [...] also breaks down the opposition traditionally established between a desire to be "anchored in reality" and the exercise of "imagination". It aims to reveal aspects of the world through concerted procedures, but these procedures are part of a creative process. [...] it generates new content that does not replicate a prior reality¹⁰.

A prison camp during the Civil War, Hart Island later housed a hospice, a prison, a women's asylum, and was also one of New York's largest cemeteries, where unknown, unclaimed bodies and the marginalized and destitute were buried in mass graves. Sternfeld's photographs show both the traces of these dark past activities, contemporary cemeterial activity and the people, particularly inmates, who occupy Hart Island today. The memorial dimension is also at the heart of another of Sternfeld's series, entitled *On This Site*, and composed of "fairly neutral, constative overviews of sites that have been the scene of tragic events¹¹", such as ecological disasters or high-profile crimes (including those of well-known figures such as Martin Luther King and Harvey Milk).

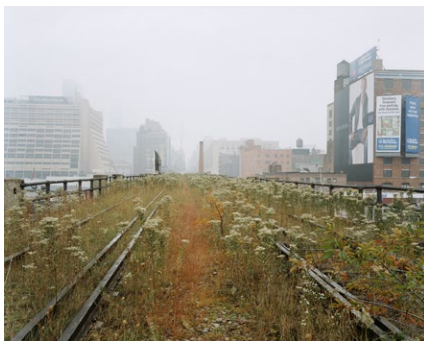
Memory and political issues, as well as American landscapes and identities, run through Sternfeld's work, embodied in photographs characterized by their richness of detail and tone, and by their ability to evoke what is no longer there. It was probably because of the photographer's singular approach, but certainly also because of his reputation at the time, that Friends of the High Line approached Sternfeld. Both the quality of his work and his influence were to give new visibility to the infrastructural landscape of the then abandoned railway viaduct.

8 Danièle Méaux. 2019. *Enquêtes : Nouvelles Formes de Photographie Documentaire* (Trézélan: Filigranes. 195.

9 Aline Cailliet. 2019. *L'Art de l'enquête : savoirs pratiques et sciences sociales* (Milan: Mimésis).

10 Méaux, *Enquêtes*, 16. Personal translation.

11 Méaux, 194.



For the High Line project, Joel Sternfeld took his view camera along the abandoned tracks on numerous occasions over a period of just over a year (from April 2000 to July 2001), enabling him to photograph all the seasons and thus different states of vegetation, the main visual element of the High Line landscape. In this way, we find photographs taken at more or less the same points along the route, but radically different due to the seasons, the vegetation or the weather. In many of his works, such as *American Prospects* and *Hart Island*, Sternfeld had resorted to elevated and therefore overhead views, as he explains in a 2019 interview:

If you're a bit overhanging, you can get very sharp depths of field. Sometimes I'd go up on the roof of a building, sometimes on the roof of a car, sometimes on a hill... I had installed a platform above my Volkswagen combi, just like Ansel Adams, but he used it to photograph mountains, not swimming pools with people moving around¹².

In this case, on the High Line, both photographer and subject are elevated and detached from the ground. Paradoxically, it is both a photograph taken at ground level (since Sternfeld does not elevate the point of view in relation to the subject) and at height (since the track is aerial). The horizon is systematically in the center of the frame. As the photographs are taken along the axis of the tracks (in the photographer's direction of travel, along the viaduct), they are marked by a strong central perspective, restoring the photographer's point of view as surveyor. The lower half of the images is filled by the ground and vegetation, with occasional glimpses of rails, railings or other traces of railway activity. The upper half is taken up by the sky and buildings, whether near or far, visible from the track. Because of the height of the viaduct, the street level, the activities of New York, that "city that never sleeps", remain invisible and out of focus. No human presence is directly visible in the photographs, in which the distant buildings and the activities they host seem no more than a background to the scene. This paradoxical absence

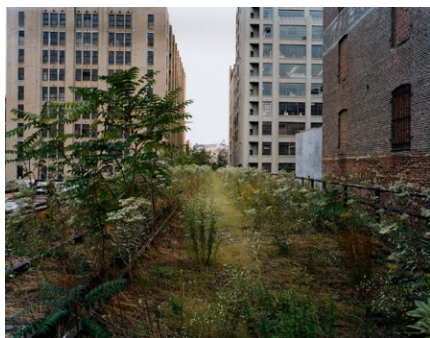
¹² Joel Sternfeld. 2019., quoted in : Clémentine Mercier, "Entretien Avec Joel Sternfeld," *Libération*, https://www.liberation.fr/arts/2019/11/04/joel-sternfeld-en-tant-qu-artiste-votre-job-est-de-tuer-le-pere_1761536/. Personal translation.

