

Deserted to Destination: A Planning and Design Case Study of the High Bridge, Bronx

**by
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Abstract

This research focuses on the role and responsibility of design professionals within processes of gentrification and neighborhood change by focusing on the case of the recent reopening of the High Bridge linking upper Manhattan and the South Bronx, as well as improvements to its adjacent park. In particular, it examines how these developments largely excluded input from the local people most affected, those living in the adjacent Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx, which according to the 2010 US census was the poorest congressional district in the United States. The significance of the High Bridge, a pedestrian bridge spanning the Harlem River connecting the Highbridge neighborhood to Manhattan, lies in the bridge's history as a tool for implementing political agendas both through its closure to the public in the 1970s, and through its restoration and re-opening in 2015, when it may have helped spur the Highbridge neighborhood to become the most rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in New York City. The history of urban renewal, redlining, and recent investment in the restoration of the High Bridge and its impacts on the neighborhood of Highbridge has yet to be examined in context with the physical and architectural tools used by professional practitioners to enact these policies.

Keywords: Urban Planning; Landscape Architecture; Design; Professional Ethics; Gentrification; Public Space

Dedication

This project is dedicated to Joseph, Domenic, and Audrey, whose curiosity about the world inspires me every day. “Just keep growing, right where you are.”

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This research was conducted on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations, and the subject area of this research is Lenape territory.

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List of Acronyms

FOI	Freedom Of Information
FOIA	Freedom Of Information Act
FOIL	Freedom of Information Law
NYC	New York City
NYC DPR / DPR	New York City Department of Parks and Recreation
PlaNYC	Plan for NYC Policy
PPP	Public Private Partnership

Glossary

City vs. city	In the context of this study, 'City' refers to New York City and 'city' refers to geographically undefined urban areas.
Community	In the context of this study, this term is to be understood as a group of individuals with a collective identity or identities. Unlike the term <i>neighborhood</i> , a community is not a spatial unit.
Gentrification	This term is defined as the process whereby the character of a poor urban area is changed by wealthier people moving in, improving housing, and attracting new businesses, typically displacing current inhabitants in the process as defined by the Oxford Language Dictionary.
Practitioner	In the context of this study, practitioner refers to licensed design professionals who are actively engaged in the practice of their design profession, i.e., landscape architects, architects, engineers, etc.
Public Space	In the context of this study, public space refers to physical spaces that are publicly owned and in which members of the public have right of access, such as parks, sidewalks, streets, etc. and "has significant social importance as a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions" (Gehl, 2010, p. 28).
Neighborhood	In the context of this study, this term as a "localized, place-based, delimited urban area that has relevance, meaning and some level of personal influence" (Talen, 2019, p. 3) and is "the spatial unit that people relate to" (Talen, 2019, p. 1).
Planner(s)	In the context of this study, the term planners should be assumed to align with Samuel Stein's definition; "planners are usually municipal employees, but they work in all levels of government and include outside actors – consultants, designers, non-profits and so on – who seek to influence land use decisions. They survey and map the physical and cultural landscape, plot what can go where and at what size and shape, design infrastructure systems to move people and products, and channel investment and development toward certain places and away from others" (Stein, 2019, p. 14).
Planning	In the context of this study, the term planning should be assumed to align with Sam Stein's definition as, "the way we shape space over time" with the intention to "have some sense of how we secure the future" (Stein, 2019, p. 13).

Public Realm	In the context of this study, public realm is defined as, “not a concrete reality [like public space] but rather a tenuous condition... its essential and enduring qualities—openness and accessibility... and ties to democratic life—are at best temporary conditions” (Miller, 2007, p. 4). Essentially, the public realm is the space(s) between buildings within the urban environment and may contain public spaces. Additionally, the public realm may include spaces that are privately owned but open to access by the public or certain groups.
Racism	This term refers to prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized as defined by the Oxford Language Dictionary.
Social Justice	This term refers to justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society as defined by the Oxford Language Dictionary.



Figure 1.1 View West from Highbridge, Bronx to Manhattan over the High Bridge prior to restoration.

Source: Ephemeral New York (A view across the High Bridge , 2008).

Foreword

The impacts on the community of Highbridge related to the closure and reopening of the High Bridge is of personal interest to me as a professional landscape architect and urban designer with extensive experience in New York City. My professional career to date has been focused on the design and implementation of public space projects throughout cities in North America, and my work has played a role in spurring gentrification in neighborhoods like Highbridge. Although throughout my practice I have been aware, to some degree, that this is the case, my design-based background had not equipped me with the tools necessary to identify my own role and therefore my personal responsibility within the larger processes of the work in which I was involved. Essentially, this research is why I have pursued an education in urban studies; to build a theoretical framework of reference to inform my own professional design-based practice.

Chapter 1.

Introduction and Rationale

“For us losers that walk over the Harlem River via the Washington Bridge about a quarter mile north, I hope the High Bridge gives some of our dignity back.”

David Binko, Bronx resident (Gray, 2013).

The comment above was posted by a Bronx resident in reaction to a 2013 article in the *New York Times* describing the proposal to re-open the High Bridge, the only pedestrian span over the Harlem River, which once connected the South Bronx neighborhood of Highbridge to Manhattan. The quote illustrates the emotional toll the bridge’s 40+ year closure had had on community members, as well as the power of public spaces, including the physical structures located within those spaces, to impact people’s lives, and to shape their identities. It is a reminder that the practices of architects, landscape architects, and urban designers have profound repercussions as community members and residents share, fight for, enjoy, and use public space in cities. Another *New York Times* article, published just a month prior, illustrates that point:

“Straddling a high point in the Bronx, High Bridge takes its name from a near-forgotten pedestrian crossing into Manhattan, closed off in the early 1970s. But in recent years, given plans to reopen the restored High Bridge next year, both it and the neighborhood have been rediscovered by growing numbers of would-be buyers and renters.”

(Gregor, 2013)

Understanding the impacts on communities being “rediscovered” by outsiders attracted by public space improvements and identifying potential ways to mitigate negative impacts that such rediscovery may have, requires an understanding of the practice of the design professions through a social science theoretical lens. By applying the tools of urban social theory to this case study of planning and design practice, I have identified the methods through which designers have responded to public policy designed to improve public spaces, how that policy was crafted to influence the design of those spaces, and how specific decisions and practices by both city leadership and

design professionals led to inequitable results for the existing communities impacted by these actions.

1.1. Introduction

As cities across North America increasingly strive to mitigate the impacts of gentrification within established communities and neighborhoods (Stein, 2019), the role of design professionals and practitioners within processes of gentrification is often unexplored. Through this study, I address this gap by analyzing the planning, design, and communication methods and tools used by urban planners and design practitioners as they respond to municipal planning policy throughout the course of the master planning process to restore the High Bridge, a pedestrian bridge connecting the neighborhood of Highbridge, Bronx to upper Manhattan.



Figure 1.1 Aerial view of the High Bridge (center) connecting Manhattan (top left) with the neighborhood of Highbridge, Bronx (bottom right). The Cross-Bronx Expressway is visible crossing the Harlem River (top right) and the Major Deegan Expressway is visible passing under the High Bridge.

Source: Google Earth, 2020.

The Highbridge neighborhood in the South Bronx area of New York City, which according to the 2010 US census was the poorest congressional district in the United States (Kamer, 2010), provides a case study in which to examine a unique community which was isolated for over 40 years by a combination of natural topography, highway construction and most significantly the closure of the High Bridge (Figure 1.1), the only pedestrian bridge from the neighborhood, indeed from the Bronx, over the Harlem River to Manhattan. Once the bridge was re-opened and the Highbridge neighborhood was re-connected to Manhattan through city-led public investment in the restoration of the High Bridge in 2015, the Highbridge neighborhood experienced the highest rate of gentrification in New York City (Chen, 2018) in 2017. This gentrification of the Highbridge neighborhood occurred despite the Bronx side of the High Bridge being removed entirely from the subsequent planning and design of Highbridge park. Although planning efforts to reopen the bridge began as a straightforward public infrastructure improvement initiative, the project soon became deeply connected to the city's economic development agenda, so that by the time it was fully funded the High Bridge and surrounding Highbridge Park restoration became a keystone of PlaNYC, the comprehensive development-driven public space strategy developed by the Bloomberg administration (City of New York, 2007), (City of New York, 2011).

The planning processes of the restoration and re-opening of the High Bridge and their impact on the Highbridge neighborhood provide an opportunity to study the connection between the influence of global capital on local public investment, including resulting gentrification and displacement that is often associated with urban renewal projects, by focusing on the role of professional planning and design practice. Key to this analysis are the methods through which the project was graphically represented and described to local neighborhood residents, city leaders, and ultimately globally through the PlaNYC strategic plan and subsequent master plans. This study is based on my belief that professional planning and design practitioners have some agency within larger politically motivated city planning initiatives and therefore a responsibility to utilize their professional tools to anticipate, communicate and potentially address negative outcomes of their work, such as gentrification and displacement, which may otherwise seem inevitable within conventional city building ideology and its capitalist growth imperatives.

1.2. Research Question

Through this research, I examined the role of professional design practitioners within the High Bridge re-opening planning process by endeavoring to answering the following research question:

How did urban planners and design professionals consider the local community in the planning process of the High Bridge and Highbridge Park restoration in light of historically inequitable outcomes of planning practices affecting Highbridge, Bronx and given the area's designation as an "anchor park" in the New York City Planning Commission's 2011 PlaNYC Strategic Plan?

By focusing this study on the planning and design process of the High Bridge re-opening and the evolution of the significance of the project to city leaders' economic growth agenda, I was able to examine the methods of community engagement and tools of communication used by planners and designers as they responded to the evolving ambitions of PlaNYC, while situating the project within the specific historic context of planning practices that had shaped the Highbridge neighborhood prior to the neighborhood's isolation caused by the bridge closure.

1.3. Background and Context

The High Bridge, the oldest standing bridge in New York City, is a stone and iron architectural marvel soaring 140 feet over the Harlem River, connecting the steep slopes of the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx to the island of Manhattan (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 The High Bridge in 1900, view West from Highbridge, Bronx to Manhattan. Several stone arches were replaced with a steel arch span in 1928 to allow for large ship navigation of the Harlem River.
Source The *New York Times*.

Built in 1848 as part of the Croton Aqueduct system to provide NYC with a viable drinking water source, the High Bridge was the most critical and monumental piece of the system, serving as the essential link between miles of water-filled canals, giant iron pipes and open streams bringing fresh, clean water from reservoirs in the Catskills to the banks of the Bronx, and over the High Bridge into Manhattan. The location of the High Bridge is strategic; located at one of the highest points in the city, water that was gravity fed from the Catskills to the Bronx was carried over the High Bridge in a 14-foot diameter wood pipe to the upper reaches of Manhattan. Arriving to Manhattan at such a high elevation, water was then easily gravity fed South to what was then a burgeoning city in the area we know today as Downtown Manhattan. Described by *New York Times* writer Jim Dwyer as, “the greatest public work in New York City’s history” (Dwyer, 2015), the High Bridge was the architectural solution to a public health crisis, arguably serving as the single most important piece of infrastructure that enabled NYC to expand beyond the bounds of Lower Manhattan. Prior to the construction of the High Bridge and the Croton Aqueduct, the city lacked a reliable supply of fresh water, severely inhibiting further

expansion physically but most importantly economically. The lack of water, which meant also lack of a public sewer system, resulted in city leaders demanding a permanent solution to what had become an extreme health crisis, culminating in a yellow fever epidemic in 1805 causing almost half of the population of the city to, “escape it, trying to find refuge in tiny Greenwich Village to the north, or across the bay in the City of Brooklyn [because the] city had to have water” (Daley, 1959, p. 36). The High Bridge’s location was not only strategic in terms of the feasibility of the topography to gravity-feed water all the way to lower Manhattan but was also seen as a potential vital link between the growing outer borough of the Bronx and the island of Manhattan. In 1848, a public walkway was constructed over the aqueduct, allowing pedestrians to stroll from the farms, estates, and new residential developments of the Highbridge area to Manhattan, creating a critical link over the river and steep terrain. This easily traversed link meant that residents of Highbridge could access the social amenities and transportation networks of Manhattan, allowing the neighborhood to fully develop within the fabric of the surrounding city and its residents to benefit from the nearby resources of Manhattan.

The importance of the High Bridge to New York City’s development history from an architectural, public health, and transportation viewpoint is critical to this study because of the impact its implementation, closure, and subsequent re-opening have had on the area, specifically in shaping and shifting the Highbridge neighborhood’s demography and economic prospects. When the bridge opened it was a symbol of engineering and design ingenuity, bringing mobility, economic promise and quite literally life, to NYC and the Highbridge neighborhood. By contrast, when the bridge was closed to pedestrians in the 1970s it had become a derelict hulk, a symbol of the City’s decline and its leaders’ desire to seal off its poorest neighborhood, the South Bronx, from its wealthiest borough, Manhattan. The Highbridge neighborhood, like much the of the Bronx, was shaped in the decades leading up to the bridge’s closure (1940s-1970) by white flight, redlining, “warehousing” of racialized populations by restricting their ability to secure housing elsewhere based on their race, and intense neglect brought on by deliberate disinvestment. During these years, like many areas in the South Bronx, the

Highbridge neighborhood's demographics shifted from predominantly Irish, Italian and Jewish to almost exclusively a neighborhood of people of color (Wilder, 2000, p. 60)¹.

Although an official closing date of the bridge is unclear, by 1970 the pedestrian link between the neighborhood of Highbridge and Manhattan had been severed by city officials (Figure 10.3).



Figure 1.3 View West through fence across the closed High Bridge prior to restoration.

Source: New York City Parks and Recreation Department Archives.

In the decades leading up to the bridge's closure, the Highbridge neighborhood was impacted by massive highway construction in the Robert Moses era including the Cross-Bronx Expressway to the north and the Major Deegan Expressway to the south and west (Figure 10.1). Combined with the neighborhood's steep natural topography and lack of access to public transportation (by contrast, multiple subway lines served the area on the Manhattan side of the High Bridge), the closing of the High Bridge effectively

¹ In this context, people of color are defined as non-white in contemporary terms. By the mid twentieth century, Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants gained position within the social order of the city as true Americans whose "whiteness" allowed them to fully participate in the economic and consumerist-based post WW2 culture, a social contract which was not afforded to African Americans or other people of color (Wilder, 2000, p. 60)".

cut off the Highbridge neighborhood from the surrounding city for nearly 45 years. Once isolated, the neighborhood became the home of the city's poorest residents, and by the 2010 Census, 98.8% of Highbridge residents identified as non-white, and 40% lived below the poverty line (American Community Survey, 2020).

That isolation began to change in 1995, when a ten-year-old neighborhood resident named Maaret Klaber attended a Bronx Community Board meeting and gave a short presentation in which she urged for the removal of the 16-foot-high chain-link fence topped by barbed razor wire that had surrounded the entrance to the bridge since anyone could remember. She argued that the bridge would be ideal for connecting a bike path from the Highbridge neighborhood to Manhattan, making it easier for her to access the public pool and community center located just over the bridge. A member of the local Community Board's Parks Committee recalled, "Everybody listened because it was unusual to have a kid make a presentation" (Dwyer, 2015). And so, the project to restore the pedestrian walkway began as grassroots neighborhood effort with a simple goal to restore pedestrian access for community members between the Highbridge neighborhood and Manhattan. However, by the time the project was completed and opened to the public in 2015, the High Bridge re-opening had been scaled up exponentially from a local initiative to a showcase element of a city-wide strategy to bring global attention (and capital) to various "destinations" throughout the city. Although the completed project did achieve Klaber's goal of re-opening the pedestrian bridge (Figure 10.4), the project also served as a catalyst for significant neighborhood change in Highbridge, spurring the neighborhood to become the most rapidly gentrifying area of NYC in 2017 (Chen, 2018). This study examines the planning and design tools used by planning and design professionals throughout the project's span as they respond to political leader's expanding ambitions for the project which evolved from straightforward restoration details to masterplans and economic studies, and finally a city-wide strategic initiative of public space improvements.

1.4. Study Purpose and Significance

This study contributes to the literature on gentrification and displacement by exploring the role design professions play within public space development projects. In doing so, it makes a case for methods of reflective planning to be integrated within design practice in order to, "navigate the space between idealism and realism", by

“examining past actions for insights” and continually grounding design practice in the context of a site’s history, relevance to disparate communities, and the potential power that a site has to impact people’s lives (Willson, 2021, p. 4).

Additionally, this study challenges the attitudinal myth often present within the design industry in which design professionals present themselves as lacking agency (and therefore responsibility) within the project hierarchy of city-building processes. Through this study I argue that the design work of individual practitioners in city-building processes is as equally impactful to communities as the policies which typically precede and define the parameters of that work.

Chapter 2.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Bodies of Literature

While this research is centered around one specific case study, it is influenced by a broad range of literature that was used to both inform and define my specific research question and provide necessary analysis of the specific context in which my research is situated. I have focused on three literatures: Urban Segregation and the NYC “Melting Pot” Myth, Racial Capitalism and the Real Estate State, and Professional Ethics and the Just City.

