

AR 532 Landscape

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1991 words



Grey to Green: How to fill the hole in the subconscious of an urban mind

Two journeys in two of the most powerful and busiest cities, secret worlds of nature in highly dense urban areas, one serving as an escape, the other as a reunion with the wonders of human technology. This is a description that fits only two landscapes: London Zoo and The High Line Park in New York. What can a past, present and future of these landscapes teach us about our attitude towards natural world (see *Figs.1a and 1b*)?



Fig.1a: Aerial view of The High Line Park



Fig.1b: Aerial view of the London Zoo

London Zoo, located at the northern end of The Regent's Park, was opened in 1828, four years after Sir Stamford Raffles had founded the Zoological Society of London (Ritvo 1996, p.43). The Zoo was established as an expression of Britain's leading position in the world due to the acquisition of many colonies, its power and elitism (Ritvo 1996, p.47). Since its establishment in early nineteenth century solely as a collection of animals serving as a symbol of British dominance, it has undergone decades of changes in attitude to animal keeping which is obvious from its planning policy.

As we can see, the first plan of the Zoological gardens from 1828 (Figs.2a and 2b) clearly shows how the northern end of the Regent's Park is converted into a new

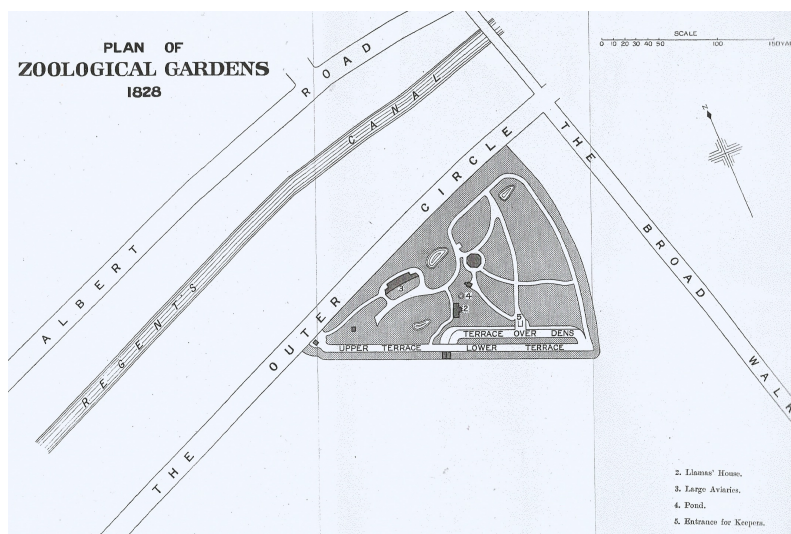


Fig.2a: Plan of Zoological gardens 1828

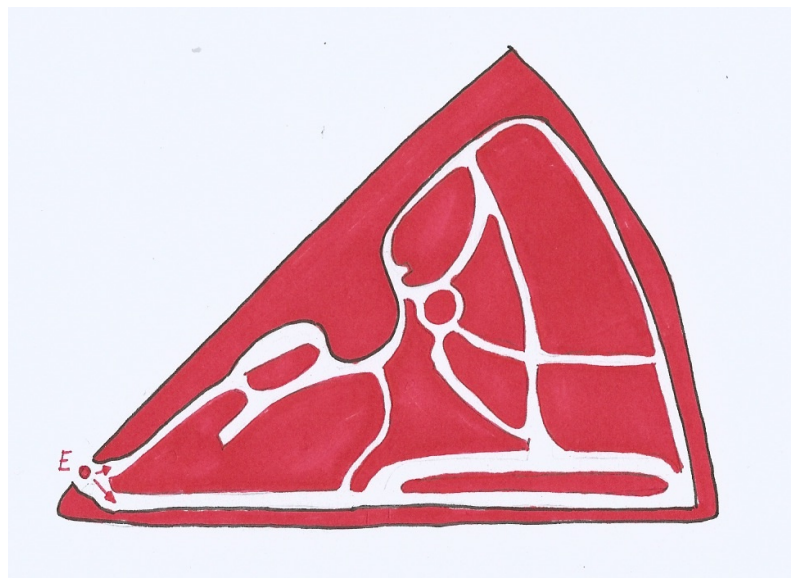


Fig.2b: Diagram showing planning in 1828

kind of landscape, a zoological garden. It has an organic type of plan in contrast with most nineteenth century zoological gardens conceived linearly, offering only a single visit route (Ritvo 1996, p.47). In