[Fig.1]

Joel Sternfeld. 2000. Walking the High Line, Looking East on 30th Street on a Morning in May, courtesy of Joel Sternfeld

and inactivity underscores the singular experience offered by the High Line: isolated from the street, vegetated, quiet in the middle of Manhattan, a district renowned for its intense activity. Rust, vegetation-covered rails, chimneys and warehouse access tracks, visible on both sides of the track, evoke the West Side Freight Line's past industrial activity, while at the same time underlining its contemporary state as a wasteland. When Sternfeld took these photographs, the High Line's future was uncertain. Devoid of official use, neither really in ruins nor really in good condition, the High Line was a pending place, characterized by the absence of the activity that led to its construction, and by the presence of traces that convey a form of memory of the place, evoking its past functions.

Joel Sternfeld's photographs reveal a singular landscape, marked by a strong contrast between the highly urbanized backdrop of Manhattan or Jersey City, and foregrounds marked by lush, autonomous vegetation that irresistibly evokes an idea of rediscovered "wilderness". The softness and wide range of nuances in the tones and hues of Sternfeld's photographs lend thickness and depth to the expanses of grass and the few paths that seem to emerge between the groves. In this way, his photographs reveal a landscape "inhabited by very distinct rhythms: that of the erosion of railway installations, that of the seasons and the growth of plants, and that of the photographer's walk"¹³. His photographs are marked by a striking paradox between the wildness of the wasteland landscape and the metropolitan backdrop of Manhattan. This visual contrast both intrigues and fascinates. While it certainly lends Sternfeld's photographs their singularity, it is also one of the aesthetic levers that encouraged the conservation and preservation of the infrastructure.



13 Danièle Méaux. 2015. *Géo-Photographies : Une Approche Renouvelée Des Territoires*. Trézélan: Filigranes éditions, 125.

[Fig. 2]

Joel Sternfeld. 2000. Walking the High Line, Looking South at 27th Street. Courtesy of Joel Sternfeld

Birth of a new image

In 2003, again with the aim of combating the High Line's negative image as an industrial relic, and to instill the possibility of its reuse, Friends of the High Line launched an international ideas competition, which attracted some 720 submissions. Local architects and students from all over the world sent in their projects. More or less realistic or detailed, some suggested, for example, transforming the track into a gigantic swimming pool 2.3 km long¹⁴. Other, more conventional proposals foreshadowed what would eventually become a "green" urban promenade, inspired by the Parisian "Promenade Plantée".

Following the competition, Friends Of The High Line organized an exhibition in Vanderbilt Hall, a monumental former waiting room in Grand Central Station. The 720 responses to the competition for ideas for the transformation of the High Line were presented, topped by monumental prints of Joel Sternfeld's photographs. For the association, the exhibition, like the ideas competition, was aimed at popularizing the railway viaduct, making it a reality in the imagination of New Yorkers. Sternfeld's photographs were intended to raise awareness of the unique quality of the landscape along the High Line, while the responses to the ideas competition stimulated the imagination, inviting us to think about the future of a structure whose future was still uncertain at the time. In the words of Robert Hammond himself, co-founder of Friends Of The High Line :

Many New Yorkers fell in love with a series of photos taken by Joel Sternfeld on the High Line in 1999 and 2000. These images gave them their first glimpse of this hidden nature, and crystallized opinion on the need to open up this space to the public. A single glance at one of Joel's photos conveys the tension we wanted to preserve when restoring the place.¹⁵

The large-scale publicity given to Sternfeld's photographs alongside the productions of the ideas competition was intended to convince and seduce public opinion in two ways. Firstly, it was necessary to establish the idea that the abandoned West Side Freight Line was a singular, qualitative landscape that deserved to be preserved for its memorial symbolism and for its once again wild status, all the more astonishing given its location in the middle of Manhattan. Paradoxically, it was also necessary to show how this preservation could be put into practice through a development project that would add value (including economic value) to the existing landscape. As early as 2000, it seemed already clear that safeguarding the railway structure could only be achieved through an adaptive reuse of the viaduct – whatever new functions and uses were to be implemented.

