Changing the Conversation: How Institutional Entrepreneurs Use Discourse Themes to Reshape Urban Space

Author Name: Miriam L. Plavin-Masterman  
Affiliation: Department of Business Administration and Economics, Worcester State University  
486 Chandler Street, Worcester, MA 01602  
email: mplavinmasterman@worcester.edu

"If you don't like what is being said, then change the conversation." – Don Draper, Mad Men  
(Season 3, Episode 2)

Abstract

This paper examines how institutional entrepreneurs use discourse themes to reconcile the multiple, often contradictory institutional logics of the different spheres in which they operate. The reconciliation process is illustrated by using a comparative study of two New York City-based community groups acting as institutional entrepreneurs. In each case, the group is attempting to build public-private coalitions as they repurpose abandoned industrial infrastructure into parks. The manuscript extends the 2011 Tracey, Phillips and Jarvis bridging model in its focus on discourse themes as a reconciliation mechanism for competing institutional logics.
Introduction

City parks provide multiple economic benefits: boosting property values, increasing tourism, increasing direct use, health benefits, community cohesion, and enhancing clean water and clean air (Harnik & Welle, 2009). Urban park space is expensive to develop, and it can be challenging to create a park in a fully developed and built out city. Because of the desire to increase city livability, the limited availability of open space near urban areas, and increasing land prices, government agencies and advocacy groups began to consider and evaluate land not generally associated with parks.

Efforts to add smaller green spaces have included developing public plazas, civic squares, greenways, gardens, pocket parks, and linear parks (Project for Public Space). Many types of manmade corridors, such as causeways, canals, street rights-of-way, and abandoned railroads (Bentryn, 1976) were recycled for park and trail development. Abandoned infrastructure segments usually are close to former (and current) warehousing districts. As a result, these kinds of parks tend to come into contact with more private land than do traditional parks, and require complex coalition-building efforts throughout the development process.

In New York City, two nonprofit community groups, known as “Friends of the Park”1 groups, have attempted to or have successfully created public-private coalitions to re-purpose existing abandoned infrastructure, above and below city streets, into innovative urban, green spaces. New York is an older, dense city that can feel packed with people and is typically

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1 A Friends of the Park group is a 501 (c) 3 entity, an American tax-exempt nonprofit organization designed to raise awareness of, and potentially funds for, a given park.
underserved by parks with neighborhood recreational activities; any new nook with trees and grass is both a blessing and a design opportunity. These parks in particular serve as reminders of how aging former infrastructure might be reused and recycled into something new, which can change the way people interact with and think about their own neighborhoods. Studying how these two community groups use discourse as a strategic tool to develop these parks is important, since these groups are trying to get people to think differently about spaces they see, and are having to do so over long periods of time, at least ten years.

Success in these ventures depends upon these not-for-profit community groups acting as entrepreneurs to “sell” their proposed projects to the coalition of actors required to make it a reality. For organizations to successfully manage institutional settings to create innovative public spaces, they must consistently present and discuss key discourse themes at multiple levels, for years, strategically and often using different media. Evaluating how these entrepreneurial organizations speak about and present their projects, over time, can help explain why some ventures become viable (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011) and some do not. Discourse in the context of re-purposing physical objects is also interesting because the objects themselves carry meanings, intended or not.

In New York City, the community group Friends of the High Line (FHL) secured over $200 million to redevelop an abandoned elevated railroad track into a 1.5 mile elevated linear park/promenade, the first of its kind in the United States. Also in New York City, the community group the Lowline (LL) is currently in the process of redeveloping the abandoned one-acre Williamsburg Trolley Terminal into a park-botanical garden, approximately 30 feet underground, at an estimated cost of $60-$80 million. These two case studies are located in the same city, the groups are trying to do similar things, and each is the first of its kind. The LL was clearly
affected by the success of High Line Park, and is attempting to follow in the FHL’s footsteps and shape the discourse, or change the conversation, in order to build support and make their project a success.

**Institutional Theory, Institutional Entrepreneurship and Institutional Logics: A Concise Review**

At the heart of institutional theory is the notion that institutions (the state, the church, family, etc.) affect and determine organizational structure; organizations are embedded in a series of social structures (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). The level of analysis focuses on the organization and its links to its operational field, or set of organizations interacting with and influencing one another. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that once a set of organizations emerges as a field, a counterintuitive situation develops: rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar to each other as they try to change them in response to the pressure of the environment. This kind of homogenization, known as isomorphism, is based on a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble others facing the same set of environmental conditions.

Meyer & Rowan (1977, p. 340) outlined these mechanics of isomorphism: "[O]rganizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures." The two Friends of the Park groups studied here have to both behave in ways expected of traditional 501c(3) groups and stretch that definition to encompass parks not yet developed, in spaces considered blighted, dangerous, ugly, and not parks.
Similar-looking organizational forms have an easier time gaining and maintaining legitimacy in the field -- which is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). The implication is because so many other organizations look like each other, if one looks different, at least in form, that organization risks losing perceived legitimacy. This becomes an issue when new organizations, especially the 501c(3) groups studied here, attempt to create something new and also attempt to gain legitimacy in support of their project. Looking too different from other 501c(3) groups or other “Friends of the Park” groups in organizational form, or trying to do something unusual and unexpected for such a group may make their search for legitimacy harder. In other words, it may become harder for people to take them seriously as an organization.