These bodies of literature are closely aligned with my research methodology and design (see Chapter 4) which included analysis of three categories of documents: those dealing with comprehensive municipal strategic planning policy; those documenting specific practitioner efforts undertaken as part of investment-driven planning initiatives; and those which reveal dynamics of community-practitioner-municipal relationships. The three bodies of literature, then, explore scholarship related to the role of municipal governments within city planning policies, the relationship of practitioners to municipal governments and investors within planning practices, and the responsibility of practitioners to communities affected by the planning policies they implement.

The first body of literature, establishes a planning scholarship framework used to critique how and why, through specific planning policies and planning ideologies, the neighborhood of Highbridge became the poorest congressional district in the United States (Kamer, 2010), setting the stage for investment and capital extraction made possible through cooperation and coordination between real estate developers, investors and municipal government leaders and enacted through the mechanisms of planners and design professionals in the guise of urban renewal, redevelopment and restoration (i.e., the *real estate state* examined in the second body of literature). Key to this analysis is scholarship critiquing the urban “melting pot”, an idea that people of diverse cultures, ethnicities, economic status and other social characteristics in cosmopolitan urban communities like New York City begin to mix or “melt” together over time into a cohesive social identity (the “New Yorker” identity, for example), diminishing or ignoring other

identities, particularly within planning practice, regardless of how an individual or community may actually describe themselves. The melting pot myth is used by planners to give credence to normative city planning assumptions that capital investment within race-and-class segregated communities is for the good of all New Yorkers, while the negative results of this investment disproportionately impact these marginalized neighborhoods and their residents. (Agnotti & Morse, 2017, p. 10).

The second body of literature explores the intersection between racial capitalism and the so-called “real estate state.” (Stein, 2019) Building on the previous analysis of the myths of New York City’s predominant melting-pot urban nationalism in the face of the reality of deepening social inequality, this body of literature illustrates how segregated, minority² areas like the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx become places ripe for extraction of capital, typically in the form of real estate investment (Toews, 2018, pp. 18-19). Once capital investment begins, the real estate state (the partnership and co-dependence between municipal government and private investment capital) takes hold, resulting in widespread gentrification of previously segregated neighborhoods (Stein, 2019, p. 32). By critiquing the High Bridge and Highbridge Park restorations and their associated impacts on the Highbridge neighborhood through this lens, I document within this study how planners and design professionals relied on systems of racialized containment underpinned by structural racism within planning practice (both historically and in more recent context) to extract capital from Highbridge through the tools of restoration and redevelopment.

Finally, literature related to professional ethics and the just city provides an analytical framework to support and define the main argument of my thesis, which is that design professionals have agency in city planning processes and ethical responsibilities to residents potentially affected by their work. Scholarship in this area has allowed me to build an evaluative framework from which to critique the above processes within the case study of High Bridge by formulating a lens of ethics and justice, defined as equity and democracy (Fainstein, 2010), that may be employed by professionals throughout their practice. Combined with literature establishing the ethical implications of design professionals involved in this work, I have evaluated both the larger processes of city-

² Although segregation of minority groups is often understood as primarily race-based, this is not always the case: LGBTQ2+ people excluded and/or relegated to the West Village/Chelsea in the mid twentieth century, for example (Chauncey, 1994).

building in which design professionals are implicated as well as analyzed individual specific decisions by those professionals throughout the High Bridge planning process.

2.2. Urban Segregation and the NYC “Melting Pot” Myth

Design related professions (including urban planning, and landscape architecture) are inextricably linked to racialization within city-building practices in urban areas around the world, and certainly in New York City, where physical neighborhood segregation based on race and class has existed for generations (Agnotti & Morse, 2017, p. 10). To understand the evolving racial landscape of NYC, and particularly the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx and how the racial demographics of the neighborhood intersect with the High Bridge restoration planning process, I will rely on urban planning scholarship to understand how urban planning has shaped and been shaped by race, as well as scholarship which critiques established urban planning processes and situates urban planning at the center of discussions regarding urban racial spatialization.

Ted Rutland describes David Harvey’s view of urban planning as “an expression of specifically capitalist social relations” (Rutland, 2018, p. 15). He explains that “urban planning takes on the tasks of providing the infrastructure, amenities, and spatial ‘order’ that continued capital accumulation requires” Through this study I will elaborate on this observation, arguing that urban planning is much more than a method of simply satisfying requirements of capitalism with little influence from human prejudices or social agendas, but rather, specific influences on processes of capital arrangement in cities, such as racial capitalism, or racist planning policies in service to capitalism (Melamed, 2015, p. 76), are directly invoked and implemented through urban planning. Rutland describes and analyzes how race and racism operate within planning practice by stating that “anti-blackness structures planning’s conception of human life” (Rutland, 2018, p. 14), meaning the very foundational functions of planning as a tool by which cities can be shaped physically and socially is based on a view of humanity that is racialized as white. By situating racism (anti-blackness, in Rutland’s case) as central to planning, Rutland theorizes the practice of planning as one that does not just influence racialized populations (resulting in segregation, etc.), but rather is itself a product of a racism-based rationalizing of what an urban experience *should* be. Understanding urban planning in this way and critiquing the planning process of the High Bridge restoration

through this lens, provides a method of contextualizing the 20th century planning policies that have shaped much of the urban physical and social forms present today, including those affecting the neighborhood of Highbridge and provides an opportunity to study how those same planning policies are present in current planning practice.

In terms of New York City, in 1970 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* in 1970. Writing in the year the High Bridge was closed, they established the conventional narrative of how and why non-white New Yorkers “found themselves in situations of poverty and marginalization” (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970, p. 3). They argued that the reason why minorities (as defined by the authors as the above groups) did not assimilate into a cohesive “melting pot” was because they were not considered white and could not participate fully in the city’s political and economic life. However, they and others until recently stopped short of understanding the reach of structural racism, including into urban planning, to explain this inequality. Tom Agnotti and Sylvia Morse correct this gap by outlining the specifics of New York City’s racialized planning history, including: mid-20th century ghettoization of immigrant communities; federal influence on local planning policy; urban renewal and displacement; public housing and “warehousing” of non-white communities; and mortgage and insurance redlining (Agnotti & Morse, 2017, pp. 55-63). Through a comprehensive analysis of urban planning specific to NYC, the authors provide local context for the “market-driven process of displacement of low-income communities of color” (Agnotti & Morse, 2017, p. 70) in which to understand the High Bridge case study. Additionally, the authors argue that this history of race-based urban planning dispels once and for all the “melting pot” theory of urban assimilation. They show how this myth has been used by city planners as a rationalization to legitimize various planning policies and projects within racially segregated communities such as Highbridge (Agnotti & Morse, 2017, p. 10). They therefore both directly implicate the processes of urban planning and the actors involved in those processes as central to racial segregation in New York City and demonstrate how these actors perpetuate the dominant discourse that obscures them.

By relying on the scholarship identified above regarding race, segregation and assimilation, I was able to not only establish a narrative of race-based planning influences on the Highbridge neighborhood, but also study the communication methods (strategic plans, open house presentations, community surveys) used by planners to

situate the High Bridge restoration as key to the economic future of not only the local neighborhood but the city itself, and put into context the “anchor park” designation which developed throughout the planning process. This literature also puts into perspective the ways in which planners were able to justify their actions, at various scales at multiple points in time, as being in the best interest of ‘all’ New Yorkers.

2.3. Racial Capitalism and the Real Estate State

Once urban racial segregation is established and entrenched, such as it was/is in the Highbridge neighborhood through past planning policies, the influence of global capital has power to extract local capital in the form of real estate investment and development (Stein, 2019). Building on Cedric J. Robinson’s writings on racial capitalism (Robinson, Gilmore, & Quan, 2019), Owen Toews defines how capital relies on racism by stating; “Racism naturalizes the socially manufactured attacks and inequities that capitalism requires, making them seem proper, inevitable and just” (Toews, 2018, p. 18). It is this naturalization of outcomes of planning that would otherwise be obviously undesirable outcomes of capitalism (genocide, colonization, or displacement through gentrification) which enable planners to implement projects “for” communities which may end up harming those same communities. Ananya Roy describes this contradictory outcome to planner’s intents in the following terms: “planning’s promise of creation and creativity is not possible without a frontier of destruction” (Roy, 2016). This “frontier”, I argue in this study, is created by racial capitalism through capital extraction from segregated neighborhoods, like Highbridge. The capital being extracted exists because of planning policies that have created ghettoized areas whose value (in terms of real estate) has remained low compared to the surrounding city, making investment within these areas potentially yield significant returns. When planning policies align with sources of capital to “improve” these places, they become more desirable to outsiders. Once established through the partnership of planning policy and capital investment, this ‘frontier’ can then be conquered, splintering existing communities and their voices, and the negative impacts associated with capitalist interventions can be naturalized through conventionally acceptable outcomes of planning practice such as gentrification which is often seen as inevitable.

New York City’s economy in the 1970s when the High Bridge was closed was much less reliant on global capital than it is today. When the High Bridge was closed,

NYC's industrialized economy was failing, the City was nearing bankruptcy, and public investment in public infrastructure such as the High Bridge had become virtually non-existent. The City's fiscal crisis in the 1970s was met with a roll back of public services which drastically altered quality of life in the city. Hospitals and fire stations were closed, public employees were laid off by the thousands, and public park and transportation infrastructure was maintained only enough to meet a base functional level (Krinsky, 2011, p. 382). In other cases, such as High Bridge and the ghettoization of the Highbridge community, city leaders deemed public infrastructure unnecessary or even undesirable. However, today, like many highly globalized cities, NYC relies on global capital in the form of real estate investment as a significant driving force for economic growth and municipal funding. Samuel Stein examines how the need for global investment spurs state-led processes (and actors such as city planners, zoning officials and other government agents who are influenced by political and economic agendas) to align themselves with private real estate developers creating an economic system in which city government is both beholden to and recipient of real estate investment capital (Stein, 2019). Through this interdependency, the real estate state, operating within a racial capitalist economic structure, aligns with municipal and private capital interests to invest in, redevelop, and renew new "frontiers" such as Highbridge – as if the famous urbanist William H. Whyte's 1980s call for embracing gentrification as the cure for city ills has been fully heeded by contemporary planners (Whyte, 1988). The partnership between local government and global capital explains, in part, how the restoration of a central piece of neighborhood infrastructure became a major part of a strategic plan to identify "destinations" and attract global capital investment to the Highbridge neighborhood. Through this study I place design practitioners as central actors within this gentrification-state partnership, alongside local government, and global capital.

2.4. Professional Ethics and the Just City

The final body of literature which informs this study is that of professional ethics within a just city rationale. It situates practitioners (urban planners, landscape architects, etc.) as non-impartial actors within the processes mentioned above (segregation, racial capitalism, the real estate state), and considers them to have some amount of agency to address issues related to systemic urban inequality within the purview of their practice. Further, the just city rationale, once established as a foundation point of professional

practice, provides a mandate from which design professionals can imbue their work with a reflective perspective and situate the need to understand the impacts on communities of past planning policies that have yielded the current conditions of current projects being undertaken equal to all other project program and goals. It is this mandate for urban justice which provides not only the opportunity to identify how design practitioners may have influenced the planning process analyzed in this case study and potentially suggest more just alternatives, also providing me personally with a rationale from which I can continue my own design-based practice.

The importance of the role of the planning and design professional within the processes of gentrification via racial capitalism is illustrated through a study by Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura. They provide a rationale for understanding why studying race through a spatial perspective is important, implicating architecture and the built form of public space directly within the racial landscape of cities. They state that “racial interactions and processes... are about how we collectively make and remake, over time and through ongoing contestation, the spaces we inhabit” (Neely & Samura, p. 1934). They continue by describing space, including urban public space, as “a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation” (Neely & Samura, p. 1936). My case study reveals the importance of understanding “relations of domination and subordination” within planning practice, including how the power dynamics between communities with differing objectives result in conflicting priorities being either favored or ignored. Additionally, the study of planning as a racialized process enacted through “domination and subordination” and the resulting professional ethical dilemmas leads to the need for an evaluative criterion of urban racial and spatial justice relative to urban planning practice.

In order to formulate a framework of urban justice from which I analyzed the process of the High Bridge restoration, I have relied primarily on Susan Fainstein’s definition of justice, namely democracy and equity, as outlined in *The Just City* in which she presents a framework for practitioners to examine professional’s past and future work, supported and critiqued by additional ethical frameworks such as a Rawlsian view of justice as fairness (Rawls, 2001).

Fainstein focuses on justice as the object of planning, but theorists like Robert Lake also argue for just processes. He argues that “a planning practice in which

inclusive deliberation on the requirements of justice is the central element that... delineates... the possibilities for planning solutions” (Lake, 2017, p. 14). Employing a lens of justice framed in this way, I have evaluated the High Bridge re-opening planning process and its outcomes for the affected neighbourhoods, combined with a focus on identifying professional ethical dilemmas throughout the planning process and understanding how those dilemmas were or were not addressed.

2.5. Conclusion

The bodies of literature in this conceptual framework provide various methods of critiquing the process of urban planning within this case study and have been used simultaneously and individually throughout my research process. These concepts both informed and focused the scope of my analysis to relate most effectively to my research question by defining the relationships between race, capital, and urban planning, and provided a method of evaluating the role of urban planning and design practitioners throughout the High Bridge restoration planning project.

Chapter 3.

Research Design and Methodologies

3.1. Introduction

In order to best answer my research question, I relied on qualitative methodologies of document analysis framed within longitudinal case study research methods (Yin, 2009) by analyzing three types of documents sequentially:

- Official documents outlining aspirational planning strategies and specific initiatives issued by the City of New York (Planning Department, Planning Commission, Department of Parks and Recreation, City Council, etc.).
- Official documents issued by planning professionals hired by the city to enact the policies set out in official city planning documents (masterplans, community board presentations, public design documents, surveys, etc.).
- Documents received through FOIA request pertaining to the implementation of the High Bridge and Highbridge Park restoration, including notes, reports, internal memos and other documents not readily made available to the public.

By analyzing this data in this sequence, I was able to determine the City's planning goals at a regional and local neighborhood scale, and then compare official documentation produced by planning professionals at three specific points in time; 2007, 2011 and 2014. For each of these three time periods within this case study scope, I analyzed materials received through FOIA request originating in this chronology to gain an internal city perspective of the work unfolding. I therefore had three sets of documents at three different points in time to analyze, providing a thorough and rich set of data, each with a unique perspective on the shifting and evolving nature of the planning process. Additionally, analyzing the three different types of documents listed above resulted in triangulation, further supporting the accuracy of my findings, and providing an additional method of identifying and theorizing converging lines of inquiry by seeking out multiple data sources. (Yin, 2009, pp. 114-115), (Babbie & Roberts, 2018, p. 105).

3.2. Document Collection and Analysis

By focusing my efforts on analyzing documents issued for public use, I was able to maintain a workable scope for this research project and was also able to derive answers to my research question from official sources. While the majority of the documents I analyzed are related to the restoration of the High Bridge and associated area planning strategies (2007-2015), I also undertook some archival research related to the original closing of the bridge in the 1970s in order to establish, from an official city planning standpoint, why the bridge was initially closed.

The data categories I chose also provided a rationale for sequencing my research methodology. The first category laid out the city's vision and intention for the High Bridge redevelopment, the second category contained the documents which illustrated the methods by which the city's vision was enacted (and how design professionals interpreted and implemented that vision), and the third provided sources to identify and understand the complex relationships between the community, practitioners and government, thus providing a means to analyze the planning process through a lens of justice and equity.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis all of the data sources I analyzed within this study were publicly available (including those made available to me through FOIA request) from Vancouver. While I had initially wanted to do archival research for this project, I realized that examining the High Bridge case study from the available data sources provided ample means to answer my research question. To inform the contextual history of the High Bridge restoration process within this study I have relied on a wide range of existing historic analyses of the neighborhoods involved and New York City development history in general.

3.2.1. Official Documents Issued by the City of New York

Although community efforts to re-open the bridge began at the local community level in 1995, the High Bridge restoration was officially undertaken as part of a large city-wide program of work proposed in 2007 by the Bloomberg administration, called *PlaNYC*. This strategic plan focused on the physical spaces, infrastructure and everyday systems of communication, transportation and other essential services that directly

impacted quality of life for city residents. A legacy project for Mayor Bloomberg, the plan was ambitious and far-reaching, including proposals for entirely new subway lines, massive investments in parks and public spaces, and a focus on creating a green economy. The mission of the strategy was to create a “greener, greater New York” (City of New York, 2011) and in so doing, prepare for a predicted additional one million residents by 2030. PlaNYC has been updated and re-issued several times in the span of my research case study, namely a major update in 2011 and a supplementary update in 2014. These official documents became the primary sources of data from a city-planning perspective at milestones throughout the course of the High Bridge restoration project. First proposed in the 2007 edition of PlaNYC, the restoration of the High Bridge expanded into a redevelopment of the associated Highbridge Park in 2011, when the designation as an “anchor park” elevated the simple re-opening of the bridge to a full-scale park redevelopment intended to serve as a city-wide attraction. By analyzing the evolution of this strategic document through several iterations, I was able to identify and analyze the context for key turning points in the evolution of this project from addressing a local infrastructure need to the full-scale rebranding of a community to serve global-city objectives.

