

# Re-Cultivating the Forest City

## RESPONSIVE DESIGN, PLEASE—NO SOLICITING

The beginning, as they say, is always the hardest part. Yet the reality of contemporary civic design practice (architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design) in the United States is that the beginning for the designer is often the end: the last stage of a much longer, more complex, and nuanced process of negotiation, definition, and consensus building

that has largely taken place for many months or even years prior to the appearance of the designer. This is a process in which a number of other actors—lawyers, politicians, community groups, stakeholders, business interests, planners, economists, financiers, environmental activists, and real estate market analysts, to name just a few—will have already played significant roles in defining exactly what the scope and ambition of the designer’s work will be, regardless of the particular design strategy, technique, style, degree of innovation, or ideology eventually employed in the engagement of the design problem in question. In truth, despite how critical we as architects, landscape architects, and urbanists understand the role of design to be in the shaping of our contemporary urban landscape, the broader public, particularly those with decision-making and implementation powers, tends to consider design as the finishing touch to the larger initiative constituting contemporary city making.

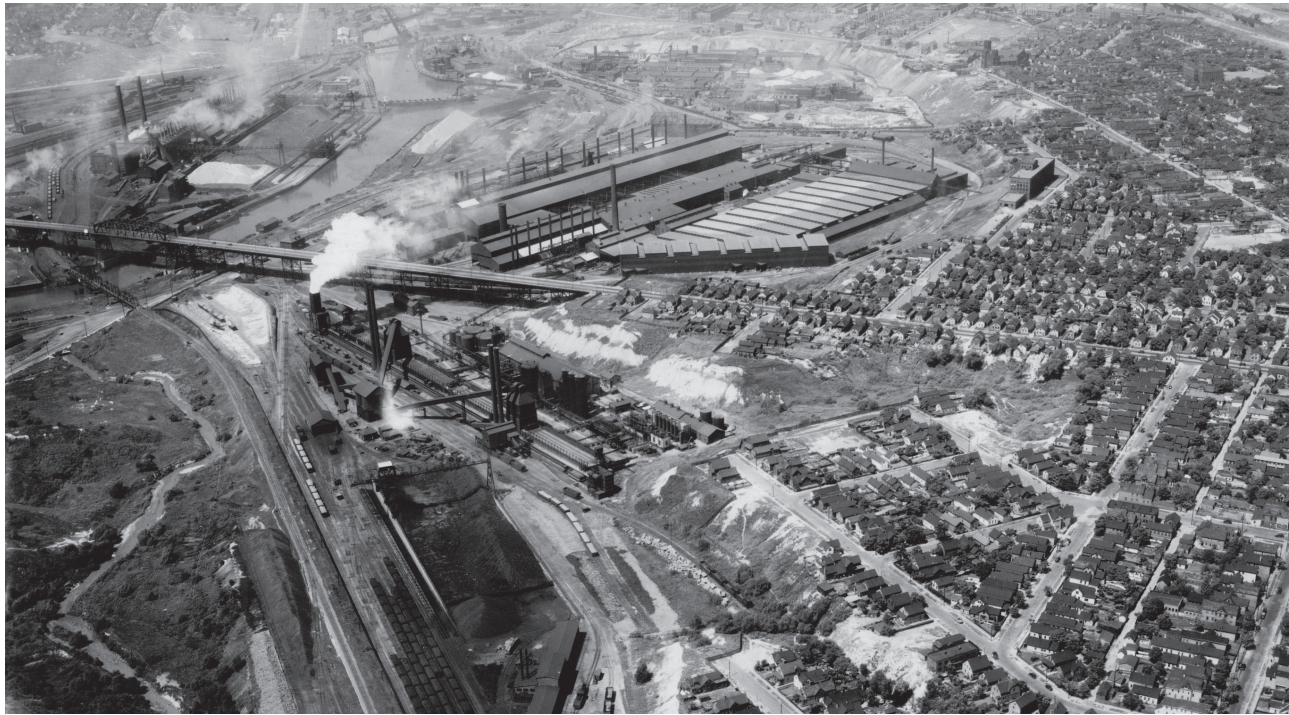
As a result of this reality, one could argue that design has become a primarily responsive, service-based undertaking, relying on RFPs, RFQs, and design competitions as vehicles for deploying disciplinary capacity. In the case of discrete projects such as a stand-alone building or a small plaza, such a mode of operation may be appropriate given the likely singularity of purpose. However, when it comes to considering large-scale approaches to urbanization, a need for a greater degree of synthesis is demanded. In fact, given the number and divergent agendas of the actors outlined above, one might suggest that there is a tremendous value in developing, disseminating, and advocating unsolicited design speculations as a mode of provocation rather than simply offering a solution to a problem defined elsewhere. However, provocation alone is not enough. Design has a long history of