For example, 501(c) 3 groups are restricted in the political and legislative (lobbying) activities they may conduct, prohibited from supporting political candidates, prohibited from conducting political campaign activities to intervene in elections to public office, and are subject to limits on lobbying. They risk loss of tax-exempt status if these prohibitions are violated. For the groups, political support is crucial, yet they are limited in the kinds of support they are allowed to solicit and how they are allowed to do so; this balancing act is an important one to highlight given that, as explained later, these groups are trying to use language, symbols, and discourse themes to develop and maintain support for their proposed projects.

Socially constructed belief systems and normative rules exercise control over organizations, affecting what they think they need to do to be considered legitimate, how organizations structure themselves, and how they carry out their work (Scott, 2004). *Institutional logics* illustrate how these socially constructed broader belief systems in turn shape organizations’
behavior in a given environment. Thornton & Ocasio (1999, p.804) define institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.” Because institutional logics refer to a set of belief systems and associated practices, they define the content and meaning of institutions (Reay & Hinings, 2009).

There is a relatively recent (but growing) body of work arguing that reconciling or manipulating institutional logics, particularly when they are overlapping, competing, plural in nature, or only partly developed (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), is a key mechanism to explain how institutions change (Green, 2004), and how our definitions of what a legitimate organization looks like can change over time, as well. Lounsbury (2007) shows how two competing institutional logics within the mutual funds industry--one based on trust and the other on performance--influenced firms’ boundary decisions -what actions to engage in, and what not to engage in. Marquis and Lounsbury (2007) extend this discussion of competing logics to community banking practices. But theorists are still left without a clear picture of how meaning is actually constructed for a set of organizations, given the presence of multiple overlapping or competing logics (Mohr, 2006).

Other accounts of meaning within the institutional entrepreneurship literature have returned to the concept of legitimacy. Recent research has emphasized that institutional entrepreneurs actively engage in symbolic management to influence the legitimacy of their emerging field (Aldrich & Fiol 1994; Aldrich & Martinez, 1999; Zott & Huy 2007b). Based on Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum’s 2009 review article, I define institutional entrepreneurs as actors who leverage resources to create new or transform existing institutions (DiMaggio, 1988; Garud, Hardy, &
Maguire, 2007; Maguire & Hardy, 2006) and apply this definition to the two Friends of the Park groups studied. In both cases, the advocacy groups are trying to gain legitimacy as the organization with the right to speak for the space in question, and be known as the group that can determine what happens to the space. The two groups are doing so in unfamiliar territory, since they are trying to transform something that was not a park into a park, while attempting to reconcile competing institutional logics of park development and urban economic growth.

Those competing logics inflict different pressures on the advocacy groups in terms of what to discuss, who to target with their messaging, and how to attempt to influence project development. Combining these institutional logics into a coherent narrative is made more difficult when the process is one of redefinition or recreation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), making something new out of the shell of something existing, as in the case of the industrial spaces. In addition, these entrepreneurs face the challenge of solving a complex problem in an urban setting; no single organization, public or private, could undertake such a project on its own and hope to solve it. Thus they need to build a coalition of multiple public and private entities, operating under distinct belief systems, and using different, often competing logics to guide their own behaviors.

The extent to which these entrepreneurs resolve competing logics affects their venture’s viability and sustainability (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Tracey, Nelson, & Phillips, 2011). Interest in competing logics has extended to investigating differing organizational mechanisms designed to manage these competing logics (Pache & Santos, 2010; Reay & Hinings, 2009), along with how entrepreneurs successfully broker among different logics (Bjerregaard & Lauring, 2012; Saz-Carranza & Longo, 2012). Researchers are also more aware that conflicting pressures stemming from brokering among different institutional logics create ambiguity for
organizational leaders and participants (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis (2011) highlight the challenges for these institutional entrepreneurs faced with having to manage competing institutional logics, using three related dimensions.

*Envisioning* discourse attempts to frame the entrepreneur’s potential project as a solution to a gap in existing institutional arrangements. In the *Envisioning* dimension of discourse, the work required to transform existing institutions or build new institutions focuses on meaning systems (Scott, 2001; Scott, 2008). Performing that work depends on the cooperation of “communities of practice”\(^2\) to make intended new institutions real (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

*Creating* discourse focuses on defining and establishing the organizational processes the entrepreneurs need to bring their desired project into existence. The entrepreneurs must show an organizational template, or otherwise highlight their capacity to make the venture happen. Discourse in this dimension usually involves some form of a roadmap and timeline that individuals see and hear about. And, *Legitimating* discourse requires entrepreneurs to link their efforts to higher-status, respected, legitimate actors. Legitimating discourse also requires links to larger, macro-level conversations that already resonate with target populations (Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis 2011).

