

# MIDDLE PERSPECTIVES

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In June of last year, I found myself in New York city, and decided to take a walk down an urban renewal experiment called the High Line. I'd gone expecting to experience something vaguely cool and hip, but the view turned to be much more interesting.



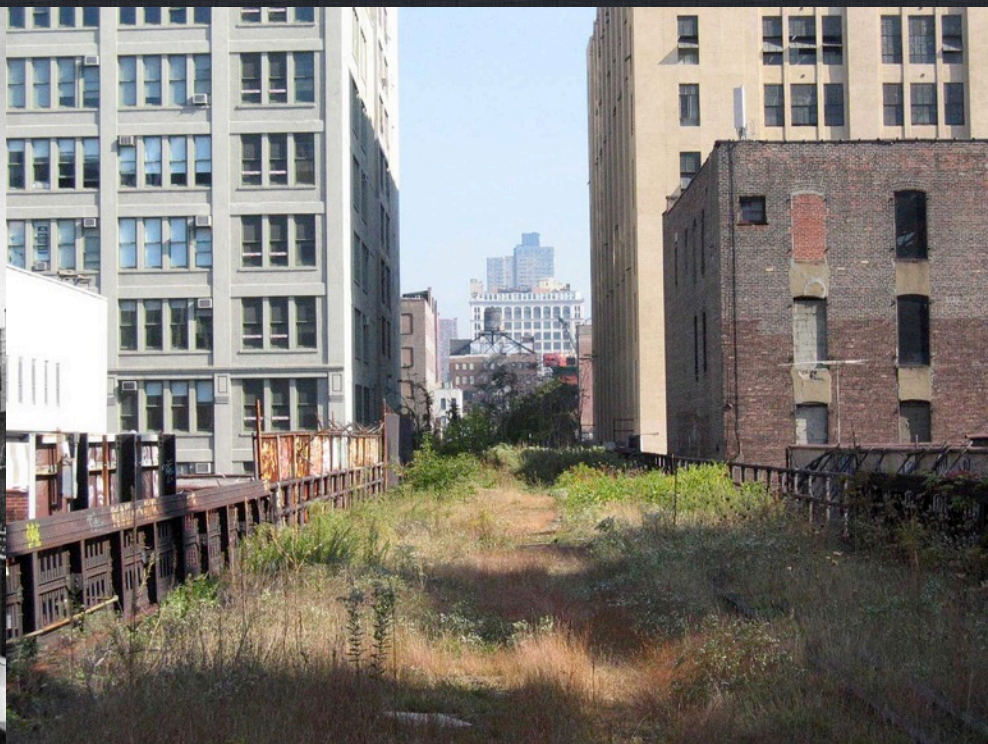
IMAGES FROM: FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE

The High Line was built in the 30s, to remove dangerous freight traffic from Manhattan's streets. The last train ran in 1980, and the railway was abandoned.





THEN



NOW

IMAGES FROM: FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE

In 1999, a group of friends stumbled into what had become a natural green space in the midst of cement-heavy New York, and started a movement to save the railway that eventually ended in its conversion into a public park that opened in 2009.





(C) IWAN BAAN

The High Line runs 20 streets through Manhattan, from Gansevoort to 30<sup>th</sup>. It runs through a variety of neighborhoods – in a sense, sampling the West side of Manhattan. The experience of the High Line, then, is partly driven by its relationship to its context.






The High Line is a unique architectural experiment, in that it takes as its material the existing urban landscape, and creates new experiences with it. Walking down the High Line thus gives you new views into the city, and changes the meaning of several of its spaces.



# MUSEUM OF THE CITY



The first kind of conversion is that the back of the house becomes the front of the house. In effect, you see into the inner material lives of city dwellers in ways you would not see through the street. Unlike with operating elevated railways, you can stop, stand, stare and examine someone else's life at leisure.





## POLITICS OF VISIBILITY?

This has the interesting and somewhat contradictory effect of both making apartments less private and driving property values up by virtue of proximity to an attractive urban feature. One wonders what the politics of this are: how does one negotiate the change in the meaning of one's own spaces as a result of someone else's construction activity?