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Figure 1: 1934—Aerial view of Republic Steel facility at the core of the lower valley (source: Cleveland State University Library Special Collections, Cleveland Press Collection File: Republic Steel).

eroding its own credibility though speculative projects that lack a fundamental utility. Provocation in this context needs to leverage the topical interests of the present and future, such as economy, public health, environment, energy, amenity, etc., into a clear sense of civic momentum. It is once this momentum is generated—when design advocacy leads to external advocates for design—that a project can reach the point of negotiation. And what is critical about the point of negotiation is that it suggests the impendence of outcome, whether it is physical implementation, policy adjustment, or additional study, and outcome should be regarded a fundamental goal of design.

#### **PROVOCATION > CONVERSATION > MOMENTUM > NEGOTIATION > OUTCOME**

In order to consider the set of relationships outlined above, this essay will explore an ongoing design and planning initiative entitled Re-Cultivating the Forest City (RCFC).<sup>1</sup> The project seeks to leverage a highly modified natural system subjugated by various formats of anthropogenic occupancy in order to create an instrument of urban regeneration in the context of an economically and environmentally challenged North American city. The project is entirely self-initiated, based upon on-going research developed by PORT A+U, and was initiated in the spring of 2011.

#### **BACKSTORY**

At its economic and political height during the mid-twentieth century, Cleveland, Ohio, had a population of nearly one million people and was building and investing in infrastructure and civic projects for projected growth that would double this population before the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the industrial economy quickly evaporated and the population declined by




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more than half its 1950s high (approx. 396,000 in 2010), leaving a vast swath of postindustrial land at the city's geographic center.<sup>3</sup>

This vacant territory is directly tied to Cleveland's two most significant natural features: its lake (Erie) and its river (the Cuyahoga). There is little doubt that the well-known environmental degradation of these two water bodies was the direct result of the now lost industrial vitality of the city and region. And while both of these water bodies are notorious for significant environmental issues in their recent history, both have stabilized and by most accounts have significantly improved from an ecological and environmental perspective.<sup>4</sup> However, in an ironic twist of fate, the improvement in the ecological health of the lake and river has occurred as the city's economic, social, and physical health has commensurately deteriorated.<sup>5</sup>

The project considers the postindustrial valley's position at the center of the municipal territory, rather than at its periphery, as a distinguishing characteristic that allows any transformation of the area to have a direct reciprocal impact on the core of the city. Additionally, what makes the territory fertile ground for intervention is that just south of the burned-out landscape of the lower valley lays the equally spectacular, lush green canopy of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP). Designated by Congress as one of the first urban national parks, CVNP is home to the deep forests, rolling hills, and open farmlands that comprise the upland areas of the Cuyahoga River, as well as other landscapes of cultural and historic significance such as the Ohio-Erie Canal, upon which the RCFC initiative can build.<sup>6</sup> The national park territory represents what the valley once was. The PORT A+U project looks to demonstrate what the lower valley has the capacity to become.

Figure 2: Re-Cultivating the Forest City illustrative plan (source: PORT A+U).