The wide-reaching scope of planning policy within PlaNYC allowed me a comprehensive perspective on city planning ideology over the course of the time period of this case study, and also appropriately limited the scope of my analysis to the documents in which my case study project was proposed, developed and implemented. Additionally, I chose to limit my data to these publicly available documents rather than including personal interviews which, while possibly interesting, would not have provided as direct indication of the city’s goals and planned outcomes. Essentially, by analyzing only the documents the City produced as policy and plans, I was able to be confident that my data represented official city intentions.

3.2.2. Official Documents Produced by Design Professionals

Along with official PlaNYC documents, I simultaneously analyzed documents produced by design professionals hired by the city to implement the goals of PlaNYC. These documents included High Bridge restoration architectural plans, presentations of the proposed work to community groups, masterplans created for city approval, and community surveys undertaken by design professionals and community groups to elicit

feedback directly from the Highbridge community. Generally, these documents aligned temporally with the various editions of PlaNYC and provided an account of how practitioners implemented the strategies proposed in PlaNYC. These documents were most useful in determining how the community was engaged, how professionals incorporated community feedback into project plans, how professionals prioritized city visions and goals, and ultimately how the overall project was communicated to residents.

These documents were primarily gathered from the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, the arm of the city through which the project was funded and implemented (the High Bridge sits within Highbridge Park) and were available on the city's website. Therefore, they were limited to those documents the city had determined to be available for public use, so the possibility exists that certain community feedback or concerns documented elsewhere were not recorded in these documents. However, by focusing my research on these publicly available documents, I was able to analyze the process of this case study and resulting outcomes from the city's own official data.

3.2.3. Documents Received through FOIA Request

Finally, this research involved the analysis of documents received from the City of New York through an FOIA request³ made by me. Specifically, I requested:

“...all planning documentation including; public outreach plans, flyers, minutes or other documentation related to communicating the project to New York City residents; internal and external correspondence related to public outreach including those communicating results of outreach efforts; vendor contracts related to organizations contracted to perform work related to the project; any other documents related to the NYC DPR High Bridge restoration project, including those related exclusively to Highbridge Park, between the period of January 1, 2007 through the bridge's re-opening (documented on or about June 9, 2015)”.

This wide-reaching request yielded significant data which proved critical to shaping this research project and informing my research question. In particular, a report titled, *Catalyst* (citation), provided comprehensive documentation from the City's perspective of their understanding of the entire community engagement process. This

³ New York State FOIL request number: 2021-846-00161, initiated March 16, 2020, completed October 18, 2021. In accordance with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Law (“FOIL”), Public Officers Law, Section 84 et seq., the Department of Parks & Recreation.

document became a keystone of my research by providing data from which I could assess each “step” of the master planning process not only from publicly available data sources but also from a self-reflexive view of the city’s work by the city⁴ itself. Therefore, being able to critique the city’s own perspective of its own work provided a rich resource to inform and answer my research question of how those involved in the planning process of the High Bridge restoration viewed and considered the needs of the Highbridge neighborhood community.

3.3. Methodologies

While this research broadly falls under the category of qualitative document analysis, I have employed several specific methodologies throughout my research process; *discourse analysis*, *historic and comparative research*, and *latent content analysis* (Babbie & Roberts, 2018, pp. 249-255).

To begin, I focused my research on *discourse analysis*, which is defined by Babbie and Roberts as, “a method for examining texts to explore how meaning, knowledge and power are created and re-created in everyday experience”, and continue to describe how discourse analysis, “searches for thematic patterns and seeks to improve understanding of how language works in its social and cultural context” (Babbie & Roberts, 2018, p. 254). For example, using this methodology I examined the data to understand how key planning concepts, such as “public space” (City of New York, 2011), change over the course of this study from initially referring to the physical constructed area of the High Bridge in 2007 to referring to the experience of the Highbridge neighborhood as a destination in 2011, and how those changes were reflected in proposals and plans. A specific example of how this method of research related to answering my research question can be seen in the evolution of the language used to describe the importance of the bridge restoration project in reaching the City’s economic development goals; in the first edition of PlaNYC (2007), the High Bridge restoration was discussed in terms of a repair and infrastructure improvement, and by the 2014 edition, the project was described as monumental and destination-worthy (City of New York, 2011), elevating its status from an important but local intervention to a restoration project

⁴ The ‘City’ in this case being its own program through its partner organization the City Parks Foundation.

intended to attract investment. Through discourse analysis, I have placed into context how the language used to describe and communicate the project evolved relative to the project's significance and importance to the City's overall planning strategy, and how planners and designers considered the impacts on the Highbridge community that evolution eventually had.

I also employed research methods relating to *historical and comparative research* in order to understand the cultural and societal changes over time relating to this case study, particularly between the time period of the bridge's closure through the creation of the Highbridge Park restoration master plan. This method was particularly useful to situate my research this case study within current developing urban planning theories as well as historic contexts of urban planning in NYC. Additionally, identifying how social and cultural attitudes and conceptions of planning in NYC had evolved also assisted in contextualizing and rationalizing the results of discourse analysis.

Finally, and simultaneously with the above research frameworks, I focused a significant portion of my research efforts on identifying and analyzing *latent content* (Babbie & Roberts, 2018) as part of my overall content analysis. This research method was pervasive throughout my project as I presumed the answers to my research question might not be revealed simply through identifying specific terms, actions or proposals, but rather by interpreting "the underlying meaning" (Babbie & Roberts, 2018, p. 249) of the proposals and plans I was analyzing. This methodology allowed me to lean heavily on my knowledge of urban theory gained through the MURB program and required synthesizing emerging concepts and themes identified throughout my research to lead to answers to my research question. Additionally, I was able to rely on my professional experience as a practitioner with extensive experience in similar urban planning processes to further identify and interpret latent meaning of the documents I analyzed in this study.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

As a researcher with personal experience in the realm of the subject I was researching and by seeking to understand how design professionals, like myself, influence and impact local communities through the projects they implement, I set the intent to focus this research on the role of the professional within my study with the

purpose that my findings may influence my own design practice as I continue to develop my own professional practice. I also intended to accurately represent and consider the community affected by the project throughout this study. Eve Tuck's writings on suspending damage-centered research, which she describes as, "research that intends to document people's pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression." (Tuck, 2009, p. 409) argues for an empowerment of self-determination within research broadly, situating "desire-centered" research, or "research to capture *desire* instead of damage." (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Therefore, I approached this research by focusing on critiquing the *frameworks* which position communities as damaged, and not the communities themselves. This approach may seem somewhat obvious; however, I was concerned that by focusing on the role of the professional throughout my research (which I believe was the best way to answer my research question), I may have missed opportunities to position the community in the most appropriate way, or that I may have skewed my analysis towards my own perspective of a practitioner. By rigorously analyzing the documents I collected and letting the language contained within speak for itself and relying on these document analysis methodologies to guide my interpretation of the data, I was able to confidently draw conclusions, make connections, and avoid 'speaking for' the community.

3.5. Methodologies in Practice

Although I initially set out to analyze the three main categories of data sequentially using all three identified research frameworks, the reality of the process as well as the fact that I received a response to my FOI request after completing a significant amount of research lead to the need to be iterative and flexible, requiring analysis of data out of sequence and re-analyzing portions of my data as my research progressed and lead to new questions. However, this iterative process ultimately reinforced my methodologies by allowing me to rely on one method to "check" another, leading to a fully rounded perspective of issues and a more informed answer to my research question.

Chapter 4.

PlaNYC

4.1. PlaNYC Policy and Context within NYC Development Politics and Relevance to High Bridge

In 2007, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg introduced PlaNYC, a broad strategic planning policy initiative with an introductory goal of leading NYC communities through economic and social development towards a “greener, greater New York”. The impetus for this strategy was to plan improvements to social and physical infrastructure throughout the city to accommodate a projected population gain of 1 million residents by 2030. The policy initiatives in PlaNYC included investment in broad categories of physical and social city infrastructure, namely land, water, transportation, energy, air and climate change (City of New York, 2007, p. 1) as well as some key specific initiatives that were designed to jumpstart the plan with actionable strategies supported by current planning policy, and proposed future strategies that would require significant change to existing policy. One of these specific actionable planning strategies was a park development program, (initially called the destination park program, and subsequently the Flagship Park and Anchor Parks programs) which included targeted capital investment to improve, rebuild, or create specific parks and green spaces in strategic locations in each of the city’s five boroughs. The High Bridge restoration and the associated improvements to ease access to the bridge through Highbridge Park (in Manhattan and the Bronx) was identified as one of these destination park initiatives and would significantly improve local community transportation and social connections. However, within the context of the Bloomberg administration’s focus on interurban competition as indicated by the PlaNYC goal to “not only keep up with the innovations of others [cities], but surpass them” (City of New York, 2007, p. 10), the High Bridge restoration project became a means to reshape surrounding neighborhoods beyond the park’s borders in an effort to transform neighborhoods from “underdeveloped” to “desirable” with an eye towards attracting potential new residents and investors. The rhetoric of PlaNYC fails to identify or acknowledge past planning policies (such as redlining and planned shrinkage) that resulted in the need for targeted community investment to address quality of life issues that those past policies created, resulting in

the “available capacity” for such investment to be needed in order to meet PlaNYC’s goals of improving quality of life for city residents. Therefore, planners’ lack of connection of the current state of economic and social issues in Highbridge to past strategies and policies implemented by their own profession, hindered their ability to anticipate the possibility of similar negative outcomes of PlaNYC policy, particularly those policies related to economic development, from realizing the intended improvements in quality of life for existing Highbridge residents. Ultimately, the master plans produced in response to PlaNYC did not include the Highbridge neighborhood at all, but rather focused resources on nearby areas with the greatest potential to attract investment through economic development and tourism.

4.2. Local Plans vs Global Intent

Although PlaNYC sets out goals and targets designed to make the city as liveable as possible for current residents and the possibility of 1 million more by 2030, it also lays out a strategy to attract global attention (mostly in the form of economic development through private investment and tourism) and even cites the potential to export PlaNYC itself as a commodity, stating, “we have developed a plan that can become a model for cities in the 21st century.” (City of New York, 2007, p. 11). The tension between the highly localized proposed initiatives designed to improve quality of life for New Yorkers by investing in local neighborhood parks and open spaces (among the other stated targeted areas) and the simultaneous focus on attracting global economic revenue, indicate the city’s plan to utilize these localized investment strategies as means to ‘improve’ public spaces through capital investment with the intention that the improvements would not only benefit current residents but also capture the world’s attention. As the plan states, “Here [within PlaNYC] we have focused on the physical city, and its possibilities to unleash opportunity. We have examined the tangible barriers to improving our daily lives... All are challenges that, if left unaddressed, will inevitably undermine our economy and our quality of life.” (City of New York, 2007, p. 3). As this quote implies, PlaNYC’s focus on maintaining and bettering “quality of life” is city’s efforts to utilize the public space projects proposed in PlaNYC, like the High Bridge restoration and associated Highbridge Park improvements, to increase economic development. Another section puts it more explicitly: “This [increase in quality of life] will...result in enormous revenues. The expansion of our tax base will impact our

economy accordingly. The additional jobs, tourists and residents could generate an additional \$13 billion annually... and provide the services that our residents, businesses, workers and visitors deserve.” (City of New York, 2007, p. 6). Despite this reliance on strategies to improve quality of life throughout the city as the main measure of economic success through localized investment, PlaNYC does not define “quality of life” in any explicit or measurable way. However, based on the document’s consistent coupling of “quality of life” with economic prosperity, it would be logical to conclude that the city’s choice of investment types and locations are related to the upgrading of spaces and places planners see as having a low quality of life (i.e. low-income and disinvested), like the Highbridge neighborhood.

Describing and identifying places seen as having a low quality of life is nothing new within urban planning practice and such language has historically supported urban planning strategies, such as redlining by identifying areas with low quality of life as urban ‘blight’ and “decay” (Lindsay, 1970). Although the resulting master plans based on these PlaNYC initiatives have dropped the notion of “blight” used by earlier generations of planners, they used synonyms such as “industrial” and “poor” (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 30) to indicate that the Highbridge neighborhood was undesirable and in need of redevelopment (see Chapter 6). Whether or not Highbridge residents and community members would describe their neighborhood as having a low quality of life is unclear and untested within PlaNYC. However, in relation to the overall goals of PlaNYC, quality of life in Highbridge and near the High Bridge is only relevant in terms of how quality of life in that community is perceived by outsiders – potential residents, investors, and tourists.

This tension between local and global within the proposed restoration plan of the High Bridge (and its stated significance to improving quality of life in for those living in Highbridge) and PlaNYC’s broader global economic goals created the likely opportunity for the project to become much more than localized investment to address a community access issue. If planners had identified any equity planning priorities, based on an acknowledgement and understanding of how previous planning policies had a negative effect on the Highbridge neighborhood, they may have been able to provide a measure of resistance to the full force of the globalized economic reach of PlaNYC at the local level. Without such a reflective planning policy, the implications of these tensions within the High Bridge restoration project played out in the course of the project’s development

and within its evolution through iterations of PlaNYC and also in the public consultation process and masterplan development.

4.3. Non-reflective planning policy: back to the future

In the introduction to PlaNYC, writers identify the efforts made over the last several decades by planners to “reclaim the parts of our city that had been rendered undesirable or unsafe”, stating, “we have spent the past two decades renewing the capacity bequeathed to us by massive population loss” (City of New York, 2007, p. 6), as though that very capacity (vacant and burned housing blocks and other underutilized real estate, etc.) was not strategically and intentionally created by past planning policies and planners (Starr, 1976). The notion that the available capacity, and its associated economic potential, has been “bequeathed” to present day planning professionals distances those professionals from all responsibility related to the effects of their predecessors, and implies an entitlement for planners to “renew” the city towards uses that are more suitable to attracting the types of people and economic investment sought through PlaNYC.

City documents usually identify this population loss as a result of “plummeting quality of life” for New Yorkers in the 1970s. However, they rarely make mention of who or what caused quality of life in the city to plummet or define which neighborhood(s) this occurred in or to what New Yorkers it was happening. In PlaNYC, population loss is described in vague terms as almost inevitable: “...the suburban ideal came within grasp of many post-war New Yorkers. The pull of new, single-family homes in Westchester, Long Island and New Jersey was so strong that, despite continued domestic in-migration our population stagnated. In the 1970s, rising crime and a plummeting quality of life caused the city to shrink by 800,000 people” (City of New York, 2007, p. 4). The analysis of how neighborhoods like Highbridge and their associated infrastructure like the High Bridge “declined” is framed without any mention of the policy and planning decisions that many scholars and journalists have shown played a major role in that decline. Within that broader history it also specifically omits the city’s role in Highbridge’s decline, therefore enabling the city and its staff to position their PlaNYC policy as the solution to economic decline through planned gentrification in order to improve quality of life.

In relation to the High Bridge restoration project, the attitude of planners towards population loss in the Highbridge neighborhood is significant. Widespread population loss occurred throughout the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Highbridge neighborhood, caused by planning policies driven by what at the time was called “planned shrinkage” in an effort to remove non-white working class residents from the city⁵. These efforts included systematic planned reduction in city services in the neighborhood and others in the South Bronx, including slashing police and fire protection as well as other forms of municipal disinvestment. This reduction in services achieved its intended outcome of reducing quality of life to such a degree that any resident who could leave did so. Planned shrinkage simultaneously reduced overall housing units in “blighted” neighborhoods through neglect, particularly in the Bronx where unresponsive fire protection resulted in large numbers of burned-out buildings. Racialized communities, including non-white migrants arriving through intracity migration from the South and rural parts of the country, as well as Dominicans and Puerto Ricans seeking better economic prospects, were concentrated in the remaining available housing units in the poorest areas of the Bronx. The result of the creation of vacant unliveable housing stock combined with the concentration of poverty in the area meant that significant space in the physical built environment of the city was made available for future potential investment. By preventing residents from securing funding to maintain and upgrade these areas through redlining, planners ensured the capacity for future investment would be maintained over time. Essentially, planners unwittingly “bequeathed” the capacity for future investment to themselves through policies which disproportionately impacted poor non-white New Yorkers. Through the PlaNYC strategic plan’s vision and the policies presented within it, contemporary planners positioned themselves to realize the potential economic benefits of areas like Highbridge through a new focus on economic investment through parks and public spaces.