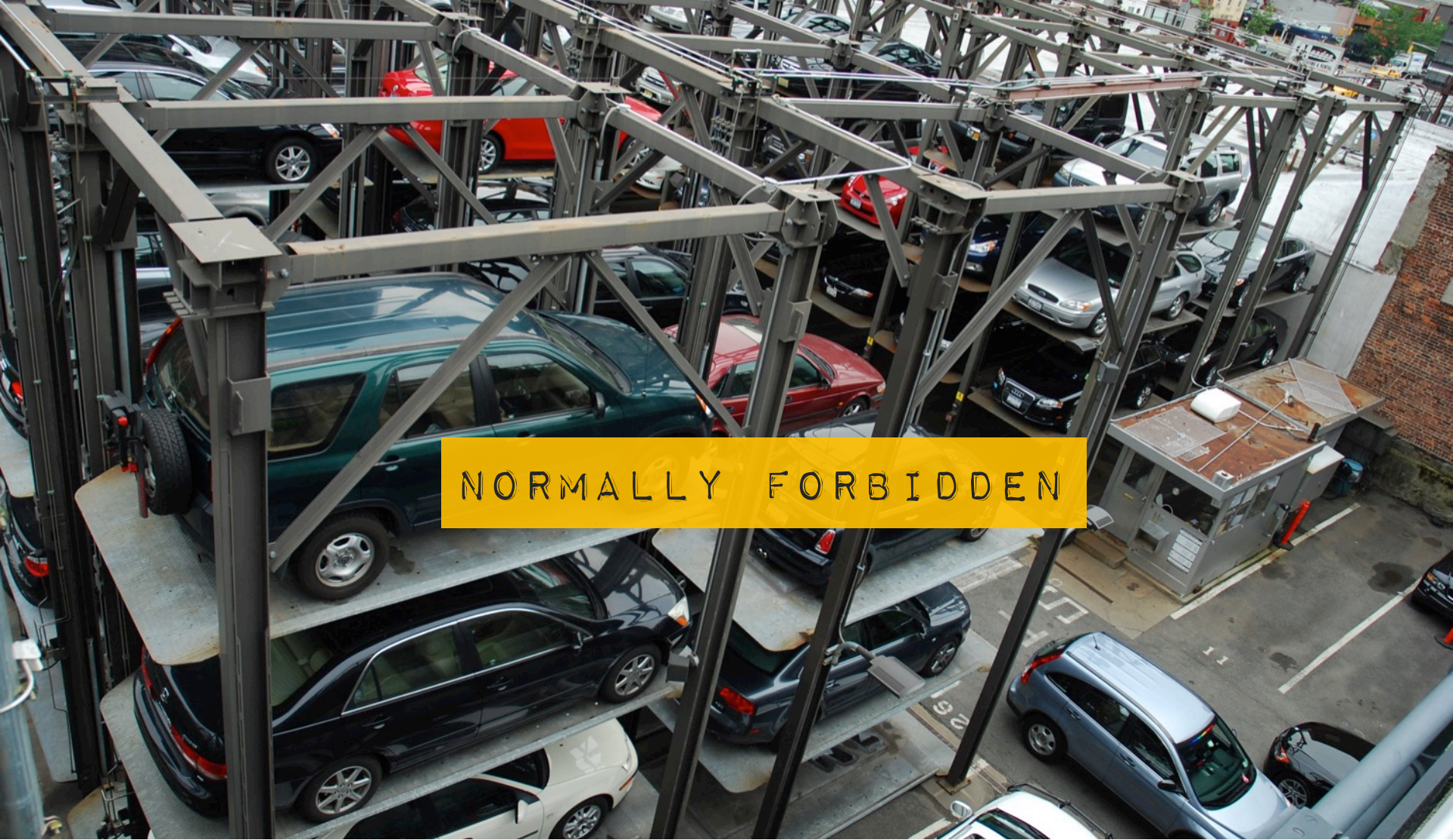




## INFRASTRUCTURE UNCOVERED

As you pass, you see public spaces from views you almost never see, unless you happen to live or work in a suitably situated space. If nothing, these small glimpses of the places nobody goes to makes you rethink what you really know about a city when you inhabit or pass through it.





## NORMALLY FORBIDDEN

Things are seen at scales you don't normally experience, often giving a comprehension of an entirety that escapes you at street level, or that you don't pay attention to because it is merely something you use, something that passes beneath the threshold of awareness. And sometimes the operators just won't let you in, for insurance reasons.





## MECHANISMS REVEALED

But now, from up here, you can now see into the innards of the beast, hazard a guess as to how it works. You're not just a wanderer now, you're an explorer, a discoverer. This is a thrill of the unknown that adults have forgotten about living in a city – the feeling of crossing over a frontier into a new space.