The ambition of the RCFC project looks to reclaim and reimagine the entirety of the 12,480-acre lower Cuyahoga River Valley, from the terminus of the national park at the territory's southern edge, north to the river's mouth near downtown Cleveland at the shores of Lake Erie. The approach to this territory utilizes a strategy of productive recolonization, combining economic, ecological, and social initiatives to transform the lower river valley into a new metropolitan figure that enhances and expands the ecological value of the river corridor while simultaneously serving to offer an alternative approach to reorienting the economy, urban form, and health of the city of Cleveland.

### **CURRENT CONTEXT**

Over the past 25 years, Cleveland, like many of its peers, has demonstrated what we'll refer to here as a kind of "keeping up with the Joneses" urbanism. Rather than leveraging distinct local conditions and unique cultural and physiographic patterns of activity and use to generate exceptional organizational and physical solutions to existing urban challenges, the city has implemented a familiar cocktail of reinterpreted nineteenth-century street grids (expanded to accommodate bike lanes); mandated street life (al fresco seating and ground-floor retail); live-work loft and townhouse residences (above-street-level retail, of course); overscaled, underutilized cultural institutions; multiple new stadia (clad in neotraditional garb); and a general greenwashing of the public realm (complete with bioswales, constructed wetlands, and porous paving)—each project seemingly sourced from the most recent ULI, AIA, APA, or ASLA checklist of what a middle-American city must have to compete in the new economy.<sup>7</sup>

Now, in an effort to keep up with its peers, Cleveland has recently opened a downtown casino and is completing a new medical services convention center and new lakefront mixed-use district, each project easily found in one variation or another in any similarly sized American city.<sup>8</sup> As such, it seems that the impetus for this work is less a careful evaluation of the particular needs or attributes of the city, or a holistic vision of where Cleveland wants to go as it enters the second decade of the twenty-first century, than it is a desire for the "quick fix" based on the apparent successes peer cities have had with similar initiatives. This mentality is creating what is increasingly a nondescript, singular definition of American urban form based, in essence, on a thought process of "if it worked there, it will work here."

Cleveland is certainly by no means alone in such a response. In fact, this precedent-based urban planning has become so endemic that cities as economically and culturally diverse as Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, and London have all discussed building a High Line of their own after seeing the success that project has had in New York City. Unfortunately, this desire to reproduce what has worked elsewhere often misses why it was a success in the first place (rezoning and exceptional market pressure in the NYC High Line's case) and why it probably will not work in their own town.<sup>9</sup> What is worse is that the design disciplines are too often complicit in advocating this particular approach to city making, relying on a kind of copy-paste idea of urbanism.

## LOCAL SPECIFICITY

Alternatively, phase one of the RCFC project involves the articulation of a muscular, ambitious, one-of-a-kind urban vision for the valley and the city. The work of this initial phase begins by defining the entire valley as a legible urban figure within the metropolitan territory. Through a detailed analysis of the topographic composition of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County, a clear planning boundary for this territory is established based on physiographic form and ecological resilience, rather than political overlays. This boundary is physically articulated by replanting the native successional forest found to the south, along the steep slopes and escarpments of the valley's perimeter, from the national park at the southern boundary, north to the shore of Lake Erie. This powerful first move rehabilitates the natural habitat of the lower Cuyahoga River Valley; creates significant new ecological preserve; recharges groundwater by managing storm events; expands biodiversity; and, through the creation of a memorable physical character, defines a new landscape figure for Cleveland by explicitly bringing productive nature back into the city's core.