By leaving this past planning history and its negative effects on neighborhoods like Highbridge unacknowledged within PlaNYC, City government and planners failed to put forward reflective planning policy that recognized past wrongs and sought to redress

⁵ Planned shrinkage as an urban planning solution to ‘blight’ was championed by Roger Starr, New York City Housing Administrator, along with ‘benign neglect’ as strategies to reduce population in NYC by focusing resources on certain areas over others. Starr stated explicitly that “the role of the city planner is not to originate the trend of abandonment but to observe and use it so that public investment will be hoarded for those areas where it will sustain life” (Starr, 1976).

resulting inequalities, including those that may have truly increased quality of life for residents in neighborhoods like Highbridge. The result of this non-reflective planning practice were policies which imitated those past policies now widely understood to be racist, disproportionately negatively affecting non-white populations in the name of economic growth.

4.4. The Evolution of the High Bridge Restoration Proposal, 2007 to 2011.

Initially proposed in the first edition of PlaNYC (2007), the High Bridge reopening was part of a program of restoration work to upgrade existing park space in an effort to “*provide Bronx residents* (emphasis mine) with new access to the parks of the northern Manhattan greenbelt, including the Highbridge pool and recreation center.” (City of New York, 2007, p. 36). Highbridge Park, in which the High Bridge sits, extends into both Manhattan and the Bronx with walking paths, green spaces and connections to adjacent neighborhoods on either side of the bridge. The only formal recreation facilities within the park are located on the Manhattan side of the High Bridge and include a Robert Moses-era indoor recreation center as well as the city’s largest outdoor swimming pool. In the 2007 iteration of the plan, providing renewed access to these facilities from the Bronx was the primary goal of the High Bridge restoration. However, the description of the project and its relevance to the NYC park system (and to potential city economic development) changed significantly between the 2007 and 2011 version of PlaNYC. This evolution was critical to defining the project not only in terms of physical scope and the associated capital investment required, but also in defining the High Bridge’s significance to the surrounding communities in terms of potential economic development beyond the park’s borders.

In the 2007 issue of PlaNYC, the High Bridge restoration was described as an effort to “restore [the] bridge with repairs to the brick walkway and stone and steel arches, creating a pedestrian and bike connection between Manhattan and the Bronx” (City of New York, 2007, p. 34). This proposal was included on a map of “destination parks” and was described by an illustrative graphic which indicated the location of the High Bridge span over the Harlem River and both the Manhattan and Bronx sides of Highbridge Park, defining Highbridge Park as one unified park space:



Figure 4.1 Excerpt from 2007 issue of PlaNYC indicating Highbridge Park on both the Manhattan and Bronx sides of the bridge.

Source: (City of New York, 2007, p. 34)

The purpose of targeted investment in these destination parks was to, “complete underdeveloped park sites... that were once envisioned as spectacular resources for the surrounding region. All have yet to reach their potential.” (City of New York, 2007, p. 33). Although the High Bridge restoration was included on the map of destination parks in 2007, the scope of work relative to the other 7 destination parks was rather small; the aim was simply to restore the physical structures of the bridge and open access over the bridge so that both sides of Highbridge Park would be joined again. Other destination parks were to receive entirely new sports facilities, major environmental remediation, and other large-scale redesigns of public space. In the introduction to the destination park section of the 2007 plan, the intention to “fulfill the potential of at least one major undeveloped park site in every borough” could be read as an equity goal – in this case the city’s desire to avoid concentrating major park improvements in one area and to identify sites beyond Manhattan, in order to distribute planning efforts in all 5 boroughs.⁶

⁶ Leading up to the rollout of PlaNYC as the official strategy of the Bloomberg planning policy, criticism over the administration’s Manhattan-centric investment-driven policy had been increasing. Both the public and private sectors were under scrutiny from members of city government as well as city residents. One example of the disparity within private-sector

The inclusion of Highbridge Park (with its boundaries in two boroughs) was then, according to the graphic, one of two destination parks in the Bronx (the other being Soundview Park). This effort to spread destination park investment across all boroughs came at a time of intense criticism of the Bloomberg administration's investment in city parks in Manhattan, the Brooklyn waterfront, and other areas of the city where tourists are frequent and resident incomes were highest (New York Business Journal, 2012).

However, despite this effort and through the development of PlaNYC and subsequent master plans for Highbridge Park, the City's focus would again begin to focus solely on Manhattan. Although the 2007 plan graphically and textually described Highbridge Park as one park in two boroughs linked by the High Bridge, in the 2011 iteration of PlaNYC, the Bronx side of Highbridge Park was erased from the map entirely along with a new designation of Highbridge Park as an "Anchor" park (City of New York, 2011, p. 41). The Anchor Park program proposed in the 2011 PlaNYC iteration identified existing parks to be upgraded in some capacity (presumably beyond the 2007 destination park level) or were entirely new parks proposed to realize the goal of providing not only "recreation" but also to, "encourage commerce and economic growth." (City of New York, 2011, p. 38). As stated in the introduction to the 2011 park strategy, planners had large-scale visions for this new program of work, declaring that "we have embarked on what has become New York's third great era of park building,"⁷ presumably since the Gilded Age and the Robert Moses era. (City of New York, 2011, p. 34). This grand scheme altered the foundational goal of the 2007 PlaNYC strategy, which had focused on *access* to park space for all NYC residents. Instead, the new edition stated that, "simply having access to parks is not enough; the type and quality of parks and public space matter as well." (City of New York, 2011, p. 34). The plan then defines types and quality of park spaces in terms of their relevance to the overall economic development goals of PlaNYC, stating that parks are "important catalyst[s] for economic development, raising property values and breathing life into neighborhoods." (City of

philanthropy pouring into Manhattan vs other more needy boroughs included billionaire John Paulson's gift of \$100 million to the Central Park Conservancy, the already resource rich non-profit funding agency for the park, while parks outside of Manhattan were languished in terms of disrepair (New York Business Journal, 2012). The inclusion of destination parks in all five boroughs was widely seen as an effort by the Bloomberg administration to address that perception.

⁷ The first great era of park building being in the 19th century with over 1900 acres of parkland designed by Olmsted and Vaux including Central Park, and the second era being under Robert Moses, with park space doubling under his leadership.

New York, 2011, p. 34). The Highbridge restoration was no different; identifying the project as an Anchor Park in the 2011 plan broadened the scope of the proposed work from a neighborhood access project to a park development project intended to act as a catalyst for neighborhood gentrification, aligning with the city's focus on economic development through the mechanisms of park development.

Coinciding with the advancement of park development policy from providing access to residents to a focus on quality of the physical spaces of parks as essential to the economic development of the city, the city's definition of a "park" evolved as well in the 2011 PlaNYC. In 2007, PlaNYC defined park space as, "publicly accessible open space that offers New Yorkers possibilities for either active recreation or relaxation and enjoyment" (City of New York, 2007, p. 38). In 2011, the city expanded this definition of a park to include, "the public realm beyond park walls, extending down parkways and green streets and creating public plazas." (City of New York, 2011, p. 45). This shift towards conceptualizing parks as expanding beyond their previously limited boundaries combined with the new focus on the 'quality' of these physical spaces indicates the city's focus on creating public spaces which not only were designed to serve local communities but also to create a "dazzling" physical public realm intended to be "used more seamlessly by all people." (City of New York, 2011, p. 45), indicating planners' rationale that improved public spaces were necessary to attract people to these areas of the city beyond the parks' existing neighbors. Stein discusses the importance of improvements to the public realm for economic development, explaining that, "[p]ublic improvements become private investment opportunities as those who own the land reap the benefits of beautiful urban design and improved infrastructure" (Stein, 2019, p. 39). For planners to realize these economic development goals through public space design, the relationship between municipal investment and the need to attract new and more people through private capital investment in these spaces was critical. Without this relationship, the city would have been investing in spaces without increased economic revenue from new residents and tourists. Stein describes municipal government's critical involvement within this relationship: "The state is a central actor, marshalling investment, boosting land values, attracting desired residents and industries, chasing away threats to profit and rolling out the welcome mat for... investors" (Stein, 2019, p. 43). Stein also describes planner's role within this process as, "ensur[ing] that both sides [real estate investors and municipal governments] of the relationship are present" and describes the

resulting gentrification process as, “a political process as well as an economic and social one...” and that planners have helped transform this process of utilizing local planning initiatives to achieve increased global capital investment by, “foster[ing] [gentrification’s] development...from a local phenomenon into a global business model” (Stein, 2019, p. 43). Therefore, the new conception of what constitutes park space within communities as described in the 2011 iteration of PlaNYC allowed investment in parks to address quality of life issues (through public realm design interventions) beyond park borders, deepening the potential for community transformation by attracting new people to those spaces, especially heretofore marginalized and ghettoized neighbourhoods like Highbridge, and therefore increasing the potential of gentrification directly through park investment. This change meant that the city was not only addressing individual targeted capital improvements within specific parks but rather seeking to transform entire neighborhoods.

In order to achieve these transformations, the 2007 issue of PlaNYC describes planners’ intended public engagement process: “for each one [park], we will engage in a planning effort with the surrounding community to develop green spaces, outdoor recreational centers with opportunities for all ages, and sports facilities...that reflect the shifting recreation interest of today’s New Yorkers” (City of New York, 2007, p. 33). This description of a robust public engagement process was reinforced in the 2011 edition’s anchor park initiative section, which promised that “[f]or each of these sites we have or will engage in an extensive planning effort with the surrounding community.” (City of New York, 2011, p. 38). Despite these statements, only a few, and sometimes by invitation-only, community meetings and one community survey regarding the High Bridge restoration were undertaken as part of the PlaNYC program of work, further illustrating the shift from localized design and infrastructure interventions proposed in the 2007 plan towards prioritizing economic development through design interventions intended to draw attention from outside the neighborhood in the 2011 plan.

The evolution of the language used to describe development goals throughout PlaNYC, as well as the language used to define what a park is and who parks are for, reflected the shifting priorities of the Bloomberg administration from 2007 to 2011. Prior to 2007 and leading up to 2011, it focused heavily on investments in projects and programs that would address “tangible barriers to improving our daily lives” (City of New York, 2007, p. 3). This focus was in response to the previous administration’s perceived

inability to tackle issues like street cleaning, noise, petty crime, and maintenance of the City's public spaces. Additionally, the Bloomberg administration's early years after 9/11 were focused on restoring normalcy to the city, strategically identifying ways that the city could address social needs that had been disrupted. The introduction to the 2007 iteration of PlaNYC reflects the immediacy of the Bloomberg administration's prior planning efforts by stating that "in the wake of the September 11th attacks, we planned for the next day, not the next decade" (City of New York, 2007, p. 3). However, the focus of PlaNYC as a policy-driven means to accommodate anticipated population growth within the confines of existing infrastructure through upgrades and restoration projects in the 2007 iteration eventually evolved to an outward-looking policy of economic development in the 2011 edition. The shifting priorities of the Bloomberg administration towards significantly increasing global capital investment and influence in the city as a means to re-secure NYC's status as a global economic leader is described by planners as part of the City's post 9/11 economic recovery. As one city document stated, "[O]ur economic rebound has been faster than anyone imagined. And so today, we have an opportunity to look further. And we have an obligation to do so, if we are to avoid a repeat of the decay and decline of the 1970s" (City of New York, 2007, p. 3).

Accordingly, by 2011 the focus on local community needs reflected in the original PlaNYC strategy were supplanted by strategies designed to increase economic development outside project boundaries, raise property values and create possibilities for capital extraction. Planners began to frame projects like the restoration of the High Bridge and associated work in Highbridge park, the benefits of which in 2007 had been described in local terms, as key to the economic success of the entire city, directly tying their implementation to NYC gaining greater global significance. This PlaNYC strategy was directed by the vision of the Bloomberg administration to define NYC as a "luxury product" to be marketed and sold globally, escalating park planning policy from the neighborhood-level to the global level (Brash, 2011, p. 81).

PlaNYC established not only the infrastructure restoration goals of the High Bridge itself but also provided a signal to potential investors worldwide that Highbridge was open for development. This identity of Highbridge Park and the High Bridge as a destination for New Yorkers and tourists was cemented through the subsequent master planning process, and planners and design practitioners hired to implement the city's PlaNYC vision had not only a defined physical scope of work but also a defined roadmap

of planning goals from which to practice. Planners and design practitioners engaged community members and developed master plans to achieve project implementation with a focus on the potential economic impacts of the plan, situating their work within the economic development frameworks of PlaNYC.

Chapter 5.

The Master Planning Process (2001-2010)

5.1. Community Organization and City Partnership

Although restoring access over the High Bridge was first proposed by the City in the 2007 iteration of PlaNYC, community efforts to address the isolation of the Highbridge neighborhood by re-opening the High Bridge date back much further. The first community group to formalize with a mission to restore access over the High Bridge was the High Bridge Coalition (hereafter referred to as the Coalition) in 2001, whose efforts were focused on, “reclaiming history and connecting communities” (Our River Our Future, 2022). The group’s primary goal was to use the voices of community members to bring awareness to the isolation of Highbridge caused by the bridge remaining closed, and to further relate the history of both the initial and ongoing closure of the bridge to the social and physical history of the Highbridge neighborhood. The Coalition used a social justice lens to expose the bridge closure’s relationship to other urban planning policies that have negatively affected Highbridge and other Bronx neighborhoods (such as redlining and planned shrinkage) and to galvanize support from local city leaders to address the issue of the neighborhood’s isolation by re-opening the bridge. By framing the need of access to Manhattan by Highbridge residents as a social justice priority, the Coalition argued that the City’s continued closure of the bridge was in fact continued support of historic urban planning policies that were designed intentionally to isolate and contain the people living in High and shield Manhattan residents from the perceived urban blight of the Bronx (High Bridge Coalition, 2007). As Rutland points out, such policies have been typically enacted against racialized communities in the history of North American urban planning, resulting in “ physical displacement, political exclusion, sanctioned exposure to dangerous living conditions, imposed impediments to good health or welfare, and enforced restrictions on people’s movement and daily activities” (Rutland, 2018, p. 3). The Coalition sought to re-define the dominant historic narrative from the City’s account that the bridge was closed simply due to lack of funding for maintenance and expose the intentional planning tactics behind the closure. By sharing the Highbridge community’s contemporary experience of the continued closure of the bridge, the Coalition organized community stakeholders, lobbied local elected officials,

and held events on the Bronx side of the High Bridge to raise awareness of its mission. However, despite its existence as a formal and active community group, the City did not engage the Coalition as a partner until the development of a Steering Committee composed of organizations outside of the Highbridge community.

Despite the fundamental importance of the bridge to the local community of Highbridge, the High Bridge's architectural function as one part of a large aqueduct system as well as its historic significance as the oldest standing bridge in NYC with unique construction engineering, meant that its preservation and potential re-opening was of interest to people far beyond the neighborhood. Being the architectural gem within the vast 19th century Croton Aqueduct system, the High Bridge restoration advocated by the Coalition quickly gained the attention of the Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct (hereafter referred to as the Friends), a historic preservation group based in rural and suburban Westchester County whose aim was to restore and maintain portions of the Old Croton Aqueduct that wind through historic villages in Westchester County as recreational trails serving the tony 'rivertowns' along the Hudson River. Specifically, the Friends' mission was to, "protect and preserve the Old Croton Aqueduct... to raise public awareness of the Aqueduct and trail and to secure the resources that will enable this historic greenway to remain unspoiled in perpetuity" (The High Bridge is Open!, 2015).

The importance of the High Bridge as the final link that would connect the aqueduct trail from Westchester to Manhattan meant that the Friends became an ally of the Coalition . Although the two organizations had different priorities leading their efforts to restore and re-open the bridge, their shared goal led to the creation of the Highbridge Coalition Steering Committee, which the Friends officially joined, and which attracted the attention of the City. The Steering Committee formalized the group's partnership with the City and became a public-private partnership through the Park's Department's Partnerships for Parks⁸ program.

⁸ NYC's Partnerships for Parks Program is a unique public-private partnership between City Parks Foundation and NYC Parks that supports and champions neighborhood volunteers by giving them the tools they need to advocate and care for their neighborhood parks and green spaces (City Parks Foundation, n.d.).

The Friends described the significance of this partnership to increase the capacity of the Coalition on its website:

“The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct were founding members of the Steering Committee of the High Bridge Coalition... and have remained active for its entire duration. The Coalition Steering Committee, with support from the Parks Department and Partnership for Parks, recruited member organizations - eventually about 50 - and individual members who together championed the plan to reopen the bridge. The Steering Committee worked for years to inspire and involve the Highbridge and Washington Heights neighborhoods in the bright future of the almost-forgotten historic treasure in their midst” (The High Bridge is Open!, 2015).

There was an underlying tension revealed in the quote above between the mission of the High Bridge Coalition and that of the Friends. The Coalition sought to “reclaim history and connect [local] communities,” while the Friends felt it had revealed this history to a community it understood as being oblivious to it. The Friends also hoped to restore the bridge and connect it to recreational opportunities far beyond the Highbridge community, especially to Westchester County, one of the wealthiest areas of New York State⁹, illustrating the conflicting priorities between local community efforts to restore basic infrastructure as a means to address social justice through planning, and the broader regional scope of the Friends’ recreational priorities. As the project developed and interest in the High Bridge restoration grew within City leadership, the expanded Coalition’s restoration efforts and potential impacts of the re-opening of the bridge began to align with the economic development goals that the city would eventually propose within the planning policy of PlaNYC, surpassing the social justice priorities of the original Coalition. The Friends group, which was an established philanthropic non-profit organization, was able to provide the project and the City with a network of influence far beyond New York City, while the original Coalition, represented by residents of the poorest congressional district in the entire United States (Kamer, 2010), had no comparative organizational ability to attract the attention of potential outside capital investment.