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Children don't forget though; they know this place is special. It's neither street nor sky; neither cartographic nor pedestrian. This is a place of middle perspectives.



# DEFAMILIARIZATION



The High Line is thus a technology we all know and use as ethnographers: making the familiar strange, but in a very particular way: the High Line creates just enough distance to everyday life for it to become visible as a larger whole, and just enough closeness.



# APPROPRIATIONS

## PERSONAL



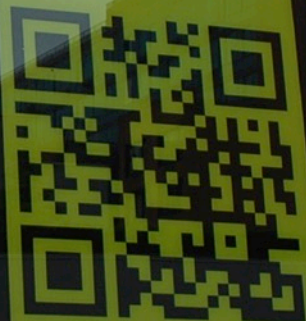
This is someone taking advantage of the new visual proximity afforded by the High Line to create their own billboard, thus making an intimate, personal performance in a public space, in a rather unique way.



# APPROPRIATIONS

## COMMERCIAL

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This isn't wasted on the market, of course. Notice the QR code, using modern smartphone technology as connective tissue in a very efficient, if somewhat brazen manner. This didn't need support from the High Line in any way – it merely appropriated a public space to its own ends.



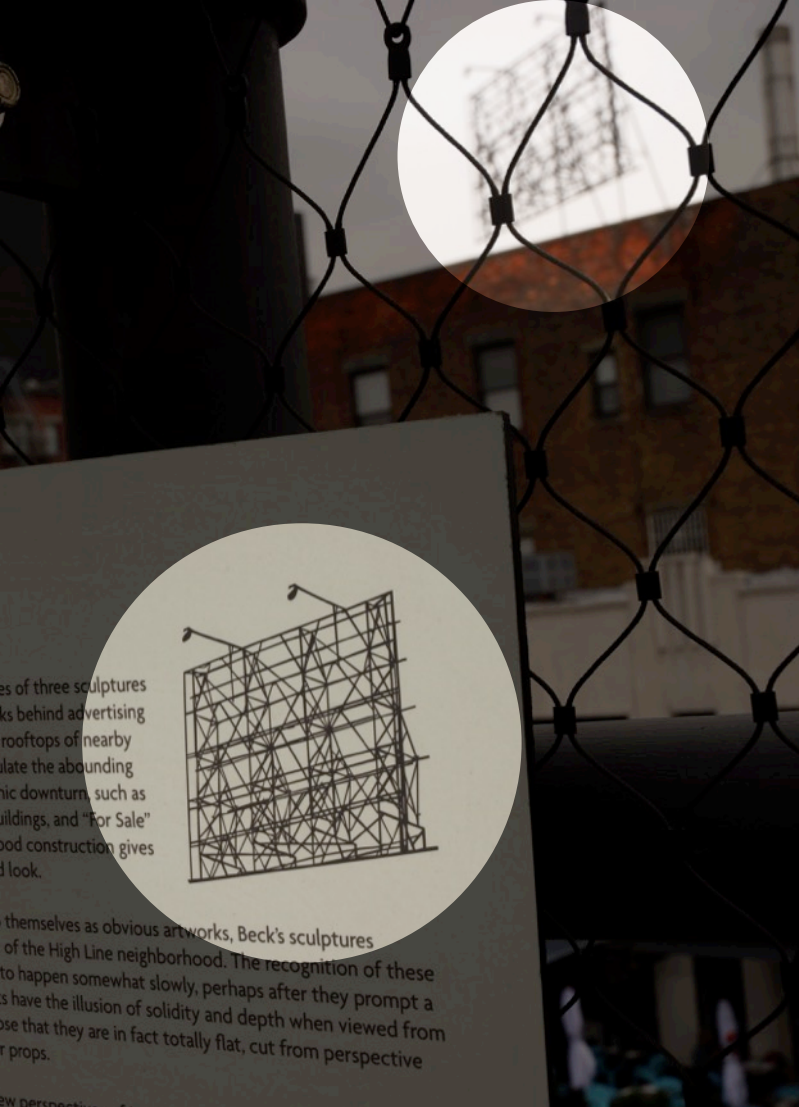
# APPROPRIATIONS

## CULTURAL



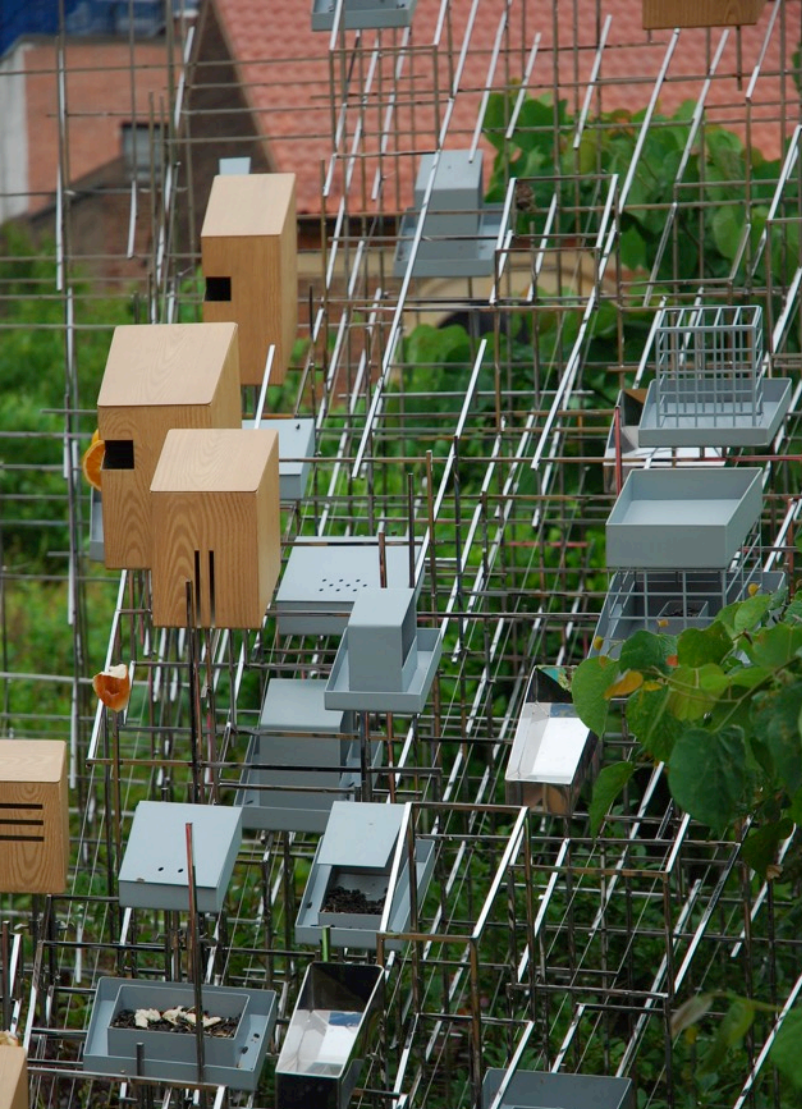
There are other, less commercial and more curiosity-engendering views. Note that all this work is largely visual, taking over surfaces that do not belong to the High Line and turning them into displays. What would happen if the High Line itself incorporated such spaces and performances?