**Methods and Approach**

The process by which each 501c (3) entity, created as a “Friends of the Park” group, brings the park into existence is related in large part to the group’s use of *Envisioning, Creating,* and

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\(^2\) Groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.
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Legitimating discourse themes to reconcile competing institutional logics. Two related research questions were developed to evaluate this intertwined process:

1) How do the institutional entrepreneurs use discourse themes to reconcile competing logics of economic growth/development, and neighborhood amenity?

2) What is it about discourse themes and ECL dimensions that matter, and how does that change over time?

A comparative case study made sense for this topic, since it is a contemporary phenomenon unfolding in real time (Yin, 2013). In addition, qualitative data is critical given the complicated nature of public/private coalition building efforts, the limited existing empirical research in the area (with the exception of Saz-Carranzo & Longo, 2012), and the emphasis on narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and discourse as concepts linked to institutional change efforts. Data collection occurred in several stages, along the lines of Yin’s sources of case study evidence (2013), which is similar to Yanow’s (2005) framework of inquiry processes for accessing data about the physical built environment:

1. Observing the site and accessing it physically. This work included site visits, and was supplemented with census tract level GIS mapping, designed to compare demographics of the areas immediately adjacent to these parks with those of the surrounding cities, based on the 2000 and 2010 censuses.

2. Talking to people conversationally and in-depth. This work included unstructured and semi-structured interviews with 15-20 key individuals from “Friends of the Park” groups, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, architects, City officials, nationally recognized park and design experts, and numerous community advocacy organization members/neighborhood organizations. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. In addition, there were some individuals not available to be interviewed but who gave public presentations, participated in panel discussions, or gave interviews to media outlets. Those interviews were collected in audio or video form, and were also transcribed.

3. Identifying, locating, and closely reading documents. The final part of the qualitative data collection involved analyzing the discourse and narratives (Wood & Kroger, 2000; Creswell and Poth, 2017) around each of these projects, as described in documents and
captured in images. The documents in question consisted of primary data, such as memos, blogs, correspondences, and presentations. They also included secondary data, such as city reports, reports prepared by other parties, newspaper accounts, films, maps, and photos. In total, approximately 600 documents were reviewed for the High Line and about 200 for the Lowline.

Building on the work of Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis (2011), the transcribed interviews, photos, presentations, and secondary sources were imported into the qualitative coding program Dedoose, reviewed, and then coded into dimensions according to the different forms of institutional work that the entrepreneurs performed: what they are proposing and what it would look like (Envisioning), how they would do it (Creating), and what it means (and to whom) (Legitimating) (2011: 64) (2011: 64). Then, I examined the materials in each dimension for the most common themes, based on words and phrases. Note that while the dimensions were given from the Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis article, the themes within each dimension varied for the two cases, depending on the discourse. Next, I evaluated the discourse in both cases for consistency or difference in how these themes were treated over time, and particular unusual patterns in the data. Table 1 shows a sample list of themes and data sources for the projects.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

Discourse analysis in institutional entrepreneurship can illuminate the processes through which the entrepreneur can fashion, communicate, and embed stories that support the creating, maintaining, or disrupting of institutions (Zilber, 2007). The process of using stories and discourse in institutional work is particularly important in work related to advocacy and constructing identities (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), as with the two advocacy groups studied here. Evaluating discourse themes at multiple levels of analysis is important in order to understand institutional change in support of a physical public amenity. How and if the “Friends of the Park” group actually brings the park into existence depends to a great extent on their
ability to determine the narratives that are used in discussing their potential project and plan for
the physical thing they are trying to change; whether they can change the conversation along
multiple dimensions while ensuring they appeal successfully to multiple stakeholders. Thus,
looking at these two cases together, in varying stages of completion, can shed light on how
discourse is linked to the process of institutional entrepreneurship.

Case Study Results

Background -- New York, High Line

The High Line was built, originally, as a freight railroad line in the 1930s to serve Manhattan's West Side; it did so for nearly fifty years. It opened in 1934 and closed in 1980, sitting abandoned for decades. Chelsea residents Robert Hammond and Joshua David met at a public forum in 1999 discussing whether or not to save the remnant of the High Line located in their neighborhood. The two decided to work together to preserve it, founding the Friends of the High Line (FHL) together. The story of the High Line's proposed demolition, preservation, and eventual redesign as a public park has caught the attention of international artists, architects, celebrities, business entrepreneurs, city planners, and writers.