The priorities of the Friends and their influence on the PlaNYC High Bridge restoration proposal are indicated through their understanding of how the bridge should be restored and for whom. One of their documents explained that “all this [advocacy]

⁹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/westchestercountynewyork>

and more led to a solid base of public support that convinced elected officials to invest in bringing the bridge back to life.” In addition, “through its maps, research, and collective knowledge, the Friends have served as a resource to public and private sectors and, through its newsletter and website, have helped to spread word of the High Bridge campaign beyond the borders of New York City”. It continues, “We have supported important Parks Department initiatives like rebuilding access to the bridge from Manhattan and advocated for the best achievable design” (The High Bridge is Open!, 2015) . The Friends’ narrative leaves unacknowledged the community voices of the Coalition and diminishes the community organizing that the Coalition undertook prior to the Friends joining the steering committee of the public-private partnership. Additionally, working towards the “best achievable design” to “rebuild access to the bridge from Manhattan” shifts from the Coalition’s original focus on the Highbridge neighborhood (and the Bronx as a whole) to design and restoration efforts aimed at addressing Manhattan residents’ experience of using the bridge. By doing so, the Friends involvement in the Steering Committee provided a means for the City to partner with a community group that had leadership whose goals aligned with those of the City to restore the bridge with an intention to attract people, and associated investment, to the area. This public-private partnership allowed the City to support a community group over which it (through its shared goals with the 50+ partners the Friends shepherded to the Coalition Steering Committee) had substantial influence in eliciting and consolidating community voices into one ‘legitimate’ community group. This community group, then, would serve to represent the broader community, including Highbridge residents, in the community engagement process prior to the project master plan development. The Highbridge Coalition’s original mandate to reclaim history and connect communities evolved into the steering committee’s goals to “[lead] a campaign to give [the High Bridge], a city and national landmark, new life as a great public space and greenway link” (The High Bridge is Open!, 2015).

The significance of the public private partnership led by the Steering Committee within the development of the High Bridge restoration project can be seen in the community consultation process and resulting master plans which prioritize the objectives of the Friends over the original goals of the Coalition.

5.2. Community Outreach and Inclusion

Shortly after the High Bridge restoration was first proposed by the city in the 2007 iteration of PlaNYC and after the Highbridge Coalition Steering Committee formally became a public-private partner with the Parks Department through the Partnership for Parks program, the City, led by the PPP, began undertaking a series of outreach efforts through several community meetings and one public survey in order to gather community feedback on the proposal. The feedback gathered through this outreach process was used to define the parameters of the restoration project, not only for the restoration of the bridge itself but also the extent of work within Highbridge Park on both the Bronx and Manhattan sides of the bridge. After the community engagement process was completed, draft master plan documents were presented to the community through several informational meetings, including the required municipal community board approval process, prior to the development of a final master plan. After these processes were complete, the PPP, with funding from several New York State agencies as well as several local and national philanthropic organizations, produced a report in March 2009 outlining a comprehensive action plan for the bridge and associated park restorations through a specific six-step plan that would provide the foundation for planners and designers working towards a master plan for project implementation (Partnerships for Parks, 2009).

5.2.1. The High Bridge Survey

The High Bridge Survey was the only systematic community engagement undertaken beyond informational meetings during the 10-year High Bridge restoration process and was designed and implemented by the PPP. As stated in the survey result summary report, “The questions and answer choices given were selected based on the scope of the project, available funding, and current and projected use patterns” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 1). Since the project scope, budget, and the space’s current use patterns were determined prior to the community participating in the survey, it produced results that generally aligned with the priorities of the PPP and the City since it didn’t offer any wider scope. The survey consisted of ten primary questions with several secondary response-dependent questions and was implemented in person in Highbridge Park on both the Bronx and Manhattan sides of the closed bridge on two

occasions in July and August 2007. The survey was also made available online with the possibility for respondents to complete it directly through the PPP website or to print a physical copy and mail it in. The online availability extended from July through September of 2007. The survey was available in English and Spanish online, however it is unclear if a Spanish version of the survey was available to all potential in-person respondents. In total, 578 valid surveys (as defined by the PPP) were collected (including in-person, online, and by mail), with 24 (4% of total valid surveys) of respondents utilizing a Spanish survey. The in-person surveys were conducted by PPP volunteers. The Bronx side of the bridge accounted for 106 surveys (18% of total surveys completed) and the Manhattan side of the bridge accounted for 51 surveys (9% of total surveys completed). The disparity between surveys conducted on the Bronx and Manhattan sides of the bridge is significant when primary language of residents is analyzed. According to NYC Open Data¹⁰ (Census Reporter, 2022) 71.6% of Highbridge residents speak a primary language other than English, and 53% of Highbridge residents identify Spanish as their primary language, however, while 106 surveys were conducted on the Bronx side of the bridge, only 24 (4%) of total survey respondents (including in-person, online and by mail) utilized a Spanish survey. There is no data within the survey report to indicate the methodology by which survey respondents were selected beyond the a note stating that “while the survey did not use a random sample, for statistical purposes we can assume that the survey represents a random sample of park users” (report p1). Although clearly a nonsensical statement, the lack of a randomized sampling strategy and the disparity between surveys conducted in English vs. Spanish, combined with the vast majority of in-person surveys being conducted on the Bronx side of the bridge, indicates that the people conducting surveys were selecting participants or making surveys available to potential participants based on sampling bias factors, possibly including language as a barrier to survey administration and/or participation. If people conducting the surveys did not offer Spanish surveys or where unable to administer Spanish surveys, the disparity between the known language demographics of Bronx residents in the area and the total surveys conducted in Spanish is possible. The

¹⁰ I have chosen to use NYC Open Data demographic information for Bronx Community District 4 (which includes the Concourse, Highbridge and Mount Eden sections) due to the frequency of updates to the data included within the neighborhood information aggregated through censusreporter.org (Census Reporter, 2022). The statistics used here are as of February 10, 2022, and include data aggregated from the 2019 American Community Survey as well as NYC Open Data and include a potential margin of error of 10 percent.

facts that the survey questions were based on “desired use outcomes”, and that so few Spanish surveys were administered in a primarily Spanish-speaking neighborhood indicate planners’ potential unconscious bias and lack of consideration of the local community and its input. Critical planning scholars back up this possibility, including Rutland’s findings of planning practice as a race-based rationalization of what an urban experience *should* be, and Galasinski’s description of surveys as being “underpinned by the authors’ beliefs and assumptions about reality and ways to understand it”, (Galasinski & Kozłowska, 2010). In short, despite what may have been real intentions by planners to illicit meaningful community feedback from Highbridge residents, their survey implementation may have been compromised by their own internal bias. Combined with the lack of a random sampling strategy, the validity of the survey as a statistical tool to be used as an accurate representation of community input was severely compromised. However, despite its lack of validity, the City and the PPP would cite the Highbridge survey extensively throughout subsequent community engagement and planning processes leading up to the master plan production.

The survey questions relate primarily to potential use of the bridge, including preferred methods of accessing the bridge (biking, walking) as well as time of day and season of use preference. No questions address in any capacity the original efforts of the Coalition concerning acknowledging and addressing the bridge’s history or significance to urban planning in some way within the restored structure (via educational signage or similar), or the Coalition’s original goal to re-connect the Highbridge community to Manhattan by addressing the isolation caused by the bridge’s decades long closure. Minor references to these issues were couched within questions primarily relating to recreational activities that relate to the potential use of the bridge as a means of recreation, whether as a destination or a space to be passed through. For example, question 3a asks respondents to identify how likely they would be to use the bridge for certain activities, including uses related to work and social connections that could have potentially been attributed to efforts to “reconnect communities”. However, these options are included alongside potential recreational uses, muddying the potential significance of the social connections by conflating them with recreational uses.

3a. How likely will you be to use **the bridge and parks** in the following ways? Choose as many as apply.

	<i>Not likely</i>	<i>Somewhat likely</i>	<i>Likely</i>	<i>Very likely</i>
Enjoy the views or relax	1	2	3	4
Commute to work	1	2	3	4
Go shopping	1	2	3	4
Visit friends and family	1	2	3	4
Visit the tower	1	2	3	4
Bike or hike on the trails	1	2	3	4
Play sports	1	2	3	4
Use the recreation center and pool (in Manhattan)	1	2	3	4
Use the spray fountain (in the Bronx)	1	2	3	4
Attend concerts and festivals	1	2	3	4
Walk dogs	1	2	3	4
Play chess or dominoes	1	2	3	4
Other: _____	1	2	3	4

Figure 5.1 High Bridge Survey question 3a.

Source: (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2007, p. 1)

If this question had been simply to identify whether the bridge should be primarily reopened to address Highbridge’s isolation or to become a recreational destination, planners and designers involved in the subsequent master plan development would have had a more specific mandate to address community needs identified by the original Coalition members. By including “visiting friends and family” and “commute to work” as options within a question about recreational uses, the potential importance to Highbridge residents of connecting communities is lost.

The survey report issued by the PPP summarizes key findings, the first of which states, “Respondents said recreational uses, such as enjoying the views or biking or hiking trails, would be their most likely uses of the park” (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2007, p. 2). This finding aligns with the survey question’s emphasis on recreation; however, the survey report does identify access, meaning uses such as “commuting, visiting friends and family, and shopping” as “less popular” when compared to recreational uses, “but still significant” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 2). The report states, “residents of nearby Bronx neighborhoods would be more likely to use [the High Bridge] to attend concerts/festivals, use the rec[reation] center and pool, and visit friends and family”. Additionally, the report states, “Bronx residents would use [the High Bridge] the most during weekdays, while Manhattan residents would use the park most during the weekend” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 2). The report continues, “Bronx residents... are less likely to bike across the bridge” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 4). These results, while not explicit in their interpretations, do indicate the desire of Bronx residents to have access across the bridge for typical daily activities, and should have

been an indicator to planners and designers that a priority should be placed on the needs of the local Bronx community, and specifically Highbridge, to address the community's isolation through the subsequent master planning process.

5.2.2. Community Catalyst; the Community Visioning Process

After the High Bridge survey was completed, the City Parks Foundation's¹¹ (CPF) Catalyst for Neighborhood Parks Program published a report titled *A Community Based Vision for the Future* (Partnerships for Parks, 2009). The report detailed the specific efforts undertaken by the PPP to engage the community in the High Bridge restoration planning process to that point and provided recommendations for the master plan design and implementation. These recommendations were documented through six action "steps" that were intended to ensure that the completion of the master plan design, and ultimately the constructed project, would be in accordance with the Catalyst Program's mandate to, "build local excitement, practical action, and dynamic partnerships for immediate results and sustained change in neighborhood parks and waterfronts" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 4). Under this aspirational and somewhat vague mandate and through the City Parks Foundation's "Catalyst for Neighborhood Parks" program, the City created a "community visioning" strategy outlined in this report with the intention to implement the High Bridge restoration project in consideration of the challenges in organizing communities with various agendas (such as those of the original Coalition and Friends organizations), stating, "...it was important to understand the historical context and relevant issues of [the] neighborhood. Many factors shaped the visioning process, including the features of the local parks, the issues faced by the community's green space, the partners involved, and the demographics of the neighborhood" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 5). The report continues by stating, "although united by their common vision, each group [Coalition, Friends, investors, etc], has their own agenda and compete[d] for resources and credit" (Partnerships for Parks,

¹¹ "The City Parks Foundation (CPF) is a non-profit parks advocacy group that works specifically with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation through the Partnerships for Parks Program. CPF's Catalyst Program is a long-term community development program, working in historically under-served NYC parks. Catalyst builds park communities, connecting people to NYC green spaces and increasing their capacity to sustain parks as a key component of resilient neighborhoods" (City Parks Foundation, n.d.).

2009, p. 5). This report, then, provided recommendations for the project's implementation through CPF's understanding of the various community issues and concerns addressed within the visioning process. The resulting six steps reflected CPF's (and de facto the City's) interpretation of how those various community concerns and issues should be addressed. By analyzing the proposed actions within these six steps, conflicts and tensions between the local community's needs and the broader desires of the PPP and City (including partner stakeholders outside of NYC) become apparent. Although some of the original Highrbridge Coalition's concerns, such as the impacts of the neighborhood's isolation, are acknowledged within individual steps outlined in the report, the authors fail to propose ways to address them.

A Community Based Vision for the Future begins with a letter from the director of the Catalyst program that articulates several goals that seem to indicate a strategy to align community involvement (and therefore potential solutions to community concerns) with established leadership through consideration of the value of public space within a pro-economic development rationale. The letter articulates CPF's intention to "support local leadership and strengthen leadership capacity; foster collaboration amongst community partners; connect community partners to decision-makers in the public and private arenas; and promote parks as valuable community assets" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 4). The letter further defines community visioning as, "a process through which an entity collects information from a specific community of people about how they imagine the future", continuing, "the Catalyst community visioning referred to in this report differs [from approaches used in other projects] ... in at least one key respect, rather than being spearheaded by an agency around a specific capital improvement, Catalyst strived to create the conditions for a type of visioning where community members are more than just participants – they are leaders and facilitators of the process" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 4). While this description of community involved decision-making seemingly places the needs and interests of local residents as a priority, the reality of the prior public engagement process on which the report was based was that the "community" was represented by "leaders" who were members of the Steering Committee of the Highbridge Coalition. In the years leading up to the publication of the report, the Steering Committee of the Coalition grew to include over 50 organizations and individuals, most of which, even more than The Friends, were in no way local, including The Altman Foundation, The J.M. Kaplan Fund, The Scherman

Foundation, The Starr Foundation, and the New York State Department of State (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 2). These entities brought a significant amount of interest into the project far beyond the boundaries of the Highbridge neighborhood or even New York City. The influence of the Steering Committee leadership's priorities which ultimately led to the project's inclusion within PlaNYC – over the social justice interests of local community activists who originally formed the Highbridge Coalition by seeking to “reveal history and connect communities” can be seen starting in the first step outlined in the report, “Understanding Community and Parks Context” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 6).

Step One: Understanding Community and Parks Context

Rooting the High Bridge restoration project within the specific community context in which it exists is the first and foundational step recommended by the Catalyst report by, “empower[ing] community partners to create their own outcomes” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 5). Through this approach, planners identified the importance of the project to re-connect the neighborhood of Highbridge to Manhattan by acknowledging the important role the bridge had in facilitating those access needs in the past by stating that, “Bronx and Manhattan neighborhood residents used the bridge to traverse the river on their route home” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 6). However, within this report and in later PlaNYC documents, the authors failed to reflect on the role of previous planning practices in cutting off the bridge to residents, and instead state passively that, “the High Bridge has been closed for nearly 40 years, with access barred from either side” (p6). They even express puzzlement about why it was shut down, particularly “[g]iven the bridge’s distinguished place in city history” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 6). The authors further minimized the impacts of the High Bridge’s 40-year closure on the community by stating, “Many visitors and New Yorkers, including High Bridge neighborhood locals, have never heard of the bridge” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 6). By framing the bridge’s history as something hidden from both current planners and neighborhood residents, the authors avoided acknowledging (and thereby addressing in their proposals) the planning policies such as planned shrinkage and benign neglect that strategically created an environment in the South Bronx prior to the 1970s closure in which closing the bridge and isolating the neighborhood of Highbridge from the rest of the city could be seen as a necessary result of lack of funds to support the bridge’s maintenance needs. Therefore, by leaving this history unacknowledged within the

community engagement process documented in this report, planners further facilitated a planning process that, while purportedly based on “understanding community and parks context”, in fact failed to acknowledge the history of the bridge’s impact on the people who were unable to utilize it. This interpretation of the bridge’s historic impact on the Highbridge community further removed the original Coalition’s goals of revealing the history of the High Bridge not only from the community engagement process but ultimately from the final master plan. Once the historic context of the project was understood and framed as merely a budgeting issue and an opportunity to renew an architectural gem, the next step identified in the report was to organize leadership to move the project forward.