A couple of examples: On the left is an artwork that plays on awareness of the urban visual landscape, and on the right is a visualization of the water colors of the Hudson river. Both are ways of helping you understand the urban landscape and the immediate geographical context.





PLATFORM

ECOLOGY PERFORMED

The High Line also becomes a platform to make connections with the surrounding biome: this is a bird feeder, though by all appearances, the birds haven't taken possession yet.





PLATFORM

GROUPS WITH A VIEW

The High Line creates an interesting kind of public space: one with views that induce conversation and connection. There is no reason such a space cannot become a site for dialogue; no reason why we can't use the view shifts created by the space to encourage middle perspectives on things other than the city.



# RENEWAL



# REVOLUTION



(C) HOSSAM EL-HAMALAWY  
[HTTP://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/ELHAMALAWY/6295299654/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/elhamalawy/6295299654/)

Making a gratuitous bridge to last year's theme: renewal and revolutions: we think of one as gentle and harmonious and the other as violent and disruptive. Yet both are civic actions that use public space as a site and platform for change.





MIDDLE PERSPECTIVES

( MANY THINGS  
TO MANY PEOPLE )

What I think is interesting about spaces that create middle perspectives is that they are many things to many people. When they embrace this, and are designed not just for people to use but for people to adopt and transform, they just might be enabling renewal at a scale we can't anticipate or will to happen.