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Ambulatory Ambiance

A Comparative Analysis of Three Elevated Linear Parks

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the atmospheres of ambulatory pathways. Differences between promenade and seating, hardscape and nature, and new public art juxtaposed with residual industrial legacy, create opportunities for choice. A privileged view outward to the city can conflict with a protected simulation of a walk through a forested allée. What are the common features of design and the concerted resulting ambiance that distinguish the Promenade Plantée in Paris, Seoulo 7017 in Seoul and the High Line in New York How does renaturation and design by nature create urban islands of calm for people? The answers are in the complexity of interaction of the different design elements.

Keywords. Linear Parks, Renaturation, Design, Experience, Semiotics

Introduction

Along with other examples of elevated parks across the world, the High Line in New York, the Promenade Plantée in Paris, and Seoulo 7017 build unique ambiances that enhance how varied the experiences of an urban park can be. Each share attributes of community connectivity and adaptive reuse in a post-industrial environment.

Our hypothesis is that coordinated urban design can elicit specific attitudes and emotions. Linear parks in New York, Paris and Seoul balance active design principles that encourage physical activity with the shaping of urban oases of calm and renaturation. Cities use these elevated parks to redefine civic pride and foster cultural identity through narratives that incorporate strands of history, entrepreneurship, art, and amenity.

The delight visible in the three linear parks here analyzed is in the complexity of interaction of the different design elements and even with each other across time and distance. The design of the Promenade Plantée influenced the subsequent planning of the High Line. The High Line gave a model to Seoulo 7017. At all three, several aspects of the design need to be taken into account to analyze the ambiance of the park. These include the renaturation program, the industrial vestiges, the views to the surrounding city blocks, the seating, and, most importantly, the flow of movement of the people using the parks. As Nathalie Sarraute wrote in *Le Planétarium* (1959): “Tout dépend de l’ambiance, tant de choses entrent en jeu” (“It all depends on ambiance, so many things come into play”).

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Comparing the specific ambiance of each ambulatory park suggests consideration of three viewpoints. First, that of governance: what were the intentions of decision-makers (politics, neighborhood associations, urban designers), what experience and ambiance did they intend to convey? Second, that of the users: how do people coming to discover and enjoy these parks, perceive, and use the place?

Thirdly, that of the signs themselves: how do all the visual, spatial and sensorial elements contribute to build a specific atmosphere and a unique experience?

Our research method on the three parks, conducted starting in 2017, relied on the method of Eliseo Veron about museum visitors (1983). It combined analysis of program, looking at traditional sources (press releases and websites), along with ethnographic observation of users (how people behave); with a specific focus on rhythms, attitudes and collective flows. Finally, a semiotic analysis was conducted to understand how the relationship of prior industrial signs with renaturation design participates to build an emotional and sequential experience. This expertise referring both to a Barthesian conception of collective imaginaries (1957) and to the approach of A. J. Greimas to narration and ambiance (1979, 1987).



Figure 1. Photos of Promenade Plantée, Seoulo 7017 and the High Line, G. de Kerret and R. Bell, 2017

Mobility

Shortly after the June 2009 opening of the High Line Park, the Active Design Guidelines were published by the City of New York to encourage more physical activity in everyday life. The document contains a description of the project, designed by James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, noting that “the 1.5-mile long park is one of only two urban railroad viaducts converted to park space in the world.” In fact, all three parks have common features pertaining to mobility for pedestrians, children and those with disabilities. These create significant opportunities for more physical activity in a dynamic, engaging environment. As linear pathways, the High Line, The Promenade Plantée, and Seoulo 7017 all build their ‘reading contract’, defined by E. Veron (1985) as a tacit and intuitive agreement between the designer-sender and the user-receiver, as a prompt to active experience.

Ambient experience in all three parks is dynamic, based on walking and a constantly changing view. They feature mobility and connection, but in significantly different ways. New Yorkers walk fast and will use the elevated pathway to avoid time lost at street crossings getting to work before the tourists come and clog the artery. In Paris, the pace is relaxed, a stroll rather than a trot. And in Seoul, the path meanders, allowing for leisure while going from place to place.

The intention of the High Line was to recall the antecedent railroad use, leaving tracks in place, but featuring “a mixture of landscape elements, including plantings, decks, innovative ‘peel-up’ benches, water fountains, and recreational pathways” (*Active Design Guidelines*).