The FHL founders, Hammond and David, positioned themselves as the voice for open space in their community – aided in their efforts due to a lack of existing, dedicated parks groups within the Chelsea and Meatpacking neighborhoods. The FHL were also able to leverage social networks that included people with access to power, financial resources, and key decision-making capabilities (Behance Team, 2009, Benepe, 2012). In 2005, New York City’s Bloomberg administration assumed control of the former rail line, and ground was broken in 2006. Section One of the High Line opened to the public in June 2009, Section Two opened in June 2011, and
Section Three opened in 2014. Figure 1 shows the High Line relative to its neighborhood, with dates marking when each section opened.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Under an agreement with New York City, FHL manages the maintenance and operations of the park (Hammond, 2011; Benepe, 2012). It has turned into one of the most innovative and inviting public spaces in New York City, attracting over seven million visitors in 2016 (highline.org). Since 2012 it has been New York City’s most popular tourist destination (Debucquoy-Dodley, 2012; highline.org).

In the last fifteen years, FHL has changed the conversation around an abandoned elevated rail spur – from dangerous blight to community amenity. They built a public/private coalition of support, raised money for construction of the 1.5 mile-long promenade, generated community enthusiasm around the project, and spurred neighborhood revitalization in those industrial and previously sparsely populated neighborhoods (census.gov). This project was the first of its kind in the United States, and has been followed by a similar project in Chicago, with others in process in Jersey City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Charleston (SC), and elsewhere.

Background -- New York, Lowline

The proposed location for the Lowline is the one-acre former Williamsburg Bridge Trolley Terminal, just below Delancey Street, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The site was opened in 1908 for trolley passengers, but has been unused since 1948, when trolley service was discontinued. Figure 2 shows a drawing of the Lowline in its proposed future location.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In 2009, James Ramsey and Dan Barasch discovered the abandoned Williamsburg trolley
terminal in the Lower East Side and developed a plan to install solar technology in the site, enabling plants and trees to grow underground. In 2011, Ramsey and Barasch released the concept of the Lowline (LL) to the public in a highly visible New York Magazine feature, modeled after the High Line’s successful use of photos in a 2001 New Yorker magazine article (Gopnik, 2001). The LL article was accompanied by futuristic renderings, as shown in Figure 3.

In February 2012, Team LL launched a Kickstarter campaign that raised over $200,000 from 3,300 worldwide supporters (Rafter, 2015). The Low Line team used the Kickstarter money and additional funding to commission planning studies, from HR&A Advisors (who also worked with the High Line), and Arup, to assess the viability of building a public park in the former trolley terminal. Both studies provided evidence that the idea could become a reality.

In September 2012, Team LL installed a functioning full-scale model of the solar technology and accompanying greenery in an abandoned warehouse directly above the actual site as a test. From October 2015 to March 2017 (Design, 2015), the team operated a simulated setup of their space, called the Lowline Lab, close to the proposed future location. The Lab was a free community gathering space, open to the public on weekends, that displayed the solar technology the park would use, allowed the team to experiment on growing plants underground, and hosted cultural and community events. Over 100,000 people visited the Lab before it closed in March 2017.

In September 2016, the Lowline was granted conditional site control of the Trolley space. This designation is linked to their completing several related actions indicating they can develop the project. First, they must hold 5-10 public design charrettes with the community, along with quarterly Community Engagement Committee meetings. Second, they must raise at least $10
million before 2018. Finally, they must complete schematic design documents and present them for approval by New York City’s Economic Development Commission within one year. Under a best case scenario, the Lowline would open in 2021 (Hawkins, 2015; Mechwarrior, 2016).

Like the High Line, the Lowline would be the first of its kind in the United States. Over the past seven years, the Lowline (LL) has attempted to transform an abandoned underground trolley terminal in New York’s historic and densely populated Lower East Side neighborhood into a one-acre subterranean park/botanical garden. They are still attempting to expand their coalition of local community supporters, do not have money for construction, do not have a completely developed program for the space, and only recently received conditional control of the site (Mechwarrior, 2016). They have not consistently been able to change the conversation around the abandoned Williamsburg Trolley Terminal.

**Findings**

These institutional entrepreneurs are trying to develop incredibly complex projects, requiring multiple coalition partners. To be successful, they must reconcile a logic of urban park creation with a logic of profit-driven economic interest and development. Comparing these two cases, there are three strategies these entrepreneurs attempt to use in reconciling competing institutional logics, and changing the conversations around these two abandoned industrial spaces, summarized in Table 2, and explored below:

**Augmenting Approach to Reconciling Competing Institutional Logics:**

*Using Legitimating discourse themes to enhance (or detract from) Creating discourse themes*

When looking at the coded discourse, there are small differences in the percentage of
discourse devoted to each ECL dimension, as shown in Figure 4. It is the patterns and process, the how and why (Yin, 2013), what is happening within and across dimensions that matters, as discussed below.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

The competing institutional logics of park development and economic growth offer different frames of reference, and ways of describing the reason for doing the projects, (Meyer, Egger-Peitler, Höllerer, & Hammerschmid, 2013) that these organizations can use to establish their identities and core values. It is possible to reconcile the competing logics in ways that enhance multiple dimensions of discourse. With the High Line, Envisioning and Creating discourse themes augmented and strengthened each other, as did Creating and Legitimating discourse themes. The Low Line’s Envisioning discourse was sometimes at odds with, and even undermined, its Creating discourse.