this case however, after entering the Zoo using its single entrance in the south-west corner, a visitor immediately has two possibilities offering a completely different perspective on the exhibits. Despite the freedom of choice one has while strolling through the

garden, a lack of any

strong geometry which can lead to confusion and result in them missing certain

exhibits. This approach can be traced back to the garden's strongest precedent, the Jardin des Plantes in France (*see Figs.3a and 3b*), where various exhibits are scattered around a park of English design (Baratay and Hadouin-Fugier 1998, p.80). The same

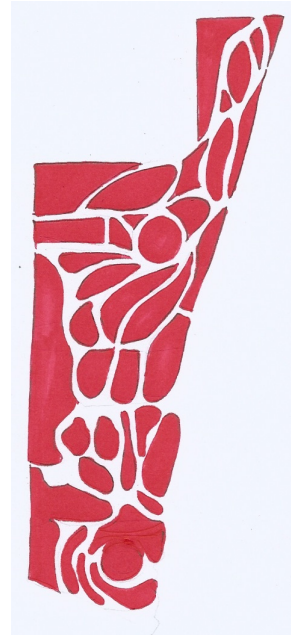
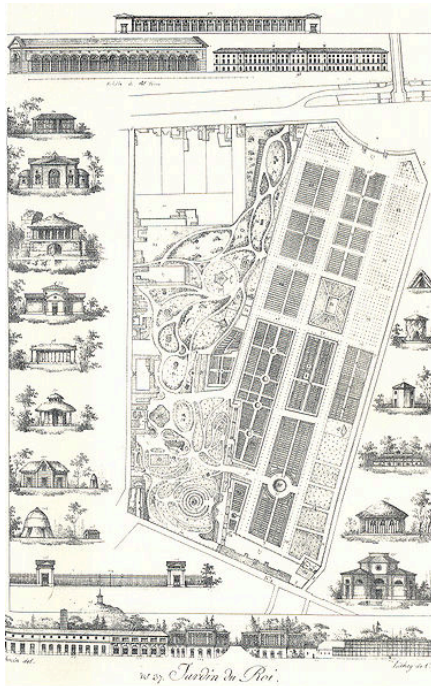


Fig.3a: Plan of the Jardin des Plantes Paris, 1819 Fig.3b: Diagram showing the influential geometry

kind of logic applies to a plan from 1829 (*see Figs.4a and 4b*). Due to the acquisition of new animals, more animal shelters and pathways are added without enlarging the total

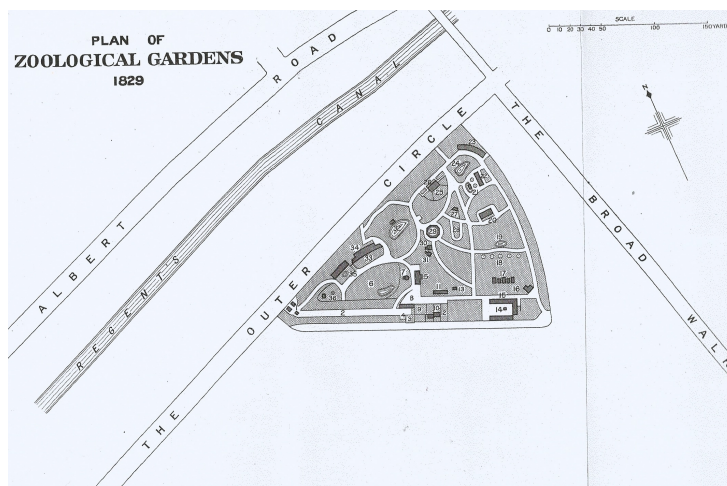


Fig.4b: Diagram showing change in planning in 1829

Fig.4a: Plan of Zoological gardens 1829

area, resulting in a denser environment without any obvious order. As we can see in the picture from 1831 showing the entrance terrace (*Fig.5*), promenading of privileged

classes as an opportunity to be on display (Baratay and Hadouin-Fugier 1998, p.100) defines the planning approach incorporating wide avenues to accommodate the