Step Two: Identifying Stewards and Building Capacity

As outlined previously, the Highbridge Coalition’s leadership began to expand beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood and even the city with the development of the Steering Committee and became formalized within a public-private partnership through the City’s Partnerships for Parks program. With the involvement of the Catalyst program, the leadership of the Highbridge Coalition (via the Steering Committee) was intentionally expanded further to increase capacity by, “conducting intensive outreach in order to identify community leaders and connect them to the High Bridge Coalition.” The report went on to explain that “Catalyst helped link community leaders with government agencies and nonprofit partners, encouraging them to work together by participating in and designating representatives to the High Bridge Coalition” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 7). Through these efforts to expand the political, social, and economic reach of the Highbridge Coalition, Catalyst successfully increased the leadership capacity to include, “over 50 members, including local community-based organizations, city-wide organizations, community leaders, neighborhood associations, parks volunteer groups, neighborhood social service providers, environmental organizations, government agencies, public health organizations and other nonprofits” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 7). Although Catalyst certainly succeeded in its efforts to increase leadership capacity, by organizing and formalizing relationships with organizations across so many potential stakeholders, Catalyst ensured that the High Bridge restoration project included involvement of organizations with leadership whose goals for the project aligned with those presented in PlaNYC, potentially diluting the influence of local community voices despite step one’s to empower those same community voices. Additionally, Catalyst

reduced the potential for activist organizations and community members to be a part of the planning process specifically by creating one vast, intentionally selected ‘community’ group whose voice was ever-present within the course of the project. Those community members who may otherwise have provided countering priorities to Catalyst’s (and the City’s) efforts to utilize the High Bridge restoration project as a means of economic development (as seen in the evolution of PlaNYC policy from 2007-2011) would simply not have a seat at the community representation table.¹²

Step Three: Assessing Challenges and Opportunities for Change

After Catalyst curated a community voice by identifying and recruiting various stakeholders to join the Highbridge Coalition, the group then worked to, “identify the challenges and opportunities presented [within the scope of the project]... by assessing the present reality of th[e] community” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 8). The five challenges identified within the community and opportunities to address those challenges within the park redevelopment project were: “unequal resources; divided communities; challenged communities; challenged parks; and underutilized park and recreation center” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 8). Each of these challenges or opportunities was explored in depth throughout the Catalyst planning process with the intention that they be addressed within the final master plan. Similar to the identification of social issues stemming from the bridge’s closure identified in step one, the opportunities identified in step three echoed community concerns regarding planning policies that had (and continued to) negatively affect the Bronx side of the High Bridge, particularly those of unequal resources and divided communities. Clearly planners and those involved with the Catalyst project understood at least some of the social ramifications of the bridge’s closure on Bronx residents, but whether they directly related these issues to past planning policies, even as personal reflections, is unclear, and not directly acknowledged at all within the Catalyst report. The Catalyst report indicates that while planners did have some understanding of planning policy effects, their continued failure to directly acknowledge the connections between the urban planning policy and

¹² NYC planning processes specifically include a process of presentation and discussion of public (and often private) projects through the Community Board approvals process. In the case of the High Bridge restoration, the community voice within this process was that of the Steering Committee or Catalyst community group as the office voice representing the community in these proceedings. Although the public was able to attend and speak, Community Boards received official ‘community’ endorsement for the project from the official community group described here.

the state of the Highbridge neighborhood is an ongoing theme. Because these issues impacting the Highbridge neighborhood were disconnected from historic urban planning policy within the report, their potential solutions would also be disconnected from future planning policy that the report would influence.

The unequal allocation of municipal, social, and economic resources between the Manhattan side of the High Bridge and the Bronx was a primary point of activism by community members in the early formation of the Highbridge Coalition. The inability of Bronx residents to access the park and recreation center in Manhattan was only one concern in terms of access. Accessing transportation, employment opportunities and maintaining social and family ties with residents on the Manhattan side of the bridge was key to the social justice narrative of the original Highbridge Coalition members who sought to end the intentional separation of their neighborhood from the rest of New York City (Our River Our Future, 2022). However, within the Catalyst report, the challenge of unequal resources is limited to the recreational opportunities provided by the Highbridge Recreation Center which lies on the Manhattan side of the bridge, highlighting the differences between the richly resourced 118 acre park on the Manhattan side and the smaller and poorly resourced park on the Bronx side¹³ (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 8). Although the inequality identified in recreational opportunities within the report is certainly important in the context of potential solutions within the master plan, by limiting the discussion of unequal resources to *only* those related to recreation within the park, Catalyst ignored other inequalities created by the bridge closure from their report and therefore consideration in the master plan.

Catalyst's focus solely on the unequal recreational resources between the Manhattan and Bronx side of the bridge is further seen in the second challenge identified in the report: Divided Communities. The report states, "Because the High Bridge is off-limits, in order to access the larger, more resourced park and the recreation center on the Manhattan side, Bronx residents must drive or take inconvenient public

¹³ Topography, including steep terrain and extreme slopes, plays a large role in the limited availability of recreational opportunities on the Bronx side of the High Bridge, as it does for virtually all public resources related to Highbridge (including transportation). When critiqued from the perspective of a landscape architecture design practitioner, the challenging topography should have been identified as even more of a reason to ensure not only adequate access over the bridge to Manhattan, but also to utilize the park restoration project as an opportunity to better connect the street network of the Highbridge neighborhood to the bridge itself.

transportation. When the bridge is re-opened, it will serve as the missing link between the Bronx and Manhattan parks communities on either side” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 8). While this description of bridge closure resulting in communities divided and separated from the recreational resources noted in the report is true, by failing to identify ways in which the Highbridge and Manhattan communities were divided beyond park space simplified and reduced the ambitions of the project as it developed. This silence on the broader importance of the High Bridge closure on Highbridge residents beyond park access is significant considering that at the same time, PlaNYC policy had evolved to expand the definition of park space beyond park borders into “the public realm beyond park walls” (City of New York, 2011, p. 45).

While the Catalyst report does not expand beyond recreational impacts of unequal resources and divided communities identified within the planning process, the identified issue of *challenged communities* within the report again indicates planners’ intention to understand – although not explicitly link to planning policy and the High Bridge closure within the report – some social, economic and health ramifications of prior planning policies within the Highbridge neighborhood and the South Bronx. They state, “The neighborhoods on each side of the High Bridge, but particularly the Bronx, have grappled with public health issues, including high asthma rates, high concentrations of industry, overcrowding, and lack of green space.... A history of low incomes and high poverty and unemployment rates are realities of the communities on either side of the High Bridge” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 8). This acknowledgement of issues within the communities adjacent to the High Bridge extending beyond park access or recreational use is also evident in the next issue identified within step three, *Challenged Parks and Underutilized Parks and Recreation Center*. The report states, “the parks have faced many severe safety and maintenance challenges. Long-time community members remember the days when the High Bridge was unsafe to cross.... [P]ark maintenance and physical improvements continue to be a main concern and past experiences color community opinions of the parks” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, pp. 8-9). Despite this statement, planners do not explore reasons why the parks decayed to such an extent, or why community residents felt unsafe using the bridge, or why these issues persist and are present at the time of this report. There is no reflection on the urban planning policies which negatively affected areas near the High Bridge, particularly in the Bronx, even though these policies (such as redlining, disinvestment,

planned shrinkage) and their devastating consequences for communities were widely known within planning practice at the time of this report.

Step Four: Community Visioning

Building on the previous steps which primarily identified and documented Catalyst's interpretation of the current state of issues affecting the project, the community visioning process documented in step four was in support of Catalyst's goal to, "use community visioning to help connect previously disconnected communities through a campaign to reopen the bridge and reclaim public space" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 10). Essentially, the community visioning step set the parameters of the design interventions to be further documented within the master plan. To realize this goal, planners began "raising broad public awareness of the Bridge and waterfront parks as a necessary step towards conducting an inclusive community visioning process" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 10). Action taken towards engaging the community included increased programming within Highbridge Park, intensive local outreach including the design and production of a High Bridge Map and Guide (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 11), and the installation of permanent informational signage on both sides of the bridge intended to inform the public of the project and provide information on how individuals could get involved in the project. Additionally, Catalyst, along with the Highbridge Coalition, organized a conference in April 2005 titled "New York's Water Supply System: A Study in the Monumental" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 11). According to the report, "The conference paid special attention to the role that the High Bridge played in the development of New York City, as well as the role it can play in the future. The event attracted more than 600 people and increased regional visibility of the High Bridge waterfront parks and Catalyst project" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 11). Additionally, Catalyst organized a series of community meetings, "for Bronx and Manhattan residents and representatives of community-based organizations... [to] provide a forum for stakeholders in either borough to voice goals for their neighborhood's waterfront parks" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 12). It is important to note that these community meetings began after the Highbridge Coalition (via the Steering Committee) became a formal partner with the city through the Partnerships for Parks program. Therefore, stakeholders invited to these meetings shared similar interests in the High Bridge restoration project as the city planners facilitating the project. Evidence of this controlled method of community engagement (and therefore "visioning")

is revealed in a memo which served as an invitation to stakeholders to attend one such community meeting. The invitation included an offer of private transportation for Manhattan stakeholders who would like to attend the meeting which was held in the Bronx (High Bridge Coalition, 2007). I found no evidence of private transportation being offered to Bronx residents when meetings were located in Manhattan, an example of the city's deliberate or de facto privileging of Manhattan stakeholders whose vision for the bridge restoration was more closely aligned with both Catalyst's and PlaNYC objectives for the project than stakeholders based in the Bronx (High Bridge Coalition, 2007).

Step Five: Articulating a Vision for the Future

In step five planners identified goals, based on the previous steps of the Catalyst planning process, to lead the master plan development for the project that, "reflect the priority areas that were identified as issues that community stakeholders were interested in and committed to helping realize" (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 13). The goals set forth in the report are: a Restored and Re-opened High Bridge; Safe and Secure Bridge; Green, Clean, Safe Parks; Connected Communities; Programmed Parks and Recreation Center; Aware Community; Environmentally Healthy and Aware Waterfront Park; and Organized Community (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 13). Of these five goals, those labeled "Aware Community" and "Organized Community" were related directly to community issues outside of the park or the High Bridge and had the potential to move the project beyond addressing park and greenspace issues and towards addressing community needs stemming from the isolation created by the bridge's closure and created an opportunity for planners to address within the master plan some of the original Highbridge Coalition's concerns. As stated in the report in the section on creating an "aware" community, planners acknowledged the connection between the physical infrastructure of the bridge and issues within surrounding communities previously identified in step three (Assessing Challenges and Opportunities for Change). The report states an intent to produce an aware community by, "offer[ing] increased educational, historical, cultural, and environmental programming to educate [the public] about the rich history of the High Bridge and make connections to current community issues..." (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 13). This statement reveals that the isolation of the Highbridge neighborhood and the ramifications that isolation has wrought on the area are not obscured entirely from the planner's consciousness or even from potential action within the master plan development, but rather are paired along with, "efforts to

promote the High Bridge as an attraction for visitors and tourists” (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 13), leaving the solution to these issues to be achieved through the development of the project into a destination-focused effort intended to attract outside economic and social capital to the area, further aligning with the goals of PlaNYC.

The community voice created by formalizing a public-private partnership with the city and the selective involvement of stakeholders from the leadership level down to community engagement participation, enabled the city to cultivate a community-based perspective that closely aligned with city planning objectives related to public space improvement via capital investment and global attention. The result of this community cultivation was further distanced community activist voices from the subsequent master planning process.

Chapter 6.

The Master Plan(s) (2011-2017)

Although the High Bridge restoration and the renovation of both the Bronx and Manhattan portions of Highbridge park was described throughout the community engagement process and within early iterations of PlaNYC through the destination and anchor parks programs as one contiguous public park improvement effort, the design and construction contracts for the restoration of the bridge itself were separated from the design and construction of the parks in early 2010. The contract for the restoration of the bridge was managed by the New York City Department of Design and Construction and focused solely on addressing the structural safety of the bridge and was thus limited in scope to upgrades and improvements to walking surfaces, railings, and seating along the span, and did not include any work associated with the parks or gatehouses on either side of the bridge. By separating the bridge design and construction from the associated parks, the city was able not only to move the bridge restoration project ahead prior to completion of community engagement of the larger park redevelopment project but was also able to focus master planning efforts on areas of Highbridge Park without the need to include the bridge restoration as a critical component of the master plan. Also, by addressing one of the community's primary concerns of isolation due to the bridge closure by completing the bridge re-opening prior to the remaining park master plan development, the City and planners were able to focus the park master planning process solely in Manhattan, with the implied assumption that since the bridge was open, all improvements in Manhattan were now accessible to Bronx residents as well. Whether the Manhattan-centric focus of the master plan was a deliberate decision is unclear within the documentation. More likely, the ease with which planners were able to remove the Bronx entirely from all Highbridge Park master planning efforts was based on their continued lack of connection between previous planning policy and the concerns of Highbridge residents, supported by the prevalent urban nationalism justifying development in NYC as an undifferentiated public good serving the entire 'melting pot' of city residents. Blind spots created by this pattern of non-reflective planning fostered a design environment in which practitioners were able to focus new resources in the area with the most existing resources (Manhattan) and in the portion of Highbridge Park they determined would be most frequented by visitors, and thus be able to serve as a

“destination” in the best interests of all New Yorkers rather than using the opportunity to further invest park development resources in the Bronx.

In addition to isolating the scope of park planning efforts to Manhattan, the change within the Highbridge Park project limits by isolating the bridge restoration contract aligned with the changes within the project proposal in PlaNYC between 2007, when Highbridge Park was defined as one unified space on both sides of the bridge, and the 2011 iteration of PlaNYC when the Bronx side of Highbridge Park was no longer considered within the project limits. Although the City, through community cultivation and engagement, described the proposal to re-open the High Bridge as critical to the well-being (i.e., quality of life) of both Bronx and Manhattan residents, the financial resources and political will gained through the community engagement process both from community members as well as from local and non-local public and private organizations and individuals, was eventually focused solely to the Manhattan side of the High Bridge, following both planners’ attention and funding.

In July of 2011, the City of New York issued the first master plan addressing Highbridge Park as part of the Northern Manhattan Parks 2030 Master Plan to coincide with the updated 2030 goals outlined in the 2011 iteration of PlaNYC. The intention of the master plan was to, “make a plan that can be implemented over the next 20 years by coordinating the efforts of elected officials, NYC Parks, City agencies, community members and non-profit partners” (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 2).

6.1. Northern Manhattan Parks Conceptual Master Plan: Redefining the park and community, 2011

The 155-page 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Conceptual Master Plan was the first project of its scope to address all the parks north of 155th street as one interconnected system of parks, and was the first attempt to address planning issues across all of the parks as one connected and interrelated network of public spaces with the purpose to, “stitch the parks together as a system of ecological areas, scenic paths, bike routes, and river access points” and to “distribute recreational facilities needed by the whole community” (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 3).

This was not only the first master plan that addressed the entire Manhattan portion of Highbridge Park, but also the first to link it with surrounding northern Manhattan parks as a comprehensive system of park space, expanding the City's anchor park from the limits of Highbridge Park (2011) to include all the parks in northern Manhattan and further decoupling Highbridge Park from the Bronx:

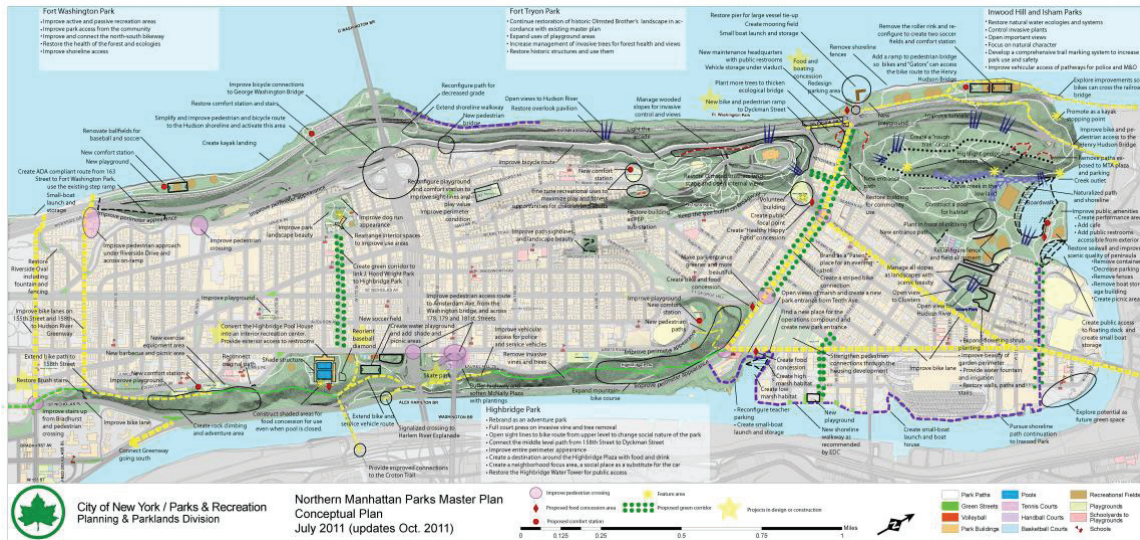


Figure 6.1 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan Conceptual Plan (see appendix for full scale map).

Source: (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011).