¹⁴ Such was the proposal of a Zurich ETH's students, Nathalie Rinne. Visible on : <https://www.thehighline.org/history/>? Consulté le 13.12.2022.

¹⁵ Robert Hammond. 2018. in Piet Oudolf and Rick Darke, *Les Jardins de la High Line à New York : un modèle de nature urbaine* (Paris: Ulmer), 12.

It is in this sense that Sternfeld's photographs play such a fundamental role. Having become the official images of the West Side Freight Line, they were virtually exclusive representations of it in the collective imagination. They have also been used as photomontages in the proposals of some of the competition's participants, notably in that of New York studio Front Studio, whose "Big Apple Roller-coaster"¹⁶ project suggested leaving the spontaneous vegetation in place on most of the viaduct, while only occasionally installing the structural elements needed to run a vast roller-coaster on and around the viaduct. Other of their collages, again based on Sternfeld's photographs, suggested the possibility of camping on the track, again linking the imaginary of the High Line to that of natural parks, and the enjoyment of natural (or supposedly so) sites.



¹⁶ Visible on the studio website : <http://frontstudio.com/big-apple-roller-coaster>

[Fig. 3]

Front Studio Architects, The Big Apple Roller Coaster, 2003, courtesy of Front Studio Architects

[Fig. 4]

Exhibition of submissions to the ideas competition and photographs by Joel Sternfeld, Grand Central Station, New York, July 2003, courtesy of Friends of the High Line

As Danièle Méaux points out, "Joel Sternfeld's work certainly played a role in the success of the High Line's defense. In this respect, it could be compared to the work carried out by William H. Jackson in Yellowstone in 1870, which contributed to the site's transformation into a national park¹⁷". Sternfeld himself, interviewed in 2002 while photographing the High Line, refers to Jackson's work:

In the 1870's, William Henry Jackson was sent out on one of the western exploration expeditions. For years there had been rumors of this fantastic region in the West, with geysers and waterfalls but nobody had seen Yellowstone until Jackson brought back pictures. And as soon as he brought them back, congress made Yellowstone into a National Park. In a way, I feel like Jackson. Nobody's ever seen the High Line, it's been the most extraordinary experience to be in the heart of New York City and see this secret landscape that only a few people have ever seen¹⁸.

For Sternfeld, taking photographs was part of an intention to bear witness to, and convey the elusive qualities of the High Line landscape. While this intention is naturally reinforced by the particular character of the site, it is in fact common to any photographic practice. To photograph is both to observe and to transmit, if only for oneself. According to Siegfried Kracauer, the photographic process has something of the nature of exploration, which goes hand in hand with the idea of testimony:

Due to the revealing power of the camera, there is also something of an explorer about him; insatiable curiosity stirs him to roam yet unconquered expanses and capture the strange patterns in them. The photographer summons up his being, not to discharge it in autonomous creations but to dissolve it into the substances of the objects that close in on him. [...] selectivity within this medium is inseparable from processes of alienation¹⁹.

In Joel Sternfeld's case, photograph is like a testimony brought back from the exploration of a virgin land (on the subject of the High Line, the photographer notes: "In some ways, it's more pristine than Yellowstone or Yosemite, because every inch of it is authentic"²⁰)), with a marked desire to show the rest of the world this hidden landscape. For the photographer, the High

17 Méaux, *Géo-Photographies*, 114–15. Personal translation.

18 Joel Sternfeld, 2002. in : *New York Voices*: Joel Sternfeld.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk>.

19 Siegfried Kracauer. 1997. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* Princeton: Princeton university press.