Fig.5: Entrance terrace, 1831

crowds. The absence of any kind of large gathering space and the lack of seating areas also supports the idea of a dynamic promenade in the landscape. In 1851, apart from taking up the whole corner of the Regent's Park, a completely new section along the Regent's Canal

was added, thus creating two separate landscapes (see Figs.6a and 6b). Previously large lawns encircled by pavements hosting various exhibits, were then split into smaller fragments enabling the visitor to change the direction more frequently. The influence

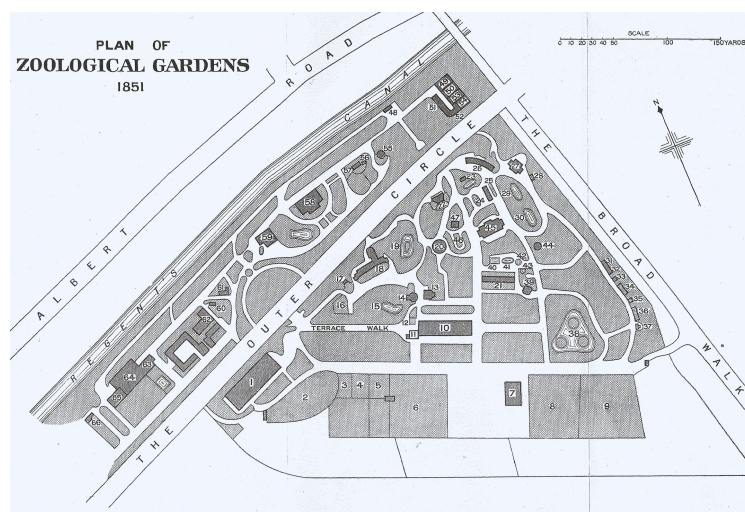


Fig.6a: Plan of Zoological gardens 1851

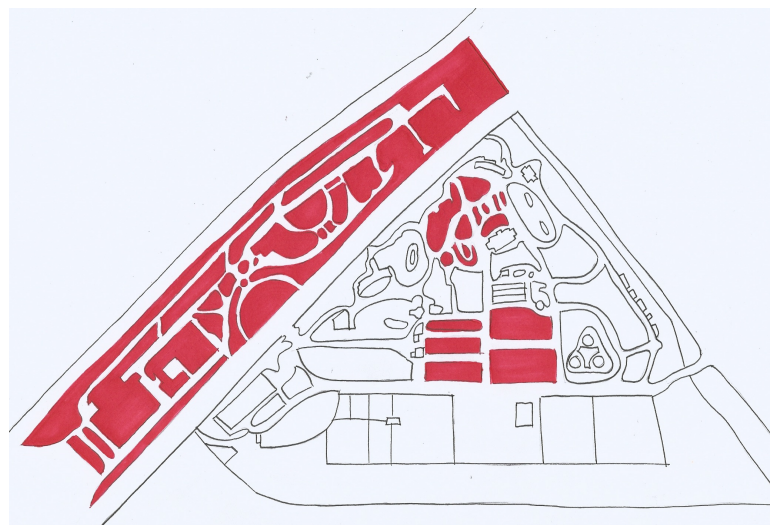


Fig.6b: Diagram showing change in planning in 1851

of French formal garden and its parterres started to appear in this period and is even more noticeable in the 1879 plan (Figs.7a and 7b), where a strong cross axis and long