The Coulée verte René-Dumont (Promenade Plantée) stretches 4.7 kilometers in the 12th arrondissement in Paris. It is most crowded in springtime when the flowering trees create a verdant pathway that seems far from the busy streetscape below. Created in 1988, it re-used an abandoned rail line that had connected the Bastille to the Varenne-Saint-Maur³. It allows users to walk through nature while an uninterrupted flow of cars circulates a few meters below. This is accentuated by the tunnel-like enclosure created in many places by the tree canopy. Another part of the Promenade Plantée is the active experience offered by the use of the space beneath the walkway. The massive stone arched vaults now house craft workshops, boutiques, restaurants and even a garden center. A vestigial eyesore becomes a hub of activity, commerce and social engagement.

Seoullo 7017 opened in May of 2017, and is approximately one kilometer in length. It is especially busy on weekends when the shops, quiet zones, playgrounds and lookout features invite people to walk from one place to the next. The paths of movement at Seoullo 7017 are as diverse as its plantings. Nodes of activity are created by boutiques such as Hydrangea Bread and small-scale play space, such as a trampoline in a netted open cage that delights kids. Thus, the episodic nature of the program opportunities encourages movement from point to point.

Stasis

All three parks combine urban and natural signs, and in addition, use plantings to repurpose hardscape infrastructure engendering stasis and contemplation. What park users contemplate is a function of context and differential urban identity. But the industrial heritage is differentially visible and emphasized among the three parks.

Because of structural constraints, the former highway overpass of Seoullo 7017 could not be covered with soil, so the plantings are in large concrete pots that serve multiple purposes, including seating. Winy Maas, the project's architect, said that the basic pot is one where you can sit on its wide edge⁴. Being elevated above the bustle of downtown Seoul, the calmness created by seating that engages contained nature is perhaps the most noticeable feature of Seoullo 7017, which uses a great variety of Korean native plants. Calmness is engendered by making the seating quite comfortable with wooden slats inserted into the concrete forms. Most seating is oriented obliquely to the primary path of movement, so that those using the benches are typically not directly engaged with passersby. Many benches are oriented towards the city view. Our observations were that most seating was used by individuals - people sitting by themselves in contemplation or reading. Small family groups, often young couples with children, use the seating elements as places to catch their breath. The rooftops of the circular shops and cafes become vantage points, turret-like, at which people engage with the city. Circular cut-outs in the pavement give views to the street below, and of the structure of the deck.

The High Line stresses continuity between nature and the city, with native plants evoking wilderness. Contemplation is organized around a dynamic perspective, separate and distinct from the Manhattan grid. High Line seating has great diversity of form from chaises longues, to backless benches to stadium bleachers. Most typically

3. *Promenade Plantée website*: <http://www.promenade-plantee.org>. Accessed June 22nd, 2020.

4. "Winy Maas on Designing Seoullo 7017," *interview of 8 Nov 2019, Singapore Government Agency website*. Accessed June 22th, 2020.

<https://www.leekuaneyeworldcityprize.com.sg/resources/interviews/designing-seoullo-7017/>

we see backed wooden benches parallel to the path of movement enabling intense interaction with both those passing by, and with the city itself. Distinct from the two other parks, the Promenade Plantée is a green tunnel, offering only glimpses of the surrounding city. Sitting on the Promenade Plantée is a challenge, and serendipitous. Seating is oriented to the interior, but users often flip seating direction in attempts to engage with the city. The word “promenade” almost dictates walking, although at a slower pace. Seating appears almost an afterthought, with many young people sitting on the walking surface itself, often using planters as back support. Nonetheless the intense plantings on this most verdant urban tunnel create an amazing sense of calm and stillness. The pace of walking is slow enough to prompt users to appreciate the fragrances. While privileged views of adjacent residential structures exist, the sense of the Promenade Plantée is of a place internally focused, an oasis of repose whose urban identity is contemplative.

Narrative

Ambulatory parks have something more than regular parks: narration. Of course, this can be found in the renaturation process: merging together a former urban device and a natural landscape tells about the city’s history, its transformations and its possible relationships with a more savage world.

But these three parks offer more. As they are built as an itinerary, they imply an iterative experience in space and time. Their design induces a narrative in which the user is offered the role of the hero, as the overall experience is characterized by two dimensions: suspense and transformation. They offer a sensitive experiment built on various sequences, each of them bringing something new. Meanwhile, they orchestrate an emotional transformation of the user. When leaving the park, he or she will be a bit different - and will emerge in another era of the city. To a certain extent, the narrative scheme of Vladimir Propp (1965) could be applied to the sequential experience offered by the three linear parks: the “initial situation” (where the linear park starts) and the “final situation” (where the park leaves the user) frame the process. In-between, a “complication” (or narrative issue) occurs, followed by various episodes and a climactic moment which emphasizes the whole experience.