Once the figure of the valley has been made legible, the interior of this territory is organized by configuring nine overlapping land-use categories across the entire valley floor. These categories include remediation, recreation, habitat, agriculture, industry, energy, water, and mobility. Each landscape type is not singularly contiguous but collectively represents an overall approach to defining use, form, and character within particular areas of the lower Cuyahoga Valley. As such, the specific configuration of these individual land-use designations is based upon existing and historical patterns of territorial occupancy, connectivity, accessibility, and programmatic mix, as well as potential adjacencies necessary to promote systemic ecological and economic development. The intention is to create a highly varied set of interfaces within the lower Cuyahoga Valley that not only produce a compelling landscape experience within but also catalyze investment in productive regimes within the valley, as well as adjacent real estate development in existing neighborhoods and districts at the edge of the figure.

Though the lower Cuyahoga River Valley is the primary area of intervention, the project also designates five strategic development zones adjacent to the valley figure that are priority areas for concentrated redevelopment catalyzed by the valley's transformation. Though these areas are not the design focus of the RCFC project, they do fall under a proposed zoning overlay related to the initiative.

It should be noted that we do not consider the RCFC proposition as purely a "park" project, or an "infrastructure" project, or an "urban redevelopment" project. Rather, it is conceptualized and defined as a composite approach to transforming the prototypical postindustrial American city for the twenty-first century, balancing economic and ecological demands to produce a new urban landscape hybrid. The proposal demands that all components of the built landscape be considered in synthesis with one another, as well as with the natural systems and ecological processes present within the particular project area. This approach allows the RCFC proposal to operate

### THE REMEDIATION FLOOR

The remade lower Cuyahoga River Valley comprises a variety of land uses and programs ranging from recreation to agriculture to new clean industry. Initially, remediation is a major programmatic activity, but within the very near term, the valley once again becomes a place of significant agricultural production utilizing a 1:1 ratio of development to agricultural areas.



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simultaneously at the level of a territorial planning initiative and at the level of site-specific physical intervention.

The scale and scope of this approach are a direct response to current planning initiatives within the city of Cleveland, which have recently focused on managing the pervasive vacancies pixelating the city's landscape through an innovative land-banking program; drawing attention back toward particular neighborhoods through pop-up event strategies associated with the Shrinking Cities movement; and pursuing the familiar capital-intensive initiatives outlined above, such as lakefront redevelopment or the construction of supposed "quick fixes" such as casinos and convention centers. While many of the strategies employed as part of the city's approach are commendable, we believe that the weight of the situation calls for a much bolder proposition, one that looks at the structural deficiencies at the root cause of the city's struggles—a failing economy. RCFC looks to recast the lower Cuyahoga River Valley as a contemporary machinic landscape of production—economic, ecological, agricultural, energetic, aquatic, and social.

### "LINES" OF EVALUATION

The impetus for the RCFC project can be traced to both an interest in the metropolitan form of Cleveland as emblematic of a midsized American city characterized by a declining population, economy, and public health and the potential opportunity for rethinking four paradigmatic urbanistic projects in the context of the circumstances at hand in Cleveland. Though RCFC is a territorial-scale initiative, four "line" projects—Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt, the recently completed High Line, the ongoing Atlanta Beltline, and Paul Rudolph and Robert Moses's failed Lower Manhattan Expressway (LoMex) proposal—offer a useful set of lenses through which to evaluate an urbanistic proposition of the scale and ambition of this one. The interest in

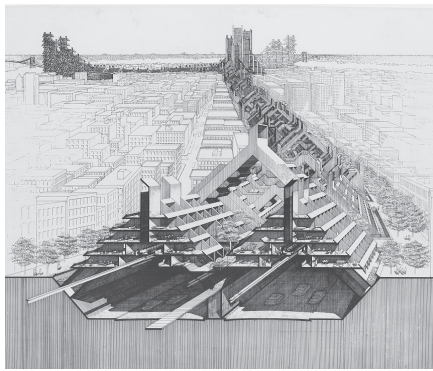
Figure 3: Re-Cultivating the Forest City land-use floor (source: PORT A+U).

these four projects is not their physical form per se but the successes and failures of the larger strategies they each employ in advocating (and, in some cases, implementing) a transformative urbanistic vision. Four distinct attributes emerge from this constellation of projects that are essential in moving any speculative urban initiative forward from provocation to negotiation to outcome.