20 Joel Sternfeld, in : *New York Voices*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk>

Line represents a singular experience, which he compares to that of Alice in Wonderland²¹: the discovery and exploration of an unsuspected landscape, as if hidden behind a magic door. However, as in the case of 19th-century American photographic missions tasked with bringing back information and images of “virgin” spaces yet to be conquered, photography deploys a particular approach to territory, thought of as a space to be conquered. Commenting on the photographs brought back by Timothy O’Sullivan as part of the Clarence King²² mission, Julie Meyer notes:

The gaze cast on this territory by the photographic device defines an aesthetic and political framework for thinking of wilderness as a space to be dominated, transformed and subjugated. In addition to its evidentiary function, photography is used to produce the imaginary of the conquest of a wild territory to be civilized²³.

Sternfeld’s photographs reflect the same American imaginary of exploration photography, but the context is markedly different. Above all, Sternfeld does not bring back images of a territory as yet untouched by man (at least by the white settler) and yet to be conquered, but rather of a landscape reclaimed by nature over anthropization. His work is therefore both a reactivation of and a step backwards from the work of nineteenth-century exploratory photographers.

From an image to the High Line Park

However, as was the case with O’Sullivan’s and Jackson’s photographs, the 2003 exhibition met with some success. Sternfeld’s photographs certainly influenced Michael Bloomberg, who became Mayor of New York in 2002, to support the association’s adaptive reuse project. In 2004, the city council & Friends of the High Line jointly launched a two-phase architectural competition for the transformation of the structure.

From the fifty or so responses received, four finalist teams were selected: Steven Holl Architects, Zaha Hadid Architects, Terra Gram/Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, and the one finally chosen, made up of landscape architects James Corner Field Operations, architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and garden designer Piet Oudolf, who was then completing the Battery Park project in Manhattan. What appealed to the commissioner about their proposal was that “this team designed a new experience in perfect harmony with the spirit of the place. Other designs

21 « I remember the first time i came here. It was magic. It was an Alice in Wonderland experience. You go through that keyhole and suddenly you're in another world that you never imagined existed ». Joel Sternfeld, in : *New York Voices*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk>

22 *United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*, 1864.

23 Julie Meyer. 2022. “Prises de vue paysagère du territoire états-unien : du sublime burkien à l’esthétique de l’anthropocène,” *Amerika. Mémoires, identités, territoires*, no. 24. <https://doi.org/10.4000/amerika.15797>. Personal translation.

were either very architectural or tried to recreate exactly the original wild landscape²⁴. Indeed, the project presented by Steven Holl proposed the addition of a number of buildings above the viaduct, including a tower of hanging gardens. The project by the TerraGram/Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates team envisaged virtually no change to the existing landscape, simply integrating a few visitor entrances and peripheral buildings to provide a view of the viaduct, while the project by Zaha Hadid Architects was resolutely mineral in character, involving the creation of a long building encompassing and absorbing the viaduct.

Paradoxically, the project chosen by the association is the one which, rather than preserving the vegetation as it was, proposed an in-depth renovation of the structure, involving the removal of everything (vegetation, substrate, ballast, railroad...) to rebuild a new bare space that corresponds to the image of the old one. The aerial urban park proposed by Diller Scofidio+Renfro, James Corner and Piet Oudolf was not a repurposed brownfield site, nor is the High Line virtually untouched, as proposed by the TerraGram team. It is a meticulous yet perfectly structured reconstruction, a controlled embodiment of the fascinating image of feralization that characterizes the High Line in Sternfeld's photographs. The winning project by James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf builds on this image of the High Line created by Joel Sternfeld's photographs.

The vegetation in the project's park is designed by internationally renowned landscape architect Piet Oudolf, best known for designing gardens that take the seasons into account, combining species with staggered flowering periods and integrating the different states of plants into the composition according to their full cycles, and not just at their most spectacular state of bloom. As in Sternfeld's photographs, which show a landscape that is sometimes snow-covered, sometimes lush in spring or in decline in autumn, Oudolf's garden is conceived in its seasonal variation, which certainly struck a chord with the competition jury. Similarly, while the species selected by the landscape gardener have little in common with the pioneer plants that spontaneously colonized the railway wasteland, they reproduce a garden with a relatively wild appearance, far removed from the parterres, borders and string-trimmed boxwood of the Parisian promenade plantée. Piet Oudolf's composition can thus be read as an evocation of the former High Line, a form of controlled representation of the landscape photographed by Sternfeld. In short, it is the adaptation of an image of nature – wild and fantasized – to the constraints and necessities of an urban park receiving several million visitors every year.