But despite this common structure, the narrative of each park is specific - and the role offered to the user is different each time. The Promenade Plantée could be compared with an initiation story. It starts with a trial: finding the hidden access stairway; then the tunnel garden appears. Contrary to many other linear parks, the Promenade Plantée stands in discontinuity with the surrounding city. It builds a protected world similar to French formal gardens, with symmetrical lines imposing order on nature - making of this archetypal landscape a progressive experience. As in a French formal garden (and as in an initiation story), drama and surprising views and perspectives are intertwined, with topiary moments, rose gardens and terraces with water features. Intimacy, mystery and secrecy prevail. The climactic moment is the arrival at the Jardin de Reuilly: unexpectedly the perspective opens, both horizontally and vertically. The elevated walkway becomes a bridge overhanging a large, curved and protective lawn, while the surrounding city vanishes. The “promenade” finds its acme in a comfortable and regressive feeling.

As opposed to the Promenade Plantée, the High Line and Seoullou 7017 build a narrative in direct relation with the city. Continuity prevails: the design underlines the site as a platform offering a visual and sensorial experience of the urban surroundings. Thanks to panoramic vantage points and the confluence of images and signs, the High

Line links city and nature, history and present time, culture and commerce. The park develops a narrative from immersion in the city to contemplation, and then back to immersion. The climactic moment of the walk probably occurs in the amphitheater overlooking 10th Avenue: the city is staged as a spectacle and the parks become an embedded metaphor of the urban Rambler, suddenly stopping to enjoy the busy scene. The High Line was a set for contemporary dance in the film, *A Taxi Driver, An Architect and the High Line* by Emmanuelle Huyhn and Jocelyn Cottencin⁵. Lines from their book about the film, *Drunken Horses*: “Les enfants jouent le carré/ de verdure de cet endroit/de la High Line/Impassibles/Les passants passent” (“The children play on the green square of this place, of the High Line, impassable, the passersby pass by”). As in modern dancing, the High Line is an experience where movement and life devolve into stillness and contemplation - and then back to movement.

Seoullo 7017 also develops a narrative from continuity and connection. First, it stands as a branching network with the environment thanks to multiple stairs, ramps, and elevators - a metaphor of arteries, irrigating the city. But while the High Line's narrative lies in the present moment of the city with some clues of the past (as the old train rails, still visible), Seoullo 7017 suggests a projection in fiction. Its very name, made from the year of its construction (1970) and its rebirth (2017), enables a leap in the field of future and fantasy, while *Seoullo*, the Korean name for Skygarden translates to “towards Seoul”⁶. Unlike the High Line and the Promenade Plantée which both close at dusk, at night Seoullo 7017 turns into a blue, fantastic sight evoking the Milky Way - as if the park was suddenly a bridge between the city and the sky. The narrative is thus rooted in time and metamorphosis. While Promenade Plantée suggests an experience of space disconnection (*u-topia*), Seoullo 7017 offers at the same time connection with the city and discontinuity with time (*u-chronia*). Users can then experience possible futures, staged as stopping points all along the walk.

Conclusion: Ambiance and Identity

Looking at the elevated pathways of New York, Paris and Seoul, we observe obvious similarities as well as strong differences. All three use renaturation as an urban design tool to create a new urban atmosphere. Details, materials, signs abound and build idiosyncratic ambiance, either connected or trying to disconnect with the city. Meanwhile, each park emphasizes a specific part of the identity of the city itself - which, apart from design, is relayed by branding, from the park name to logo and graphics. The Promenade Plantée builds a utopian story conveying the atmosphere of a timeless haven, either disconnected from the city or offering itself as one of Paris' most closely kept secrets. On the contrary, the High Line stands as a means to decipher the city - it *highlights* and *underlines* Manhattan's spirit, which connects remains of the city's past with nature and modernity. Finally, Seoullo 7017 tries at the same time to emphasize Korean identity and to imagine Seoul's upcoming transformations.

Each in their own way, the three parks suggest that renaturation is more than a means to improve the city. While inducing new ambiances and experiences, it is also the opportunity to question its identity, and to embrace its future.

5. See: <https://vimeo.com/267694285?ref=em-share>. Accessed June 22nd, 2020.

6. See: <https://www.mvrdr.nl/projects/208/seoullo-7017-skygarden>. Accessed June 22nd, 2020.

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