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Integrated Seminar 2

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4/18/16

Research Paper

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”¹ This quote by Jane Jacobs reveals the ever-changing cities based on its residents. Over the past 10 years², the neighborhood of Chelsea in New York City has had an increase in gentrification, or a lack of diversity in the area, which began around the start of the construction of the High Line - a once historic elevated train track that is now a park that runs from 14th Street to 34th Street along 10th Avenue in Chelsea. Besides the art galleries, commercial businesses, and restaurants, it has been claimed that this increase in gentrification was caused by the construction of the High Line. Chelsea is known for its sustainability in historic architecture, using older buildings as modern day commercial chain stores and restaurants, and a prime example of this sustainability is the High Line. My proposed question is why specifically is the High Line considered a facet of Chelsea’s gentrification and what about the High Line contributed to the gentrification?

The name "Chelsea" was chosen by Chelsea’s first landowner, Thomas Clarke, and named after the Royal Hospital Chelsea, a retirement home for soldiers in London,

¹ Jacobs, Jane. “The Death and Life of Great American Cities.” Random House, New York. 1961.

² Anonymous former Chelsea resident. Interview by the author. Chelsea, New York City, N.Y. April 10th, 2016.

England. The neighborhood continued to grow from this point for about thirty years, with many single family households and row houses. As the neighborhood grew, Chelsea spread far past the limits of Clarke's estate, with an industrial zone also beginning to develop along the Hudson River. With this industrial zone came immigrants, predominately from Ireland, working along the waterfront on the piers and truck terminals that labored along side along with freight trains and tracks. This included the meat packaging train that ran through factories along the Hudson. This specific elevated train track was what is today the High Line park.³

During the height of Chelsea's industrial era, the West Side Line was used to distribute products and goods such as meat throughout the factories in the meatpacking district. The track became a dangerous area where many accidents occurred, leading to 10th Avenue's nickname, "Death Avenue". After years of debating the hazard of the industrial area, the city of New York agreed on the West Side Improvement Project, which led to the \$150,000,000 construction of the West Side Elevated Highway in 1934. The elevated train track at the time had many pros. It created a safer area for this neighborhood and improved product and good unloading by allowing trains to enter through the factory and warehouse buildings. This created a faster distribution process by avoiding distribution traffic on the streets. The increase of interstate trucking in the 1950s led to a drop in railroad traffic throughout the country, so that by 1960, the

³ Williams, Kieth "The 200-Year History Of Chelsea's Ever-Expanding Borders." Curbed New York. January 23rd, 2014.

southernmost section of the rail was demolished. The last train to run on the track was in 1980, which led to the abandonment of the once busy railroad.⁴

Using the Promenade Planteé in Paris as inspiration⁵, the nonprofit Friends of the High Line organization was created in 1999 by local Chelsea residents Joshua David and Robert Hammond. They advocated preserving and repurposing the line's public open space in hopes to stop the planned demolition of the train track. A photographer was hired to document the greenery on the line for a year. These photographs were used at public meetings whenever the subject of saving the train track was discussed. Community support of public redevelopment of the track for pedestrian use spread, and in 2004, the New York City government committed \$50 million to establish and construct the proposed elevated park, the High Line.⁶

The topic of the High Line today has become quite controversial to Chelsea's revitalization and gentrification. One side of this debate is that the urban park brought on a revitalization in Chelsea for the better, considering the neighborhood's poor condition in the late twentieth century. The construction of the park had also stimulated real estate development in the areas along the line itself. Mayor Bloomberg commented that the High Line has helped form "something of a renaissance"⁷ in the neighborhood, considering the 30+ projects that were planned or under construction in the area.

⁴ Hynes, Tom "Looking Back at The History of The High Line in NYC." Untapped Cities. April 1st, 2015.

⁵ Zimmer, Lori "Paris' Promenade Plantée Gave Inspiration to New York's High Line Park." Inhabitat. July 23rd, 2012.

⁶ Friends of the High Line. "About the High Line." High Line NYC. Last modified 2016.

⁷ Pogrebin, Robin. "First Phase of High Line Is Ready for Strolling." The New York Times. June 8th, 2009.

