

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
515 WEST 26TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
212 397 0742
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Jason Lazarus

Asterisk for the High Line (Ultimately, we failed)*

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Project statement:

A revelatory 2017 admission by Richard Hammond, executive director of the Friends of the High Line, highlights the ethical shortcomings of Chelsea's most popular public park: "...We were from the community. We wanted to do it for the neighborhood," he noted. "Ultimately, we failed..." — [The High Line's Next Balancing Act](#) by Laura Bliss, City Lab, 2017

Coming across this admission, "*ultimately, we failed*" is a powerfully clarifying moment — I can't unread it as it not only changes the High Line for me, it changes *me*. The very act of publicly admitting institutional failure is the thing that feels most truly *public*, and generous, about this public park.

'The High Line is a runaway success,' wrote Laura Bliss at City Lab in 2017. 'But by one critical metric, it is not. Locals aren't the ones overloading the park, nor are locals all benefiting from its economic windfall. The High Line is bookended by two large public housing projects; nearly one third of residents in its neighborhood, Chelsea, are people of color. Yet anyone who's ever strolled among the High Line's native plants and cold-brew vendors knows its foot traffic is, as a recent City University of New York study found, "overwhelmingly white." And most visitors are tourists, not locals.'

Hammond's take on the park's social impact follows previously celebrated expansions, as new sections of the High Line opened to the public. Although not a physical addition, the 2017 admission is a significant architectural — and iconic — stride forward. With it, I can perhaps for the first time take meaningful steps on the High Line — not as an innocuous tourist, but as a kind of participant. *I* — and now an increasing *we* — are perhaps better able to participate, bear witness, read further, ask questions, advocate, actively name, call out, and reconceptualize developing projects in our communities, nationwide.

In fact, in a new gilded age that abounds with many forms of violence — wherein we are asked to believe we are participants, when in fact we are actually being consumed — the basic litmus tests for public and/or public-private development partnerships can be actively shaped by questions such as:

1. Who Is This For?
2. What Do Locals Need and Want?
3. How Can We Stop Displacement?
4. How Can Growth Be Equitably Shared?

'Yet for all the High Line's flaws, there is a silver lining, argues anthropologist Julian Brash: It was built primarily with public funds and envisioned from the start as a city park open to all. "We need to see the High Line not as representing a new paradigm of public space, or as its betrayal," he writes. "Instead, we need to see the publicness of the High Line as an unfulfilled promise." — [Village Voice](#), Stephen Miller, 2017.

The High Line is a 1.45 mile sentence, the gallery's facade is, for the moment, an asterisk. The asterisk is temporary, but perhaps something of a permanent fixture on the High Line physically marking this rare declaration of an unfulfilled public promise (and asking new, more powerful questions) may help cement the lesson?

Thank you Laura Bliss and CityLab for your work!
Jason Lazarus, January, 2020