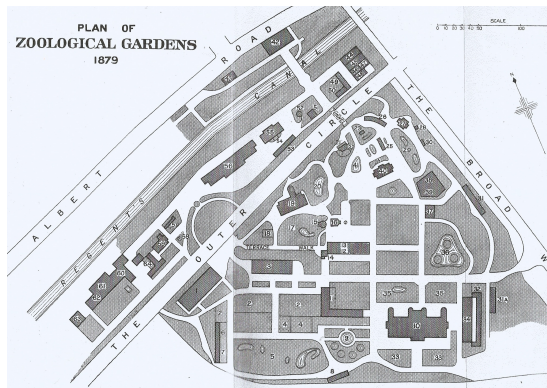


Fig.7a: Plan of Zoological gardens 1879

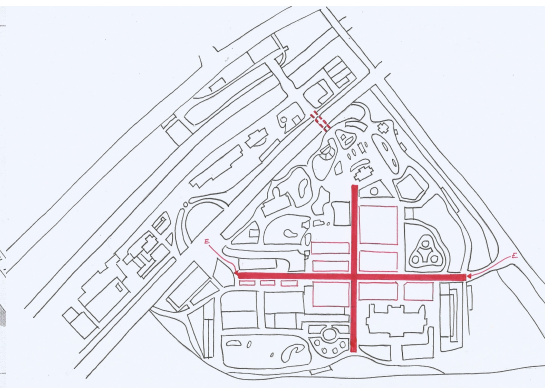


Fig.7b: Diagram showing planning elements in 1851

alleys were imposed, offering visitors a possibility to enter the main part of the garden from two ends. The creation of a tunnel under The Outer Circle serving also as a bomb shelter, clearly demonstrates the increase in concern with public safety, undeniably mirrored in raising people's awareness of the possibly fatal results of reckless behaviour, and in improving the building techniques of the animal shelters. Many of these were designed by Decimus Burton, the Zoo's official architect from 1826 to 1841 (*ZSL Living Conservation, 2013*). A marked change of planning policy came in the twentieth century shown on the plan from 1929 (Figs.8a and 8b), when a strong circulation space was incorporated leading to a huge open space serving as an

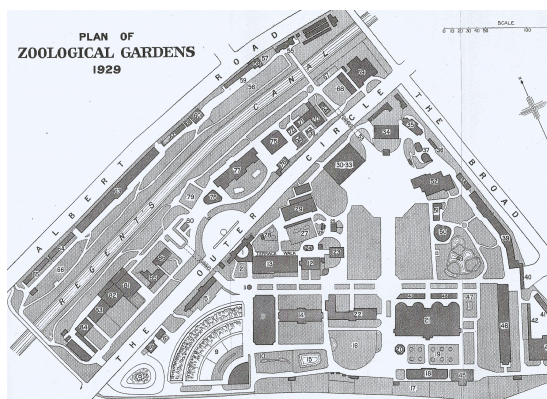


Fig.8a: Plan of Zoological gardens 1929

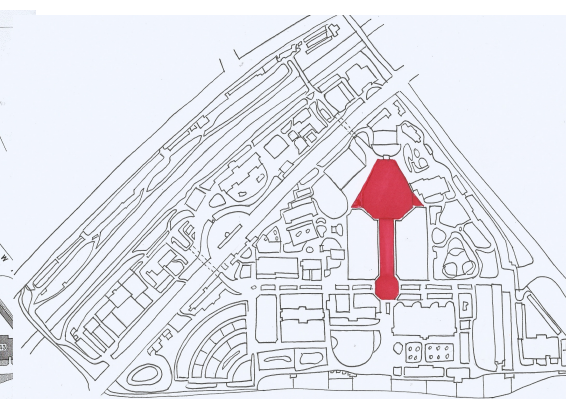


Fig.8b: Diagram showing planning elements in 1851

important meeting point for social gatherings. Looking at the contemporary plan (Figs.9a and 9b), the traces of the seventeenth century French formal garden are smudged while a clear distinction between the exhibits is maintained. The most important pathway linking the main exhibits and at the same time both parts of the