This attention to the entire Northern Manhattan Park system signaled a new interest in northern Manhattan as a place to be invested in, not just as a park destination¹⁴, but as an entire neighborhood. By linking the parks together through the master plan in a network, the spaces between the parks (the public realm) became part

¹⁴ This new interest would eventually result in a wide-scale rezoning of the Inwood section of Northern Manhattan, a move which, although faced with strong, sustained, and organized community opposition, resulted in one of the largest re-zonings in NYC history. The relationship between municipal planners' efforts to rezone the neighborhood and the potential development opportunities identified by private capital was described in the *New York Times* through this typical example: "In 2015, as city officials were showing an interest in rezoning Inwood, the co-developers Madd Equities and Joy Construction bought a stake in the property for \$4.3 million. In August 2018, a few weeks after the city approved the zoning, excavations began" (Hughes, 2021). Northern Manhattan's gentrification foreshadowed the redevelopment of many other working-class communities in the outer boroughs, including Highbridge.

of the plan as well. How people moved from one park to another, how different recreational opportunities were provided in one park over another and the connections between areas of Northern Manhattan that resulted were all considered within the plan, further illustrating the power of public space investment to influence surrounding areas. By identifying public spaces in Northern Manhattan as worthy of investment through a wide-ranging geographically comprehensive plan that encompassed improvements to the physical built parks spaces as well as ‘quality of life’ issues within a social context such as adequate green space for gathering and respite, the City’s expanded PlaNYC definition of parks as including spaces beyond their physical border began to be implemented.

Some of the city’s largest parks were included in this plan, including Fort Washington Park, Fort Tryon Park, Inwood Hill Park, and Highbridge Park, totaling more than 600 acres and affecting more than 200,000 residents in the neighborhoods that compose northern Manhattan. The inclusion of all parks in Northern Manhattan in the masterplan followed demographic shifts within the socio-economic status of many residents in the area, reflecting Northern Manhattan’s changing status from a primarily low-income working-class neighborhood, like Highbridge in the Bronx, to one which NYC residents from outer boroughs saw as a step up in residential status. The cachet of Manhattan and the ability of mobile city dwellers to relocate from fast(er) gentrifying neighborhoods such as Williamsburg in Brooklyn to the relative affordability of pre-war housing stock in Northern Manhattan, enabled the city’s internal migrants to find affordable space in an easily commutable Manhattan neighborhood¹⁵. The stated goals of the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan reflected these demographic shifts and included long-range planning efforts to accommodate design strategies used in more affluent areas of NYC. Some of these public realm improvements included bike lanes, pedestrian plazas, environmentally sensitive stormwater design, and a focus on overall community well-being by providing public spaces to gather beyond the confines of a park. Specifically, planners aimed to “make a plan that can be implemented over the next 20 years by coordinating the efforts of elected officials, NYC Parks, City agencies, community members and non-profit partners” (NYC Department of Parks and

¹⁵ Manhattan Community District 12, which includes the neighborhoods of Washington Heights, Inwood, and Marble Hill, saw significant demographic shifts between the 2000 and 2010 US census. Namely, the white population increased by 42% (Center for Urban Research, The Graduate Center, 2011).

Recreation, 2011, p. 2) which would, “identify and address community concerns, waterfront design and access, pedestrian and bicycle circulation, recreational needs and preferences, as well as ecological and sustainability goals, community health and fitness, service and security problems” (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 5). Each of these goals were broken down into action items specific to each park included in the Master Plan. The first action item identified to achieve these goals for the Highbridge Park portion of the plan was to “rebrand as an adventure park” (Figure 6.2) (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011), aligning with the PlaNYC designation of Highbridge park as a destination and an anchor park, with the intention to serve as the primary active recreation (i.e. “adventure”) park in the area.

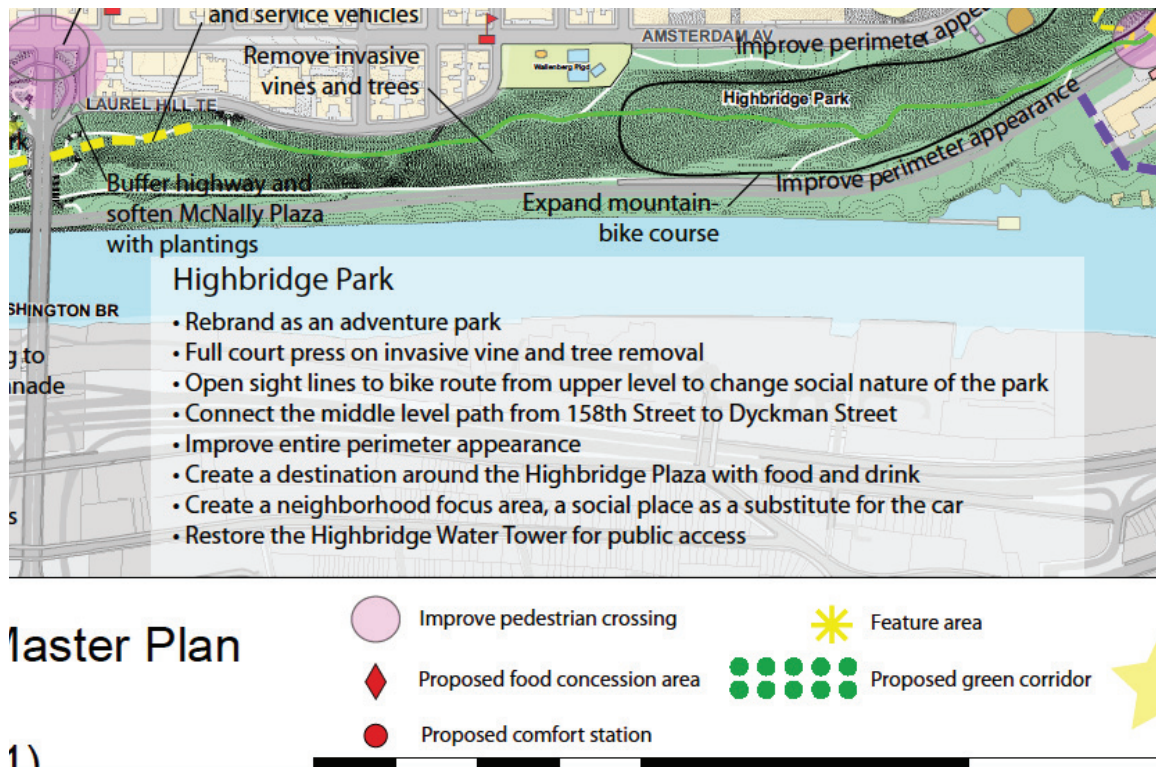


Figure 6.2 Enlargement of 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan Conceptual Plan showing the goals for Highbridge Park (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011)

With an eye towards attracting non-residents to the park, planners carefully chose both language and graphics that communicated the City’s interest in further removing the Highbridge neighborhood, and the entire Bronx, from any connection to the planned attraction on the Manhattan side of the High Bridge. Quite literally, planners

would indicate the need to shield visitor's views of the Bronx from Manhattan in the next master plan that would be developed for Highbridge Park.

The Highbridge Park portion of the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan would eventually become the master plan for the Highbridge Park Anchor Parks Program (2017), a program that was established in PlaNYC in 2011 in which Highbridge Park (in the Bronx and Manhattan), because of the High Bridge, was identified as one of five such anchor parks across the five boroughs of New York City whose primary purpose would be to attract visitors from other city neighborhoods and ultimately tourists from around the world. However, as the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan developed and continued to include only the Manhattan side of the bridge, the subsequent anchor park program solely included the Manhattan side of Highbridge Park, removing Highbridge Park in the Bronx entirely from planned park capital improvements through 2030 as discussed in section 6.2.

6.1.1. Erasing the Bronx – The Impact of Visual Representation

The 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan further dissociated the Manhattan side of Highbridge Park from the Bronx community of Highbridge through planners' analysis of the physical and experiential features of the park¹⁶. In the "Scenic Experiences and Views" section of the plan, the entire Highbridge Park waterfront on the Bronx side of the bridge, which would be viewed from Manhattan, is identified with a thick, black, zigzag line, and labelled "industrial views" with a note promising that, "designers [would] make every effort to open desirable views and block poor ones" (Figure 6.3) (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 30). Although this language is not as stark as the use of the term "blight" historically associated with criticized urban planning and urban "renewal" policies, the effect is the same. By labelling the community of Highbridge, a place that includes people's homes, as "industrial", planners have effectively repeated the same strategies of their predecessors and erased, through words and graphics, an entire community of people from inclusion

¹⁶ The NYC Department of Parks and Recreation has jurisdictional cohesion within its ability to manage park budgets, including capital improvements, of a park located in two boroughs. Although some coordination may have been required, the agency had the authority and the ability to manage the park restoration across borough borders if it had chosen to do so.

and consideration within the plan. Planners' framing of the Bronx as undesirable in this way delineates portions of the Bronx as unfit for the investment of public park resources.



Figure 6.3 Excerpt from the 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan indicating the Bronx waterfront (and the neighborhood of Highbridge) as industrial.

Source (NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011, p. 30)

Although the Bronx waterfront is indeed heavily industrialized (including a highway, train tracks etc.), there are actual park spaces in addition to Highbridge park, including Bridge Park and Roberto Clemente State Park, which provide direct public access to the Bronx waterfront and are completely ignored by the master plan graphic and analysis statement. Also unacknowledged are the apartment houses and residences of the Highbridge neighborhood which are also visible from Manhattan. Meanwhile, the Manhattan waterfront is indicated in the plan as 'scenic' on the map despite most of the waterfront being composed of the Harlem River Drive and access ramps to the Cross Bronx Expressway.

Understanding the significance of the decision by planners to represent the Bronx in this way is crucial to understanding how planners considered the Highbridge community throughout the development of the master plan. By representing the Bronx side of the bridge and the Highbridge neighborhood as industrial in the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan, planners effectively removed, graphically and therefore contextually, the community of people who live within the Highbridge neighborhood from further consideration throughout the master plan development process. The effect was similar to what Rutland describes in the context of Halifax's Black community – in effect

to “undercut” the Highbridge community’s “every claim” to the space (Rutland, 2018, p. 286). Subsequent iterations of the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan as well as the subsequent Highbridge Park Anchor Parks Program Master Plan all exclude the Bronx entirely. This erasure of the neighborhood and its residents occurred despite all the years of community activism by the Highbridge Coalition and their partnership with the City, community outreach by the City including surveys of Bronx residents, community meetings, working groups and design charettes all of which were intended to, at least in part, bring attention to the project from within the Bronx community and to engage the community towards an outcome that addressed its specific needs. All of those previous community engagement and activism efforts were erased in one graphic.

The ability of planners to isolate the Highbridge Park restoration master planning efforts from the Bronx entirely was made possible, at least in part and perhaps unintentionally, by the separation of the restoration of the High Bridge from the renovation of Highbridge Park. The change in the scope of work after the High Bridge itself was removed from the park restoration plans and the resulting change to the scope of work within the scope of work relative to the park restoration left the opportunity for planners to prioritize the Manhattan side of Highbridge Park over the Bronx side of Highbridge Park. Although throughout the community engagement process the High Bridge and Highbridge Park were discussed by planners as one contiguous public space and described by the community as one community resource, once the restoration of the High Bridge was complete and the bridge was open, much of the Bronx community’s needs and concerns regarding isolation and access were addressed from a planner’s standpoint. By failing to identify the physical opportunities for connection between the park spaces on the Bronx side of the bridge to those on the Manhattan side, as well as failing to conceive of the Bronx side of the bridge as more than an industrial area to be screened from view but rather as public spaces vital to the quality of life of Highbridge neighborhood residents, planners directed resources away from the Highbridge neighborhood (and the surrounding Bronx neighborhoods) and toward the already recreation-resource abundant Manhattan neighborhoods. Planners’ actions could be explained as simply taking the path of least resistance within their contract scopes which may not have encouraged them or allowed them the opportunity to attempt to address larger structural inequalities within the planning history of the area. However, in so doing, park planners echoed the missteps identified by the original Highbridge Coalition

community group – that the Highbridge neighborhood had been intentionally isolated through the disinvestment of vital resources to address basic community needs based on inequitable planning policies. Additionally, the Highbridge Coalition’s concern that planners understand the effects of those policies through reflective planning policy throughout the High Bridge restoration process could have afforded planners and design professionals a substantive mandate with which to challenge the City’s Manhattan-centric project scope.

6.2. Highbridge Park Anchor Parks Program: Conceptual Master Plan, 2017

The focus of the Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan shifted to follow the Bloomberg administration’s 2011 iteration of PlaNYC in which Highbridge Park was elevated from the status of a destination park to an anchor park and became one of the five signature parks across the City identified in the Anchor Parks Program. Along with this new designation came a new master plan which was completed in 2017 and was the undertaken by a private landscape architecture and planning firm, MKW+Associates. Previous master plans, including the 2011 Northern Manhattan Parks Master Plan, were completed by the city’s own planning professionals within the Department of Parks and Recreation and the City Planning Department. The outsourcing of the master plan from the city’s own planners to a private design firm is significant because it resulted in a gap in continuity of knowledge about the history of the project, including the years of community engagement and associated community cultivation identified earlier. In addition, unlike the city’s own planning professionals who were able to control the project’s parameters including the project’s physical boundaries, overall design goals and funding from within their agency (and modify that scope over the course of the project if necessary), the privately contracted planning professionals were bound to the specific limits of scope mandated in their contracts with little leeway in terms of addressing planning issues that may have arisen through the course of their work. Therefore, the combination of privatizing the practice of planning (with specific, limited, and mandated scope) along with the new designation of Highbridge Park as an Anchor Park within PlaNYC (and the associated planning goals of that designation), the resulting plan was one which placed the experiences of visitors and tourists as a priority over the needs of the local community and emphasized a holistic public realm design intended to

impact surrounding neighborhoods beyond the park borders. This emphasis on influencing the public realm through park design directly aligned with the 2011 iteration of PlaNYC by utilizing public space improvements to spur investment in areas seen as “underdeveloped” (City of New York, 2007, p. 33).

As noted earlier, the Highbridge Park Anchor Parks Master Plan is limited in scope to only include the Manhattan portion of the park:

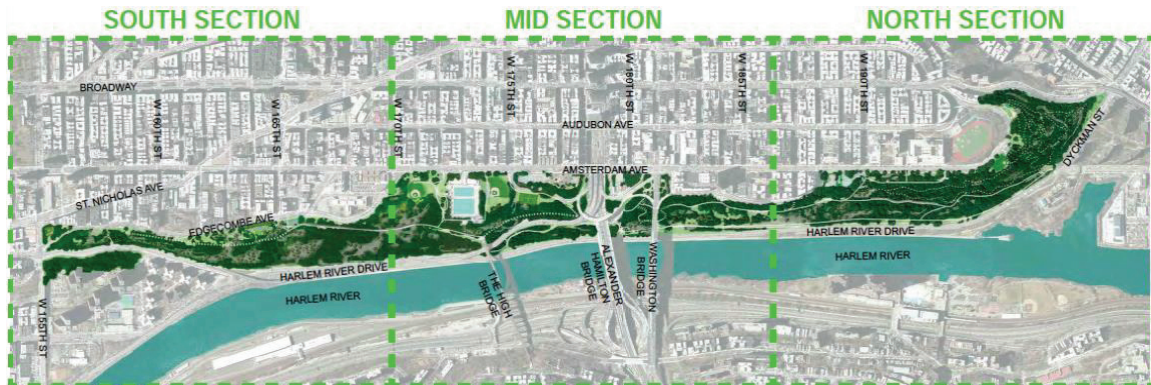


Figure 6.4 Excerpt from the 2017 Highbridge Park Master Plan. The entirety of the Bronx waterfront (below the Harlem River), including Highbridge Park, Bridge Park, and Roberto Clemente State Park have no relevance to the Manhattan plan.

Source: (MKW + Associates, 2017, p. 22)

However, despite no reference to the Bronx whatsoever, the Highbridge neighborhood became one of NYC’s fastest gentrifying neighborhoods with rents increasing 22 percent in 2017 alone (Demaue & McPherson, 2018), providing an example of how the 2011 PlaNYC goal of the Anchor Parks initiative to, “encourage commerce and economic growth” (City of New York, 2011, p. 38) was realized. The 2011 iteration of PlaNYC moved public park investment priorities beyond addressing specific park needs to addressing regional capital investment through parks, and the association between the development of the Highbridge park master plans and the gentrification of the Highbridge neighborhood illustrates how those regional economic development goals were accomplished without any actual strategic planning for public capital investment in the Highbridge neighborhood itself¹⁷. The strategic decision by the

¹⁷ Although gentrification is typically understood as the result of investment, disinvestment, and subsequent reinvestment (Stein, 2019, p. 49) all within one neighborhood (or contiguous area), the power of public space investment in the Manhattan side of Highbridge Park had such influence on the Bronx neighborhood of Highbridge that no actual capital investment in the park

City to formally limit the scope of the Highbridge Park restoration by utilizing private contractors to undertake the 2017 master plan constricted planners from analyzing and addressing clear community needs and priorities within the plan. Additionally, the development of the Anchor Parks initiative set new city priorities for public space as a method to spur economic activity, further dissociating the needs of the Highbridge Community from the results of the master plan and the plan's resulting social and economic impacts.