In the case of the High Line, Envisioning discourse used by FHL focused primarily on Aesthetics, or how the future space would look and feel, once transformed to a pedestrian esplanade. Many members of the FHL had arts-related backgrounds. Co-founder Robert Hammond emphasized that, from the beginning, there was a commitment to design. “It wasn’t enough for us to save this and put up a planter. All along there…we were going to make a commitment to design” (Behance Team, 2009).

As part of their appeal to the aesthetic, in New York, Hammond and David of FHL consistently focused on the amount of open space the High Line would create. Manhattan is so congested, and any amount of open space so rarely available, that supporters were intrigued by the possibilities (Hammond interview). The FHL actively promoted photos and renderings very early on (Gopnik, 2001; Behance Team, 2009; Ciabotti, 2011; Stone, 2012). Figure 5 shows an
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early image of the High Line, which was important in generating early support – the potential of the space, and its unique proposition were clear.

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Early photographs like the one shown above got people talking about the High Line. FHL and their supporters built on this set of images and consistently used words like “dreamy” (Hotz, 2005), “one of a kind” (Amateau, 2006), “magical” (David & Hammond, 2007), “unusual” (Smith, 2006), “urban wonderland” (Topousis, 2007), and “secret” (Robinson, 2005) to attempt to capture the different sense of place the potential public space would generate.

Their focus on the amount of open space was constant, clear, and linked to New Yorkers’ need for open space. Hammond and David consistently argued that there were few chances for the City to design “1.5 miles of Manhattan” (McGraw Hill Construction, 2003; Robinson, 2005; David & Hammond, 2011; Hammond, 2011). This emphasis in New York is notable given the lack of green space in Chelsea and the Meatpacking District, the neighborhoods closest to the High Line. And the focus on open space came through in the discourse, regardless of who was describing the project, be it FHL or their key supporters (Hammond & David, 2007; Hammond, 2011; von Furstenberg, 2011). The FHL’s ability to change the conversation from an abandoned structure to the possibility of creating a beautiful open space was directly linked to and consistent with their coalition of supporters, financial and otherwise.

Envisioning discourse themes around the Lowline have focused on the space’s aesthetics, and how the space would work. Cofounder Barasch says “it’s not often that you can transform a forgotten piece of real estate in a city like New York and turn it into a magical public space” (thelowline.org). They have used renderings and simulated setups to demonstrate both aspects, since unlike the High Line, one cannot walk around the Lowline in its current state and get a
sense of the future plan.

The LL says their space will provide “the unique experience of exploring dense and verdant underground gardens via winding pathways, marked by the old cobblestones and trolley tracks evoking this space’s original purpose” (Barasch, 2016:74). The solar technology needed to bring light into the terminal also gets a lot of attention in the discourse, with videos and images attempting to demonstrate exactly how it would work (Campbell-Dollaghan, 2016). So the Envisioning imagery includes both the plants and potential brightness brought by innovative solar technology (Godfrey, 2012; Dickinson, 2013; Feinstein, 2015).

But while the technology is undeniably innovative, it is not enough of a hook to overcome some of the constraints the Lowline actually faces. In contrast to the High Line, there is no view, or breeze, as Sweeting (2016) highlights, as shown in Figure 6, the existing conditions. The simulated setup in the Lowline Lab also seems very dark, as shown in Figure 6.

It is unclear how many people will see these images and associate them with a park. Cofounder Ramsey even admits that “at its heart, the Lowline is a design and technology-driven project”, while simultaneously calling it “the world’s first underground park” (thelowline.org). There is conflict even within Envisioning discourse, between the pictures and themes.

The LL is trying to have their Envisioning messaging support Creating discourse in focusing on the green space they would create. Sometimes, that works. Their submission to New York’s Economic Development Commission argued that they would provide the Lower East Side with “desperately needed green space,” (Barasch, 2016: 60), establish a new neighborhood hub, and be “a new venue for culture and arts… offering programming to support local youth, artists, and community organizations” (Barasch, 2016: 63). The LL is emphasizing the
opportunity to reclaim abandoned space and make it into something magical.

The LL has also built a high-powered, well connected coalition (Brooks, 2013; Quirk, 2015; Hawkins, 2015; Surana, 2015), heavily mimicking the structure and approach used by the High Line. They watched and learned as the FHL were able to raise money, get political support, and become a parks conservancy in order to manage the park once open. Unsurprisingly, the Lowline have arranged for the High Line cofounders to sit on their board, hired similar economic and development advisors and consultants, focused on building champions for their project within city agencies, and developed a core group of private philanthropists and wealthy donors (Sweeting, 2015).

New York City has experience with private philanthropy, specifically dealing with urban parks, so the conservancy group model makes a lot of intuitive sense. Bryant Park, Central Park, Madison Square Park, the High Line, and Hudson River Park, among others, are supported by organizations that supplement the money allocated to them by the Parks Department (Benepe, 2012). The conservancies often cover most of the park’s budget; they cover seventy-five percent of Central Park’s budget, or as much as ninety-eight percent of the High Line’s budget.