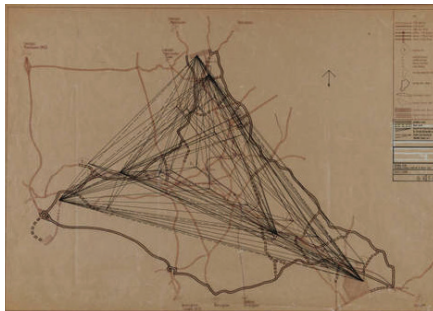
The first attribute one sees is the value of *generating public momentum* for a project and the need for a diverse set of advocates from beyond design.

The High Line, in what has become nearly legend, was conceived of by Joshua David and Robert Hammond after the two met at a public hearing regarding the fate of the elevated rail in 1999. Though neither had any background in design or planning, the two were able to orchestrate a series of events over the course of the project's first five years that led to the transformation of what was previously considered a public nuisance into one of the most well-loved and widely published public realm projects in the world. Acknowledging all of the gallery exhibitions, design competitions, gala events, celebrity donors, and opportunistic politicians involved, the event that most fundamentally transformed the High Line was the first set of photographs taken by Joel Sternfeld in May of 2000.<sup>10</sup> The collection of images that emerged from Sternfeld's work universally changed the perception of the elevated rail corridor, generated enthusiasm toward its potential from an enormously broad audience, and provided a visual artifact to accompany the narrative that David and Hammond were developing. For all that has been written about this project, there is little question that this first move was the project's most important.

Similarly, the Beltline emerged from an unexpected place (a graduate thesis by Ryan Gravel at Georgia Tech) and would not have occurred had the thesis's initial concept not been disseminated and evangelized to whomever would listen.<sup>11</sup> At the encouragement of a lone Atlanta City Council member who became interested in the project after receiving a copy of the thesis, Gravel and a small group of colleagues began speaking in living rooms and church basements and at neighborhood block parties about the potentials of the initiative. Eventually, the group was able to build enough citywide momentum that in 2003 they established a nonprofit organization, Friends of the Beltline, that could more formally advocate for the initiative. By 2005, the project had garnered the support of Atlanta's mayor, as well as a large number of local business leaders, and it was included in long-term strategy documents developed by transit and planning agencies both locally and statewide. In the spring of 2011, the initiative's first parks and trails were opened, catalyzing considerable sustained real estate investment despite the global economic downturn, with the transit component of the project anticipated to begin in the coming years. The Beltline is considered the largest urban redevelopment project currently under way in the United States and represents more than \$2.8 billion in investment.<sup>12</sup> But again, like the High Line, though there were a number of significant events over the past 12 years that have ultimately led to the delivery of the project, none was more essential than the initial grassroots public momentum.



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Figure 4: 1964–1966—Potteries Thinkbelt Desire Line  
(source: Museum of Modern Art).

Figure 5: 1970—Lower Manhattan Expressway, New York City  
(source: Library of Congress).

Unlike the High Line or the Beltline, Price’s Potteries Thinkbelt project did not have a broad set of advocates from within or outside of design. In fact, at the time, it was unclear who the clients or stakeholders for such a project might even be. Intended to be a critique of the centralized university system in the United Kingdom, the project was envisaged to create a regional community of learning while also promoting economic growth through the leveraging of an abandoned infrastructure and a large, latent population otherwise predisposed to vacate the region. Though the project was mentioned in passing in a *Times* essay Price coauthored in 1964, it was never formally presented to any agency or institution that might have acted on or supported the project, though it was submitted to the Ministry of Education in 1965 for consideration.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, this should be of no great surprise since much of the work of this time was, as noted above, offered as a provocation or critique rather than a projection of potential utility. However, given the seeming timelessness of the proposal and its continued embrace as a source of contemporary work, one can only imagine what might have emerged had Price been as entrepreneurial as David, Hammond, and Gravel.