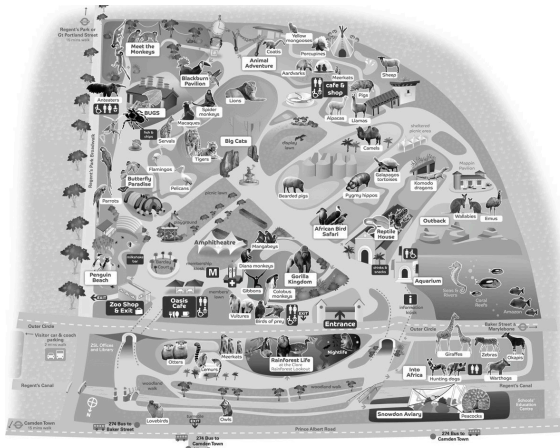


Fig.9a: Plan of Zoological gardens 2013

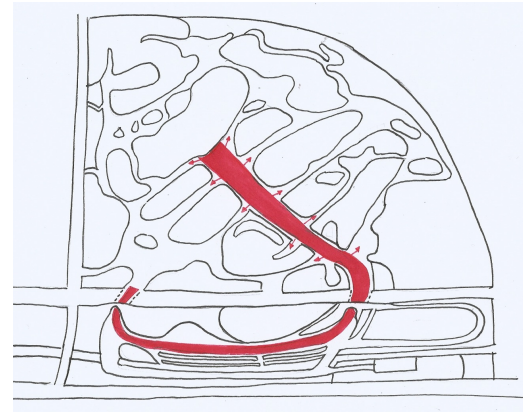


Fig.9b: Diagram showing planning elements in 2013

Zoo through tunnels, creates a relationship between the visitor and the environment.

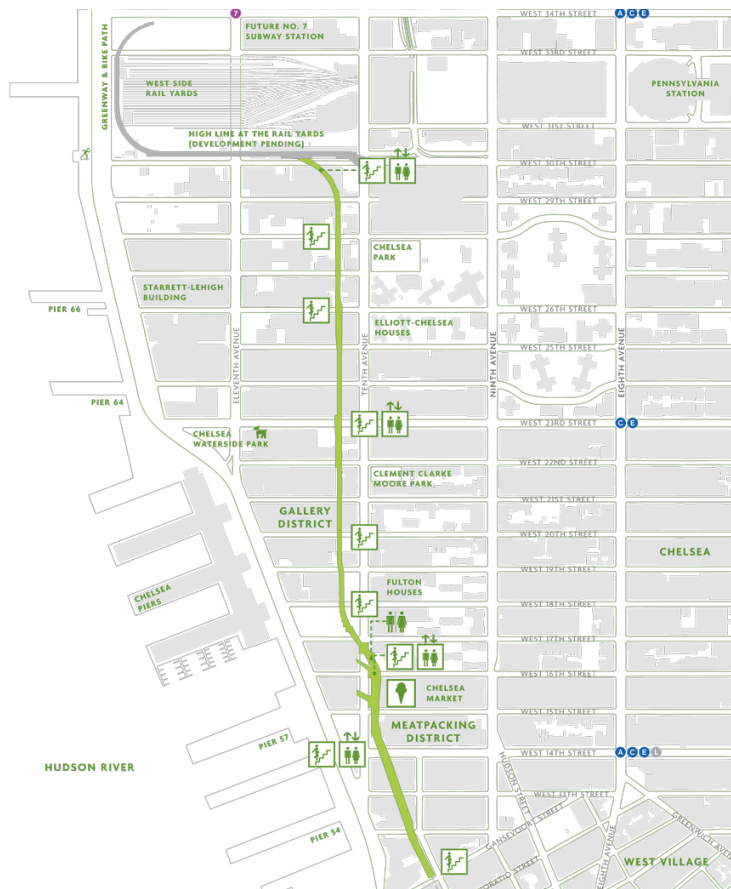


Fig.10: High Line-Neighborhood context map

The visitor of the London Zoo undergoes a journey experiencing mesmerizing worlds of ecosystems hidden behind the bars, the same way as a New Yorker passing through The High Line Park perceives the city as a living organism pulsing in the streets or resting in a shelter. The High Line Park in New York, conveniently nicknamed ‘a park in the sky’ was constructed on a former

freight track thanks to

Joshua David a Robert Hammond, two young men who had decided to save this incredible feat of engineering from the 1930s and give it a new life (David and Hammond 2011). The first part of this 1.45 mile long track was opened in 2009, followed by the second part in 2011. It runs through three of Manhattan’s most dynamic neighborhoods: the Meatpacking District, West Chelsea and Hell’s Kitchen/Clinton with the Hudson River in sight (see Fig.10)(High Line, *Neighborhood info*, 2012). The High Line’s remarkable design is a result of a merged effort of