But, when private money covers a portion of a space’s development and maintenance cost, there is an expectation that the space works for them. The LL coalition of support includes hedge fund managers and neighborhood developers, (Surana, 2015; Hawkins, 2016). While organizers say the facility will be “free and open to the public five days a week, including weekends (from 6 a.m.-9 p.m. year-round), and would (only) be closed for a “minimal number of revenue-generating events” (Barasch, 2016: 91), plans for maintaining the Lowline, estimated at $2 to $4 million annually (Morgan, 2012; Barasch, 2016), depend on event fees, program fees, and private money (LoDown, 2016; Barasch, 2016). This in turn highlights a tension between
Envisioning and Creating discourses: the organization is saying they are creating a community space but is really developing the capacity to build an event space the wealthy can rent.

Fundamentally, the more restricted the edges of a park, by elevation, water, walls, or some combination, the more restricted the activities within it. High style, high maintenance, low square footage parks like the Lowline serve the fewest people with the most constraints (Lange, 2016). In addition, New Yorkers already spend a lot of time underground using the subway system. While the High Line can feel like an escape due to its height, it is not clear that New Yorkers would see the Lowline as an escape, or would choose to spend more time underground. That lack of clarity leads to another question – who, exactly, is this park for? In this case, attempts to change the conversation to what the space will look like are undermined by the discourse around what the LL are going to build, and for whom.

Using Legitimating discourse themes to enhance, or detract from, Creating discourse themes

FHL has been able to reconcile Legitimating discourse themes, focusing on what the park would do for the neighborhood and New York City, with economic development themes present in the Creating discourse. In contrast, the LL has had difficulty reconciling neighborhood-focused Legitimating themes with investment-focused Creating themes.

The lack of an existing neighborhood group focused on parks gave FHL an opening early on; FHL claimed the right to speak for the neighborhood, and spent time and effort building up community support. In addition, there was recursive action between the Creating and Legitimating discourses that reinforced and strengthened each discourse. For example, FHL was set up early on as a conservancy in charge of maintaining and operating the High Line, and the efforts of the City agencies, though important for permitting and zoning, were framed as secondary in the Creating discourse.
The FHL was heavily involved in all aspects of the High Line’s development—an ideas competition, the request for proposals and resulting evaluation/selection of the architect, and the project’s public face. FHL mastered intricate details about the park, filed lawsuits to block initial demolition, worked with City Planning on developing the neighborhood redistricting plan (Behance team, 2009), and raised money from private donors to ensure certain design features could be implemented (Hammond, 2011; Foderaro 2012). New York City has a history of conservancies involved in managing their parks, including the Central Park Conservancy and the Bryant Park Conservatory (Benepe, 2012); City government designated FHL as a park conservancy and that status gave them legitimacy as project coordinators.

In addition, this Creating discourse supported Legitimating discourse in discussions of the FHL’s efforts to work with the local community. Friends of the High Line hosted public street events and art exhibits; FHL board members began to visit the homes of local residents (including those in the two nearby public housing facilities) to talk in more detail about the proposed project. Residents remember David setting up a small table on the street to educate the community about the need to save the High Line (Humm, 2012). The interactions with the community provided legitimacy endorsed from below, in addition to what the FHL had already achieved with legitimacy granted from above through interactions with city government agencies.

The Lowline (LL) has run into challenges when they have tried to play up neighborhood-focused Legitimating themes—developing green space, in an under-parked area of New York, working with local (High School) students in the Lowline Lab (Lowline) etc. The Lower East Side has become an area of contention; historic buildings are being demolished as wealthy developers move into the area looking for relatively cheap real estate and a place to put new
hotels, bars, and restaurants. This gentrification has landed the Lower East Side on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s list of America’s Most Endangered Cities as of 2008 (Chan, 2008), since the new construction “threatens to erode the fabric of the community and wipe away the collective memory of generations of immigrant families.” (Arak, 2008). While the neighborhood needs more green space, community residents are nervous about the changes that have come, and those projected to come.

In response to concerns about gentrification, the LL has focused on Creating discourse themes emphasizing its organizational parallels to the High Line, and on the positive Legitimating discourse associated with adding green space to the Lower East Side neighborhood. As mentioned earlier, they have High Line cofounders on their board of advisors and have used the same economic and planning advisors as the High Line. Even their choice of name is meant to remind people of the High Line.

But this High Line focus has come at a cost. Focusing on the High Line to such an extent leads to a sense that the Lowline people might not be able to develop an amenity that benefits the existing community. In the Creating discourse, the Lowline planners highlight the role that developing the Lowline could play in increasing the value of Lower East Side real estate. Recent estimates show it would increase land values by between $10 million and $20 million, and create $5 million and $10 million in sales, hotel, and real-estate taxes over 30 years based on a net-present-value calculation (Morgan, 2012; Dailey, 2013). Focusing on the potential economic benefits of the Lowline is an attempt to mix Creating and Legitimating discourse themes. The challenge in doing this is that the present process of gentrification in the neighborhood receives more attention, which in turn increases tension between the two discourses.