24 Robert Hammond, in Oudolf and Darke, *Les jardins de la High Line*, 12.

In 2005, a new exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, curated by Tina di Carlo²⁵. It showcased the winning team's project, again accompanied by photographs by Joel Sternfeld, as well as architectural projects that served as inspiration or reference, drawn from MoMa's collections. These include plans, axonometries and sketches of Bernard Tschumi's project for the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1983), as well as a model and numerous drawings (axonometries, elevations, sketches) of Bridge of Houses (1981), a theoretical project by Steven Holl²⁶. Once again, the association of Sternfeld's photographs with the various phases of the architectural project contributes to their importance in the storytelling surrounding the High Line.

In the same year, and following federal approval, New York's zoning plan was locally adapted to allow the integration of what would become High Line Park as a public park, with the first section opening to the public in 2009 (between Gansevoort Street and 20th Street). A second section opened in 2012, followed by a third in 2014. Further developments were completed in 2019 and 2023.



25 A synthesis of the exhibition is available on the MoMA's website :

<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/107>

26 Originally published in Pamphlet Architecture n°7 (1981) see : *Pamphlet Architecture 1-10* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

[Fig. 5]

Oscar Barnay, On the High Line Park, August 2019

The major intervention (which involved removing all the substrate, resurfacing the concrete slab on the metal beams, and removing the rails and railings, labelling them with archaeological precision and then reinstalling them once restored) enables the project to establish a finely designed, structurally sound promenade, well served by stairs, ramps and elevators making it accessible to people with reduced mobility and light maintenance vehicles. But at the same time, it annihilates all previous spontaneous vegetation and animal occupation of the High Line. It transforms this industrial wasteland into a place of leisure, and the proximity between the two is now purely visual, a form of staging reinforced by the reuse, in their exact original place, of rails and railings, almost museum-like or archaeological relics of railway activity. Robert Hammond, then Executive Director of Friends of the High Line, claims no different:

The abandoned High Line landscape, once an authentic ruin, was a popular destination for urban explorers. Reincarnated as a series of contemplative gardens, this same landscape now safely provides millions of people with the experience of that kind of exhilaration associated with discovering unlikely places²⁷.

Sternfeld's photographs gave an image to the West Side Freight Line's wild character. They also promoted its preservation, building a place for it in the collective imagination of New Yorkers. And yet, paradoxically, the architects' project proposes that visitors experience not this vanished neo-savage landscape, but rather the image of this landscape. In this sense, the High Line designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf is less an evocation of the railway viaduct than merely of its photographs. It could be argued that the image of the real has here taken precedence over the real itself, and that the memory of the West Side Freight Line has been entrusted exclusively to images, embodying one of the biases of the relationship to the world mediated by the photographic image that Siegfried Kracauer prophesied as early as 1927:

The world itself has taken on a "photographic face"; it can be photographed because it strives to be completely reducible to the spatial continuum that yields to snapshots. It can sometimes depend on that fraction of a second required for the exposure of an object whether or not a sportsman will become so famous that photographers are commissioned by illustrated magazines to give him exposure. The camera can also capture the figures of the beautiful girls and young gentlemen. That the world devours them is a sign of the fear of death. What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory-image. In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it all the more²⁸.

27 Robert Hammond, in Oudolf and Darke, *Les jardins de la High Line*.

28 Siegfried Kracauer. 1993. "Photography. 1927." trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3.

Joel Sternfeld's photographs began as a means of raising public awareness of the qualities of the abandoned railroad. They became one of the strongest arguments in favor of preserving the High Line, before becoming the embodiment of its state of neglect and suspense. Today, they are used as a form of legitimization for the urban park, which presents itself as a surrogate experience – an heir to the image provided by Sternfeld's photographs – that has become accessible to all, and can be valorized from a real-estate point of view for gentrified neighborhoods such as Chelsea, or fast-developing ones such as Hudson Yard. Although Sternfeld's photographs were important actors in the repair of a post-industrial landscape, they may also have contributed to a relative instrumentalization of the memory they sought to preserve.

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