architectural practices Diller Scofidio+Renfro and Field Operations in collaboration with a Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf. According to James Corner from Field Operations, they treated the park as if it was ‘one long meandering ribbon but with special episodes’(Goldberger 2011). Thus the different sequences of plants and structures paying homage to stunning views that surround the park, create a composition, a symphony that would lose its charm even if a single note was dropped. Unlike in the London Zoo, the linearity of the park dictates the direction in which the story unfolds and it is up to a visitor to define its plot and populate it with

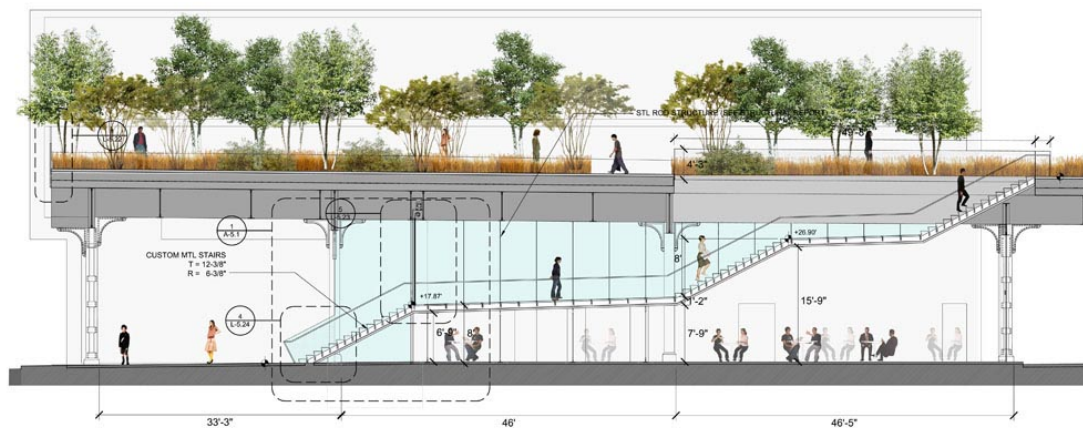


Fig.11: Gansevoort street entrance section

ever-changing characters. The Grand entrance at Gansevoort Street in the form of a staircase cut through the steel beams and brought to the ground (see Fig.11)(Farge 2012, p.39), slowly leads the visitor thirty feet above the bustling streets to a new world, but the question that inevitably arose during the design process was: How do you keep this quality of magical landscape, the sense of discovery while allowing crowds of people to invade it? How do you radically alter it and respect it at the same time (Usui and Wu 2009)? The answer is provided by not seeing the natural and industrial aspect of it as two separate entities and thus by keeping most of the former railway tracks in place, by benefiting from original structure and transforming it so that everyone has a possibility to appreciate the views and energy of the city, and above all, by Piet Oudolf’s unique approach. As a founder of The New Perennial Movement, he endeavours to create natural-looking environments by using a variety of perennials, high grasses and native plants (Oudolf and Kingsbury 2010). In contrast with the exotic Asian and African plants used in the London Zoo to create artificial

landscapes representing the power of the British Empire, the colonialism and slavery (Ritvo 1996, p.49), Oudolf's planting list respects North America as such, with exotic plants seen as immigrants, always with sustainability in mind. Therefore, a term 'Agritecture' has been ascribed to this complex design summarizing all its strategies (Kayatsky 2004). Various types of plantings create a series of events along the main axis from south to north, a wildflower field, a viewing spur, a woodland flyover, a lawn, a thicket, grasslands, a square with an amphitheater, a sun deck with a water feature and a perennial meadow (see Fig.12) (Farge 2012). These different sequences