And, most importantly, Legitimating discourse themes attempt to change the conversation
to say the Lowline is a park for the community. This may be part of the founders’ strategy to build support from City agencies (LoDown, 2013; Hawkins, 2015). However, *Creating* discourse themes make it clear that the Lowline is not really a park and it is not really for the community. In fact, some government officials are skeptical the Lowline will become a defining part of the city like its aerial (and named) inspiration the High Line. They wonder whether the Lowline will be a one-time attraction, primarily for tourists (Hawkins, 2015), or a magnet solely for celebrities and wealthy patrons with no stake in the community (Hu, 2016). The skepticism expressed by government officials reinforces the weakness exposed in the *Creating* discourse -- just what are the LL backers supporting, and for whom? That weakness in turn undermines the attempts to drive a park development narrative in the *Legitimating* discourse, to connect the Lowline project with a macro–level discourse.

**Connect Approach to Reconciling Competing Institutional Logics**

*Physical object supporting the discourse themes*

The FHL gave public presentations to anyone who would allow them, and constantly called bloggers and journalists in attempts to give tours and get articles written about the project (Hammond & David, 2011). Wherever possible the FHL took people up onto the space to give users the experience of the space, and also showed High Line images whenever possible in their talks and presentations. Hammond remembers that actually taking people up onto the High Line and then getting them to tell others about the experience was one of the most effective ways of selling early potential supporters on the site’s aesthetic and design (Hammond, 2011) -- an explicit embrace of the physical object as media and discourse strategy (Meyer et al, 2013). The High Line as a physical object was more than a transmitter of information, or means of communication: it was used by FHL as a mode of meaning-construction (Kress and Van
Leeuwen, 2001; Höllerer, Jancsary, Meyer, and Vettori, 2013). More specifically, the High Line, as a physical object, was able to carry symbolic meaning for FHL. The object, itself, acted to reconcile competing institutional logics, in form and thought.

The LL calls itself “the world’s first underground park” (Blanda, 2012; lowline.org), but in function and design appears more like a botanical garden (Lange, 2016) or an atrium (Sweeting, 2015). The pictures show plants in pots or planters, and no lawn equivalent to picnic upon (Hawkins, 2016; Barasch, 2016). At its core the Lowline is a room, one that can hold up to 1500 people (Sweeting, 2015). The site’s physical constraints imply that the whole space would realistically be shut down for an event, which is not what happens in a park. Shutting the entire space down from time to time reinforces the sense that this is not really a park, but rather something more like an elite, privately funded space that the public gets to use. The discourse themes do not sit easily on the abandoned Williamsburg Trolley Terminal space; the LL group appears to be trying to get the community to Envision and Legitimate a thing that the object currently is not, and is not going to be.

**Variegate Approach to Reconciling Competing Institutional Logics**

*Acknowledging the physical and demographic realities of the site surrounding the proposed green public spaces*

Long-time neighborhood residents complaining about changes in the neighborhoods adjacent to the High Line and Lowline are correct: their neighborhoods are changing. Between the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, both areas have become whiter, more educated, and more affluent. In the High Line neighborhood alone, home values within one-third of a mile of the park increased 10% immediately following its opening (Levere, 2014), and condominium prices have increased 85% since 2009 (Surana, 2015). Figure 7 illustrates the change in population
percentage of non-Hispanic Whites in both neighborhoods, and city-wide, between 2000 and 2010. It also illustrates changes in educational attainment (percentages of the population 25 and over with bachelor’s degrees) in both neighborhoods and city-wide between 2000 and 2010.  

INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Figure 8 illustrates changes in median household income for both neighborhoods and city-wide between 2000 and 2010.  

INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE

These changes can help explain why there is at least some interest in further developing the neighborhoods in each case. A lifestyle-driven growth engine can be at least as important to a city as a purely financially-based growth engine is, and possibly more so (Florida, 2001). Green space is part of that lifestyle, and urban neighborhoods with green space benefit dramatically in terms of direct use, health benefits, cleaner water and cleaner air (Harnik & Welle, 2009) – making these places more attractive to live, especially for college graduates. One of the most critical ingredients for a successful urban transformation is having a high proportion of college graduates (Glaeser, 2011); college graduates often cluster together, gravitating to places with many other college graduates and the atmosphere that creates (Tavernise, 2012).  