While some look at all this positively, some view the High Line as a “tourist clogged catwalk”⁸. An interview with a previous resident of Chelsea gave an in-depth perspective into the impact of the High Line on this neighborhood. “I believe the High Line is definitely what kick started the transition of the neighborhood. After the opening of the High Line, that’s when people started realizing that this area can be completely transformed – so everyone began moving and opening their stores and businesses of there. High-end fashion stores, art galleries, the Whitney Museum, the new Sugar Factory and residential buildings where a studio costs a quarter of a million dollars – all of these have contributed to the gentrification of the once not so popular area.”⁹ With an increase of tourists in the area comes an increase in prices due to the popular demand, weeding out residents who once could afford the cost to live there to not be able to any longer. The boom in real estate development hasn't been victimless. Many small and well established businesses have closed in west Chelsea due to the decrease of neighborhood customers and rent increases. Many residents have had to move out of the neighborhood as well due to these rent increases, which caused a decrease of customers in local businesses. The once cultured Chelsea, reflected of its ethnicity and social diversity by ethnic restaurants, delis, and clothing boutiques, has now been erased by the gentrification in the neighborhood.¹⁰ An example of this gentrification is a

⁸ Kurutz, Steven. “Close Quarters.” New York Times. August 1st, 2012.

⁹ Anonymous previous Chelsea resident. Interview by the author. Chelsea, New York City, N.Y. April 10th, 2016.

¹⁰ Moss, Jeremiah. “Disney World on the Hudson.” The New York Times. August 21st, 2012.

recent census from 2010 that shows that 65% of Chelsea's residents today are white non-hispanic.¹¹

As shown, it is found that the High Line's contribution to the gentrification in Chelsea is through tourism and the price of its construction, leading to expensive real estate development and an increase in rent and products in the neighborhood. This increase weaved out the culture that Chelsea was known for. Considering Chelsea's previous cultural markets, shops, and delis, my proposed intervention is a daily cultural market on the High Line right above the Chelsea Market. Today, they have food vendors there, but with my proposal, this area of the High Line will be able to bring back the culture in the neighborhood that was lost with diverse foods, clothes, and more that will attract the varied population Chelsea was known for.

¹¹ Census Fact Finder NYC. "Searched Census Tract Manhattan 26.02." In *Census Fact Finder NYC*.

Bibliography

1. Anonymous. Interview by the author. Chelsea, New York City, N.Y. April 10th, 2016.

This is a primary source where I interviewed a former Chelsea resident. This person has either lived in or right next to Chelsea all of her life. Being that this person knew the area this well, this interview was necessary to my research in understanding the effects of the High Line in the area.

2. Census Fact Finder NYC. "Searched Census Tract Manhattan 26.02." In *Census Fact Finder NYC*.

This is a primary source where I found information on Chelsea's statistics and demographics. This gave me the information that was essential to making my point of gentrification in the neighborhood.

3. Friends of the High Line. "About the High Line." High Line NYC. Last modified 2016.

This is a primary source where I found founders and funders of the High Line, and information on how the High Line came to be.

4. Jacobs, Jane. "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Random House, New York. 1961.

This book is a secondary source that offered me a quote that could be useful as an introduction to my topic of gentrification in Chelsea. This book covers the topic of urban renewal and unslumming.

5. Williams, Kieth "The 200-Year History Of Chelsea's Ever-Expanding Borders." Curbed New York. January 23rd, 2014.

This article is a secondary source that gave me a fully detailed timeline of the High Line that I needed to give an in depth history of the High Line to my readers.

6. Hynes, Tom "Looking Back at The History of The High Line in NYC." Untapped Cities. April 1st, 2015.

This article is a secondary source that also gave me the information I needed for an in depth history of the High Line.

7. Zimmer, Lori "Paris' Promenade Plantée Gave Inspiration to New York's High Line Park." Inhabitat. July 23rd, 2012.

This article is a secondary source that gave me the information I needed to understand what the High Line was inspired by, which was the Promenade Plantée in Paris.

8. Pogrebin, Robin. "First Phase of High Line Is Ready for Strolling." The New York Times. June 8th, 2009.

This is a secondary resource article where critics are rating the High Line when it was first opened.

9. Kurutz, Steven. "Close Quarters." New York Times. August 1st, 2012.

This article is a secondary resource article where critics are also rating the High Line when it was first opened.

10. Moss, Jeremiah. "Disney World on the Hudson." The New York Times. August 21st, 2012.

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