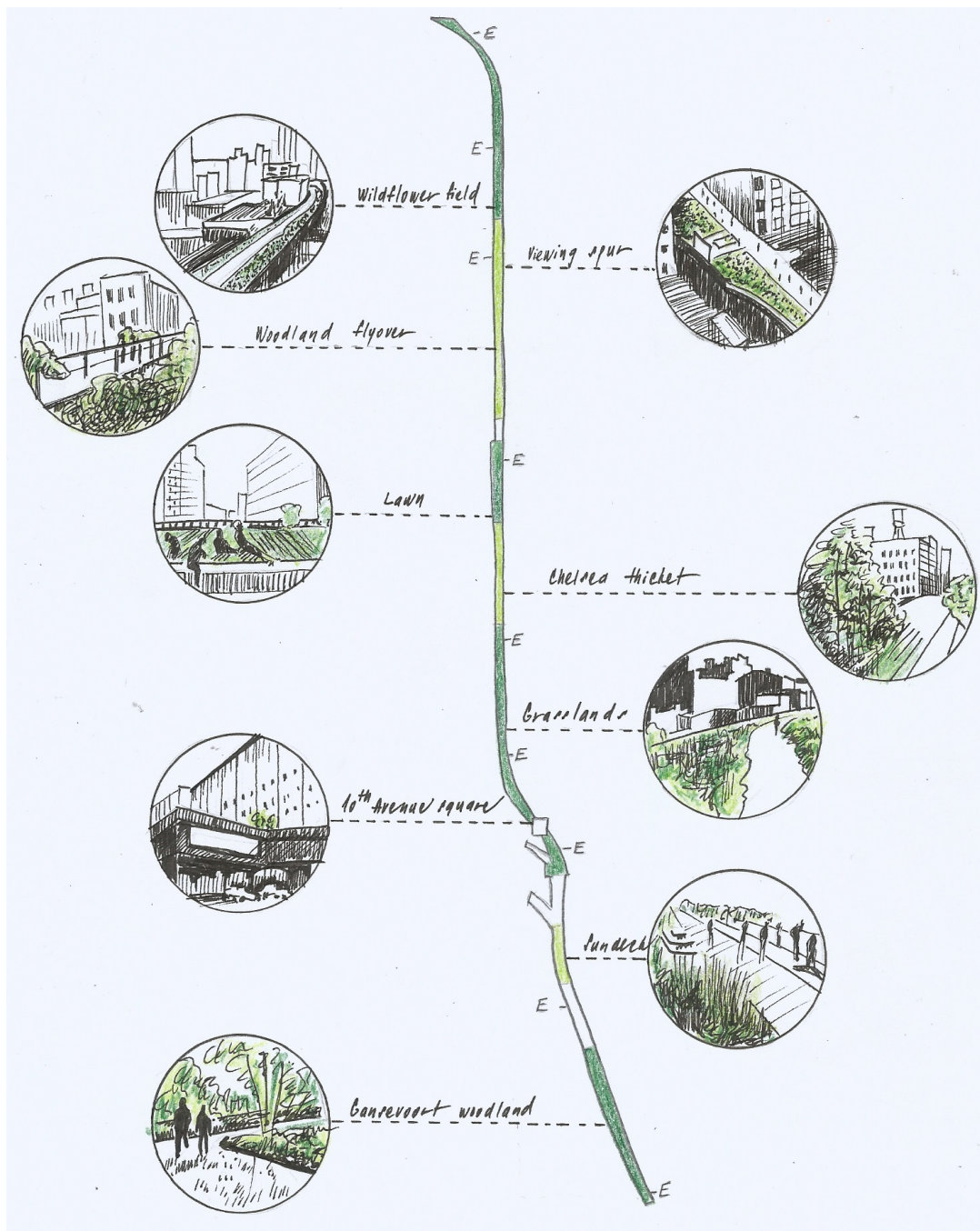


Fig.12: Features of The High Line

are analogous to a novel approach towards organization of animal exhibits by ecological themes such as desert or rainforest (Fiby 2008, p.50). Another analogy we can observe concerns the display of animals either trapped in cages, in isolation as humans are in buildings, or in naturalistic exhibits together with other species with a relative freedom of movement, similar to a Manhattan's street buzzing with life. There are two places in The High Line Park, where this phenomenon is especially noticeable. One of them, the former billboard frame looking south down Twenty-Sixth Street with a seating area behind, offers a view of diverse architectural styles, the cages for people hovering above the horizon like a peaceful animal which we can observe through a transparent frame without fear (*see Fig.13*). Looking north up Tenth