Within the Highbridge Park Anchor Parks Master Plan, community input is cited and used to substantiate various aspects of the plan including improvements such as new sports fields, bathrooms, and better maintenance. However, the category with the largest community priority is identified as "connectivity, paths and entrances":

space on the Bronx side of the High Bridge was necessary to attract capital, and therefore gentrification, to the neighborhood of Highbridge (Kamer, 2010).

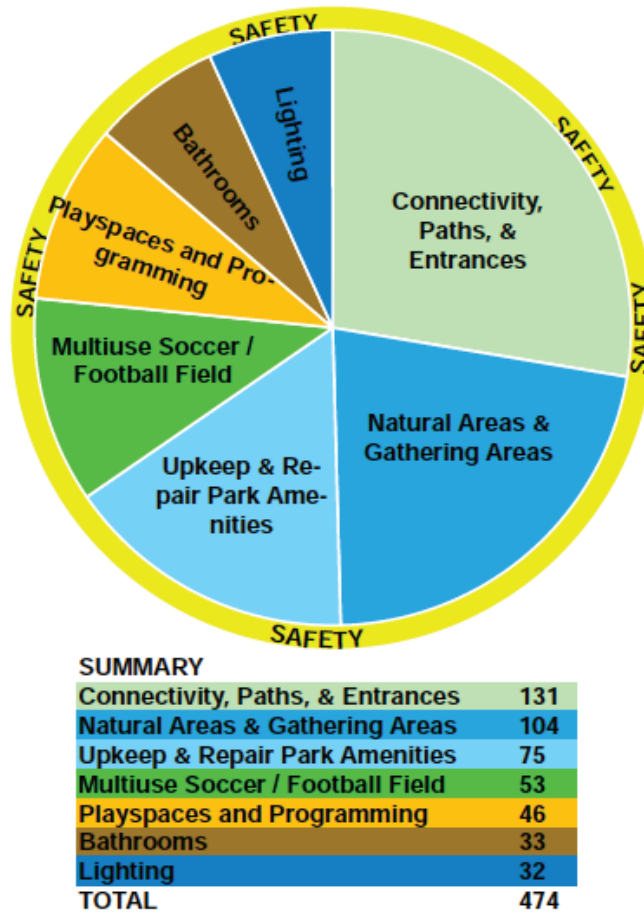


Figure 6.5 Excerpt from the 2017 Highbridge Park Master Plan indicating ‘community vision’.

Source: (MKW + Associates, 2017, p. 57).

Although not explicit within the plan, the priority placed on connectivity from within the community throughout the master planning process echoes the prior community concerns regarding connectivity and access from both Bronx and Manhattan residents undertaken during the 2001-2010 period as identified within the Catalyst Community Visioning Report (Partnerships for Parks, 2009, p. 4). Clearly, connectivity remained a priority of community members throughout the development of the Anchor Parks master planning process, yet the master plan scope which limited the project to Manhattan remained, and no connectivity between the Bronx and Manhattan is mentioned other than the newly re-opened High Bridge.

Although community concerns over connectivity were addressed at the most fundamental level by the re-opening of the bridge, the social implications of those concerns remained either unaddressed or addressed without an equitable outcome,

leaving the Bronx (and its residents) entirely out of the picture. As Rutland states, “the line between lives improved and lives degraded is written most clearly and indelibly in the font of race” (Rutland, 2018, p. 4), a statement that could describe both the historic planning practices which led to the High Bridge’s closure, as well as the results of the planning and design efforts to restore the bridge and Highbridge Park.

Chapter 7.

Research Implications

Understanding the ways in which planners and design practitioners considered the Highbridge community throughout the course of the High Bridge restoration project requires a consideration of landscape (i.e., public space, the public realm, and the spaces we inhabit between buildings) from two theoretical perspectives that are, in my view, inseparable. First, landscape must be considered through a lens of history, particularly as that history may reveal *why* the landscape looks the way it does since it reveals who has impacted the shape of the land and why (Mitchell D. , 2008). Second, landscape must be considered as a form of and source of power, whose creation and re-creation through design interventions is an act of will and intention. Although these two methods of understanding the landscape may seem obvious attributes for consideration within the processes of landscape project design and development, the High Bridge restoration case study reveals how manipulating or favoring one narrative of site history over another and utilizing a site's power (current or potential power) can significantly alter the trajectory of a project, and even repeat obvious past planning and design failures. Planners and design practitioners have the ability to educate themselves, identify and prioritize community needs, like those identified by the original Coalition, relative to historic influences on projects they undertake, and challenge the perceived inevitability of a site's potential negative outcomes (like gentrification) by 'reading' the landscape through these two lenses and then planning and designing accordingly.

7.1. (whose) History and (whose) Power

Throughout the planning and design process of the High Bridge restoration and associated work in Highbridge park, these two methods of considering the Highbridge neighborhood and community (the historic narrative of the bridge's role within shaping the neighborhood of Highbridge as well as the powerful influence of the bridge within New York City's past and future development) were often at odds. Ultimately, planners' actions resulted in a dominant narrative of the bridge throughout the project's development as representing unrealized economic opportunity rather than serving as a symbol of past planning and design policy failures.

Don Mitchell provides an analysis of both of these ways of considering landscape in his writing, *New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice* (Mitchell D. , 2008). Particular to the importance of the consideration of the historic perspective of a site or landscape, Mitchell notes that, “all human landscape has cultural meaning [and] landscape is a clue to culture. [N]early every item in the landscape reflect[s] culture in some way...” (Mitchell D. , 2008, pp. 29-31), establishing that identifying and understanding a site’s history provides clues as to the cultural relevance of that landscape to a community. If applied to the community engagement process outlined within this case study, the historic narrative of the bridge’s impact on the socio-economic development of the Highbridge community as brought forth by the original Highbridge Coalition might have been carried through the project, potentially resulting in a less Manhattan centric plan. Additionally, Mitchell states, “landscape is a repository of memory, both individual and collective. It is a site of and for identity” (Mitchell D. , 2008, p. 42). The history of a site is held, at least in part, through memory which exists differently in various communities, and, Mitchell continues “...since memory is indelible, the struggles to preserve the landscape that represents it are intense, for while memory may be indelible people are not, and whole traditions, whole ways of knowing and being in the world can fade with the generations” s (Mitchell D. , 2008, p. 42). The historic narrative carried through the project was not based on the Highbridge community’s memory of the bridge as a method of containing them, but rather was based on the memory of the bridge as a method of moving people *through* the community of Highbridge, steered planners and designers towards elevating the bridge restoration from an infrastructure improvement to the creation of a destination. By favoring one community’s history and memory of a landscape over another, the resulting disparate impacts on people’s experience with the landscape also reveals how landscape is power.

Perhaps the most significant form in which landscape *is* power is how landscape reveals *who* has power (Mitchell D. , 2008, p. 43). Mitchell describes this significance by stating:

“Landscape is power in many senses. It is an expression of power, an expression of who has the power to define the meanings that are to be read into and out of the landscape, and, of course, to determine just what will exist in (and as) the landscape. [...] These acts of power are accepted, negotiated, contested, and resisted, which is to say they are acts of social

power. To read a landscape, in other words, requires fluency in the symbols and languages of social power. It requires close attention to how the landscape is an expression of power and in what ways that power is expressed. It also requires always keeping in mind that the preeminent power that landscape might express is the power to erase history, signs of opposition, alternative readings, and so forth.” (Mitchell D. , 2008).

The ability of the landscape to reveal social power and therefore hold the power to erase history is precisely the power that the original Highbridge Coalition sought to identify and address by “revealing history and connecting communities” (Our River Our Future, 2022). The original Highbridge Coalition understood the importance of the power the High Bridge represented, and the impacts of that power, because they had experienced how it was used by City officials to isolate them firsthand. While planners and design practitioners may have known of the bridge’s history in terms of a physical barrier to access, their failure to connect that history and its outcomes to the power held within the physical landscape of the bridge to impact Highbridge residents hindered them from perceiving how the decision to re-open bridge and restore the landscape of Highbridge Park could and would wield similar power, potentially negatively effecting the Highbridge neighborhood and community all over again.

The power of landscape to act as a platform to legitimize a community, and therefore be influenced by that community, is described by Katharyne Mitchell: “legitimacy is lended to a community through the occupation of space” (Mitchell K. , 2003), meaning that merely being present within landscape enables ‘legitimacy’ within processes of project development like the High Bride restoration where community input is concerned. The reality of the exclusion of certain voices from the power structure of the ‘community’ developed through the Highbridge Coalition Steering Committee illustrates how removing one community’s voice was achieved by removing that same community from the physical space of the project itself. By excising the Bronx entirely from the master plan(s), planners and city officials removed the Highbridge community from a position of legitimacy within the project, enabling the plan to move forward without a reckoning with past planning-based inequalities. The shift of power from the original Highbridge Coalition’s goals to those of the Steering Committee directly resulted in the power of the landscape to be used for economic development through tourism and a destination-worthy development rather than as a means of illuminating and addressing Highbridge resident’s long-standing isolation. Mitchell puts into stark terms the reality of landscape’s power to influence social justice by stating, “[t]he shape of the land [in this

case to influence access] has the power to shape social life”, therefore, “landscape is the spatial form that social justice takes” (Mitchell D. , 2008). By conceiving of landscape and design practices which influence and change landscape as tools to influence forms of social justice, design practice can be considered as important to achieving a just city as the policies (such as PlaNYC), which typically outline the parameters of that practice.

Reading the landscape from a social science perspective and the ability of planners and design practitioners to implement projects through which they have identified and embedded sources of history and power into their design practice is critical to developing projects that avoid outcomes like those documented in this case study. Rather, by integrating social science theory into their work, practitioners can equip themselves with the tools necessary to anticipate and advocate for more equitable outcomes for communities whose history and power may not be otherwise be prioritized within capitalist-oriented urban development.

7.2. Theory in Practice

Susan Fainstein’s work to theorize what constitutes a “Just City” through the application of principles of democracy and equity begins to address the need for design-based practices to mitigate the “theoretical weakness[es] arising from the isolation of process from context and outcome” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 57) such as can be seen in the disparity between the process of community engagement from the context (both historic and recent) of the Highbridge neighborhood. To assist planners in achieving outcomes that more closely align with Just City principles (see section 2.4), Fainstein proposed three questions to be addressed iteratively throughout design practice: “(1) What is the relationship between the urban context and planning activity? In other words, what are the background conditions that facilitate and constrain planning for a just city? (2) How does planning affect city users, including residents, commuters, and visitors? (3) What principles should guide plan formulation, content, and implementation?” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 57). Although these questions provide opportunities for planners and designers to identify previous poor planning policies, “they also demand exploration of the field of forces in which planners function and a formulation of what a better city might be in relation to justice” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 57). It is the “field of forces” which theorizing landscape through the lenses of history and power can substantially illuminate for practitioners, expanding the tools of design practice to include methods of considering

the landscape (and the implications landscape has and by whom those implications are experienced) through social theory which may steer practitioners and project outcomes towards better addressing social justice issues.

Each of Fainstein's questions provides opportunities for practitioners also to apply theories of understanding landscape history and power at different points within a project's development, at different scales, and in differing relationships between a site and policy or other guiding strategies through which design practice is influenced. For example, as the guiding principles within PlaNYC evolved relative to the status of Highbridge Park as an anchor park, planners and designers could have identified the evolving ways in which Highbridge Park, as a potential source of power, would influence nearby residents. There is no mention within the master plan documentation¹⁸ of the potential negative impacts a tourist destination would have within the surrounding neighborhoods, even from a basic transportation and access point of view, let alone a social justice perspective. Additionally, and arguably the most important application of the consideration of landscape as history and power is when applied to question 3: "What principles should guide plan formulation, content, and implementation?" (Fainstein, 2010, p. 57). Here Fainstein provides an opportunity for planners and design practitioners to consider (and critique) the power structures, historic and present, within a design project and formulate guiding parameters for the project which consider those power structures throughout the project's development. How planners and design practitioners allocate space, design space, develop space and plan for space is how we also conceive of the parameters of social justice within our work and within our society. By engaging with theories of a site's history and power as described by Mitchell while evaluating practice through Fainstein's theory of justice, the High Bridge restoration may have resulted in a master plan that better addressed Highbridge community concerns beyond mere access and may have resulted in a less Manhattan-centric plan. While the economic development goals of PlaNYC may still have resulted in some impacts on gentrification within the area, a master plan that considered the history of the bridge as a source of power to control, recognizing that history of control to be directly enabled by planning policy and directed towards specific groups of people, and further considered the power of the bridge and park landscapes to influence the future of the Highbridge

¹⁸ Including internal memos, meeting minutes and other documents received via FOIA request.

community, planners and design practitioners may have produced a plan with an outcome that strengthened community, elevated quality of life for residents on both sides of the bridge, and more closely aligned with the principles of a just city.

7.3. Conclusion

“The ground upon which buildings, roads and cities are constructed is invariably conceived as empty, awaiting cultural inscription. This invokes a violent amnesia: for what ground has not already and always been culturally inscribed by someone, by some body? Nevertheless, and to continue, the ground itself, unless particularly resistant or unsuitable, is invariably ignored in the subsequent appropriation and exploitation of the terrain. Yet the land, although seemingly passive and dumb, replies. In climatic and telluric terms the abstract site witnesses the persistent, sometimes dramatic and irruptive, insistence of its terrestrial coordinates—from inclement weather (storms, blizzards, floods and drought) to geological instability (earthquakes and volcanic activity). But a deliberate ignorance of the ground is exposed not only in turning away from the materiality of the site to becoming engrossed in the imposed prospects of the plan; it also lies in the direct subordination of earthly forces to societal desire and confirmation.” Excerpt from *Ground* (Chambers, 2000).

Today, the High Bridge is open. It is a wonderful place to visit, to take a walk or bike from High to view the entirety of Manhattan from the top of the George Washington Bridge to One World Trade Center (Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1 View West from the neighborhood of Highbridge to Manhattan across the re-opened High Bridge.

Source: Stephen Wilkinson, 2018.

But what *more* could the project have achieved? How could the re-opened bridge have been a catalyst to address urban issues of poverty, health, and education which remain prevalent in the Highbridge neighborhood? These are the questions that, if given

priority throughout the planning and design process of the project, may have provided direction to planners and designers to consider how the \$60 million public investment could have been leveraged to address some of these issues. As Chambers writes in the excerpt from his essay in *Ground* (above), it is deliberate ignorance which allows designs on the land to be undertaken through design practice without consideration of the context of the site, including its social history and power.

This method of operating is one that I have engaged within my own practice in various ways through the course of developing this case study, including in the most technical of every-day landscape architecture tasks. Additionally, I have introduced this method of practice into the classroom through my own teaching in UBC SALA's Master of Landscape Architecture program. While the course I teach, Landscape Technology, primarily deals with methods of stormwater management, site grading and topography manipulation that are specific to learning the fundamentals of landscape architecture design practice, I've been able to introduce theoretical concepts mentioned above in order to enable students to understand the impacts and power of shaping the land, directing water, defining circulation, etc. The students' engagement with these concepts has been robust, with some students producing entire projects demonstrating their technical ability as required by the course while rooting their technical decisions and implementation strategies in social theory.

The desire to ground design practice within theoretical frameworks that better enable practitioners to deliver projects that can address community needs is not new, and certainly not all project outcomes can be anticipated. However, by continually and iteratively considering a place's history, visible and invisible, and the place's relation to power or the potential to affect power, design practitioners not only have the ability to mitigate unintended outcomes, but also have a mandate from which to practice.

The High Bridge restoration was a success in many ways; public dollars were spent to restore a community asset, public space was improved in terms of material quality, safety, and useability, and nearby residents now have a more beautiful public realm because of it. Early in this case study development I was asked if I thought this project should have been undertaken at all, considering that the outcome repeated past planning failures and failed to address real urban issues its closing created, continuing the legacy of planning and design practices that negatively affected the neighborhood of

Highbridge. My answer to this question is yes, not only for the reasons mentioned above regarding the social value of the investment in an improved public space, but I believe the outcome, although not ideal or even just, has been an increased awareness within the Highbridge community of the value of their voice and methods of organization, enabling community members to engage in other proposed projects in their community in strategic ways. Critically, the Highbridge community is and will continue to engage in the development of the current spin off of PlaNYC, the DeBlasio administration's *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City (OneNYC)*, whose stated goal is to, "chart a course for a sustainable and resilient city for all its residents, and address the profound social, economic, and environmental issues that we face" (City of New York, 2018). Design practitioners also must respond to the proposals within OneNYC by implementing strategies within their own work where a reflective theory of planning rooted in justice is continually applied, and City leaders must ensure that project processes are not discontinuous, but that knowledge gained in the early stages of a proposal is maintained throughout the project duration.

As cities continually strive to achieve greater global economic status, ensuring that local communities like Highbridge remain central to planning and design practices must be a priority in order to achieve any semblance of a Just City.

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