The second attribute that emerges when considering these four projects is the *power of an empty vessel*. The Beltline, the High Line, and the Potteries Thinkbelt, for that matter, all offered a compelling, captivating vision when first disseminated. Yet each allowed their audience to project back into the proposal their own set of aspirations and possibilities. Price in particular “was determined that his work would not impose physical or psychological constraints upon its occupants nor reduce them to standards, as did modernist architecture,” but rather that it would provide for individual flexibility and freedom within the structure of a regional-scale urban complex.<sup>14</sup> This may seem an immaterial point, but one can argue that without the capacity to receive and capture the ambitions of a diverse population, the momentum described in the point above would have never emerged and, as such, neither would the projects.

In contrast, one can consider the exacting specificity of Rudolph and Moses’s LoMex project as directly leading to its eventual failure. The totalizing urbanism of the project exemplifies the misdirected and needless desire to control—urban form, social interaction, patterns of use, nature, etc.—that characterized much of midcentury urban design and planning. Hybridizing auto-centric mobility infrastructures with a relentless social housing regime produced a singular urban figure that obliterated the layered, sloppy, imperfect texture of existing urban form and (with a little help from Jane Jacobs) crystallized the widespread public perception of disconnect between design and reality.<sup>15</sup> There was simply nothing left to imagine, no opportunity to build a sense of stewardship or ownership. You were either a supporter of the social and physical attributes of the proposed megastructure or you weren’t. There was no gray area in the LoMex proposition.

This leads to the third attribute of these projects that emerges from consideration, *the challenge of design specificity*. If the failure of the LoMex project was tied to its overarticulation as a piece of megastructure, one might argue that the failure of contemporary metropolitan planning initiatives is their

generality, their absence of physical design in lieu of bullet points and platitudes. As was noted in the introduction to this essay, design has been rendered as the closing act to an urbanistic story. Consensus has been reached, design charrettes have been held, public meetings have been attended, and the negotiation is done. Now go draw it up, please. The failures of midcentury planning and design have created an environment where consensus outweighs expertise when it comes to envisioning future urban form.

The High Line was such a boutique project that the Friends of the High Line were able to navigate this reality by staging not one but two design competitions (one an open-ideas competition, the other for the commission). Michael Van Valkenberg, Steven Holl, SOM, Diana Balmori, Zaha Hadid, 2x4, Field Operations, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro were all trotted out to pitch their wares to a public whose opinion would be the project's final litmus test. To say the organizers were savvy in negotiating the role of design in manifesting the project wouldn't do the Friends of the High Line justice.

The Beltline, on the other hand, chose an alternate path and up to this point has had less impressive results. An RFP process was undertaken in 2009 that selected a designer for the project, but because there was no clear sense of the physical consequence of the decision, very little additional momentum was built. Study area reports were developed, and a project team was selected, but the physical identity of the project has not been significantly advanced. The attribute of an empty vessel early in the project has become a liability in negotiating how to move forward. The question should not be one of "design specificity" versus "no design." The question should be when "design specificity" and "to what extent."

The final, and perhaps most critical, conclusion one can draw from this collection of projects is *the value of a systemic matrix* of production, organization, and ambition. The Beltline began as an idea for a transit-oriented mobility corridor for a city known for its automobile congestion and sprawl.<sup>16</sup> When an overlay of public realm was bundled with this proposition, support for the project expanded.<sup>17</sup> When the real estate potentials of the project were demonstrated, the project gained broad nonpartisan support and became part of public policy. The High Line was no different. If the Joel Sternfeld photographs were the project's first epiphany, then the October 2002 economic feasibility study prepared by HR&A demonstrating that the "new tax revenues created by the public space would be greater than the costs of construction" was the second.<sup>18</sup>

Having multiple systems present and accounted for in a territorial-scale urban initiative is not enough. Rather, the interrelationship between the constituent systems is a fundamental element of success. Price's Thinkbelt project was composed of multiple systems, yet the interface of these constituent parts was never articulated. In fact, one might argue that the individual systems were overly siloed in the way that Price represented them. The singularity of the LoMex project reinforces this point. The project is so dominated by mobility and housing that any other systems of production—ecology, public realm, recreation, and commerce—seemed to be foreclosed



as well as potential temporary interventions. It offers design specificity without yet offering a single, specific design.