Fig.13: The viewing spur

Avenue, the situation is contrasting. From this artificially created amphitheater, we, as humans, are safely observing from behind the glass traffic resembling a dangerous, roaring animal running down the street formerly



Fig.14a: The Tenth Avenue square



Fig.14b: The Tenth Avenue square

known as 'Death Avenue' (*see Figs.14a and 14b*). High death rate was paradoxically the reason for the birth of this elevated freight track, and it is partly the aesthetics of death, that attracts thousands of visitors to The High Line Park all year long in comparison with zoological gardens popular only in spring and summer months. This rarity is a result of all-seasonal planting approach and thus the concern with the

beauty of the whole cycle of plant's life (see Figs.15a and 15b). As Piet Oudolf's

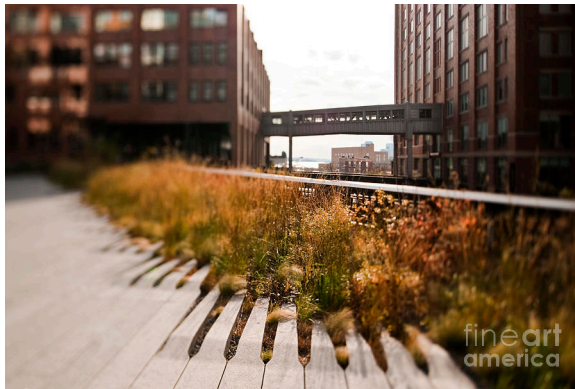


Fig.15a: The High Line in Autumn



Fig.15b: The High Line in Autumn

motto goes: 'Dying in an interesting way is just as important as living' (cited by Farge 2012, p.69). While we could say, that he is troubled only by a superficial aspect of it, the Zoological society in the nineteenth century found animals scientifically most valuable

right after their death, enriching the general knowledge of anatomy (Ritvo 1996, p.46). Educating the public, as one of the goals of The High Line Park's design team is present throughout the structure and literally palpable in 'Woodland Flyover' spanning between Twenty-Fifth and

Twenty-Seventh Street, where a metal walkway rises eight feet above the most densely planted area and enables visitors to find themselves completely surrounded by nature (see Figs.16a and 16b) (Farge 2012, p.162). This step was taken to prevent people from feeling dwarfed by the tall warehouses at both sides, but we could argue that in order to enhance the impression



Fig.16a: The Woodland Flyover



Fig.16b: The Woodland Flyover

of the omnipresence of ‘Mother Nature’, the walkways could have been constructed from a more transparent material to blur the boundary between the natural and industrial layer.

Layers, as the most basic concept lying behind London Zoo and The High Line Park, shape a transition from natural to artificial world as our perception shifts from familiar to surprising. Although it is not expected that every design idea is understood by the public, it is vital that the atmosphere and the uniqueness of a place make visitors pause and think. Walking through these landscapes, what is a preeminent feature that attracts our attention? What is it that appeals to us, that we cannot overlook? ‘The darkest place is under the lamp’, as the saying goes and strolling through a zoological garden, we are most likely to devote our attention to exotic animals ignoring their enclosure and plantings which serve as a transition, somewhat insignificant in comparison with the main object of interest. We choose the target, the strongest feature trying to make contact with something beyond our grasp. What is it like to walk up to The High Line, to the natural, yet humanly dominated space, where plants and railings cannot stop us from admiring the giants invading the streets on Manhattan giving way to a glittering Hudson River? The excitement one feels while admiring these surreal vistas causes respect for communities of scientists or ordinary citizens, whose determination and power of thought offered us a possibility to transfer ourselves to almost ethereal worlds, where one can see a long winding line connecting past, present and future, linger in the air. Transforming itself from roughness of the industrial age, class segregation and cruelty to animals, to humane behaviour, consideration for ecology, preservation and better living conditions, it encapsulates a journey from ignorance to activism.

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Images

Front cover. Author's own work

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