If outcome is understood as the fundamental goal of design, it is necessary to reconsider the products of that outcome. Renderings, models, and drawings are essential, but in a static state, they are no longer the best tools for engaging in the negotiations related to future urban form. What is needed are new tools of engagement and negotiation. If RCFC traces its lineage back to the ambitions of projects such as the Potteries Thinkbelt or the Atlanta Beltline, its future is in its ability to move from an urbanistic design proposition into a tool for civic engagement and, eventually, outcome. RCFC endeavors to catalyze the reconsideration and reorientation of the urban future of Cleveland, by demonstrating the latent capacity of the city's most noteworthy physical feature, a territory that was once Cleveland's economic heart but has now become its back door. ♦

4. See "America's Sewage System and the Price of Optimism," in *Time*, August 1, 1969, Vol. 94, No. 5, and "From Flames to Fish: Resurrection of the Cuyahoga," in *Proceedings of the Water Environment Federation*, WEFTEC 2009: Session 21-30, pp. 1655-1672.
5. Cleveland was ranked by *Forbes* magazine as the "most miserable city" in the United States in 2010 based upon factors such as unemployment, taxes, average commuting time, violent crimes, and corruption. See "America's Most Miserable Cities," in *Forbes*, February 18, 2010.
6. See "Ohio's National Park Site Bulletin," National Park Service website, accessed January 31, 2011.
7. See, for example, *What's Next? Real Estate in the New Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 2011).
8. Michelle Jarboe, "Billions of dollars in development, redevelopment stir up dust around Cleveland," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 10, 2011.
9. Chicago/Jersey City: Kate Taylor, "After High Line's Success, Other Cities Look Up," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2010. Philadelphia: Inga Saffron, "Changing Skyline: a park on high," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 17, 2011. Toronto: Patty Winsa, "Transforming the Gardiner into a garden," *Toronto Star*, April 23, 2010. Los Angeles: Editor, "SOCAL seeks High Line west," *The Architects Newspaper*, June 28, 2010. London: Landscape Institute website, accessed September 5, 2012.
10. See Friends of the High Line, introduction to *Designing the High Line: Gansevoort Street to 30th Street* (New York: Friends of the High Line and New York City Parks Commission, 2008), pp. 4-16, and the High Line website, accessed September 1, 2012.
11. Ryan Austin Gravel, "Belt Line—Atlanta: Design of Infrastructure as a Reflection of Public Policy" (Master of Architecture and City Planning thesis, Georgia Institute of Technology, 1999).
12. "Atlanta BeltLine Overview," Atlanta BeltLine Inc. website, accessed May 10, 2011.
13. Stanley Matthews, "Cedric Price: From the 'Brain Drain' to the 'Knowledge Economy,'" in *Architectural Design*, January/February 2006, Vol. 76, Issue 1, pp. 90-96.
14. Terence Riley, ed., *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), pp. 56-58.
15. Jim Walrod and Ed Rawlings, co-curators, "Paul Rudolph: Lower Manhattan Expressway" (New York: The Drawing Center—Arthur A. Houghton Jr. Gallery of the Cooper Union, October 1-November 20, 2010).
16. See Rem Koolhaas, "Atlanta," in *S,M,L,XL*, OMA, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), pp. 833-859.
17. Alex Garvin, *The Beltline Emerald Necklace: Atlanta's New Public Realm* (New York: Trust for Public Land, 2004).
18. See Friends of the High Line website and HR&A Advisors website, accessed September 1, 2012.