There is real concern in the High Line discourse about the effects the park has had and will continue to have on the current process of gentrification. In addition, there is concern about the High Line’s impact on lower income residents, and those residents’ perception that perhaps the High Line is not for them. This is not a surprise given the High Line’s physical structure, and its corresponding inability to provide traditional park experiences like playgrounds and open fields. The limitations of the physical structure have implications for how the High Line would be viewed by those inside the immediate neighborhood and beyond.
As Andrew Stone of TPL’s New York office pointed out: “Accommodating neighborhood people?” It’s sort of like, “Not really”. It’s like, the High Line is amazing. It’s one of a kind, but it wasn’t designed to have accommodating neighborhood residents as one of its guiding principles. The reality is, … that the design of the High Line is, for me, is a particular kind of regional resource first and foremost. It’s almost like you make certain decisions in your master plan and your overall design, and I think that it’s designed as a regional resource--and a very particular kind of regional resource that’s appealing to tourists. It has a real wow factor.” (Stone, 2012)

Only approximately one-third of High Line visitors are city residents, and this may be in part because as former Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe put it, “right now, [the High Line] is a very grown up space.” (Benepe, 2012). Andrew Stone of the Trust for Public Land’s New York office, concurred, saying that “Hudson River Park provides a lot of green amenities for the community; and it’s not as needed on the High Line.” (Stone, 2012).

Since the High Line opened, more than 2,500 new residential units, 1,000 hotel rooms and over 500,000 square feet of office and art gallery space have gone up in the immediate neighborhood. The construction and related development has generated $2 billion in private investment in the area, over $900 million in increased taxes, and has created over 12,000 jobs (Quintana, 2016). But on the flip side, there has been more grumbling in the discourse around the High Line about who the $2 billion benefits, who lives in the fancy new buildings, and who has the new jobs created by the High Line (Budds, 2016). Some argue that the High Line merely created a boom market for real estate without any real benefits for the local community. “The High Line didn’t create any new affordable housing, only condominiums for the rich, and the park itself has no open spaces for kids, but is more something for tourists to walk through,” said Miguel Acevedo, president of the tenants’ association at the Robert Fulton Houses, an affordable-housing development in the neighborhood (Satow, 2012).

This feeling of the existing community being left out of plans has spilled over into the discussion around the Lowline; there are concerns about the Lower East Side’s overall
Changing the Conversation: How Institutional Entrepreneurs Use Discourse Themes to Reshape Urban Space

gentrification, especially coming from minority advocacy groups (Surana, 2015; Hu, 2016). The Lowline’s explicit attempts to link itself to the High Line is both a blessing and curse. The Lower East Side is far more populated than the High Line’s neighborhood, and has an older, grittier history, one that people want to preserve.

Lowline supporters are also wrestling with definitions. The Lowline will not be a good place for barbecues, baseball games, or other activities traditionally associated with parks; these kinds of common recreations draw people of color in particular to parks (Bliss, 2017). The Lowline will not be directly funded by the city, either (Barasch, 2016), so its status as a public space is open to debate. For a neighborhood like the Lower East Side that is extremely short on green space, that can feel like a cop-out to existing residents. Local community groups expressed concern about this, arguing that “[p]ublic property [should be] for the common good,” (Papa, quoted in Hu, 2016). The changing area demographics reinforce the sense that the Lowline would not directly benefit area residents.

Discussion and Conclusions

This manuscript examined institutional entrepreneurs’ use of discourse themes to build support for reclaiming and reshaping abandoned urban infrastructure. By exposing how, and under what circumstances, discourse themes can reconcile competing institutional logics or demonstrate that some logics are irreconcilable, I provided preliminary yet promising evidence that discourse represents a powerful reconciliation mechanism for competing institutional logics.

In the cases studied here, the institutional entrepreneurs are trying to repurpose abandoned industrial spaces into public green spaces. Their projects are incredibly complex, and the entrepreneurs must balance a logic of urban park development vs. a logic of profit-driven
economic interest if they hope for success. The Friends of the Park groups cannot successfully do their projects without the help of both private and public organizational support and funding.

The FHL community group has been better at reconciling competing institutional logics using several techniques: augmenting *Envisioning* and *Creating* discourses, augmenting *Creating* and *Legitimating* discourses, connecting discourses across dimensions and ensuring consistency, and managing the variegation of discourse themes over time. In contrast, the Lowline (LL) has not, to date, successfully reconciled their competing logics.

To be clear, I recognize the LL is attempting to develop something important, clever, and creative with what they are proposing. Green space is critical for cities, where more and more of the world’s population is living. The Lower East Side desperately needs green space.

The LL project would offer access to an otherwise unused piece of fascinating New York City history -- with some incredible features, “like remnant cobblestones, crisscrossing rail tracks and vaulted ceilings” (Lowline). There are similar abandoned spaces in New York and elsewhere (Adams, 2016). If done well, this project could inspire other cities to be innovative to increase green space and connect with urban history. And, on a certain level, you cannot argue against adaptive reuse of unused space. The technology is fascinating, too – and potentially transformative.

That said, the LL project is flawed, sometimes seriously, and the project team needs to think harder about what they are doing and why. Is it a park? Is it an elite space community members get to use? Is it somewhere to display very cool solar technology? As yet, there is not a common theme or set of themes that answers those questions in an internally coherent way. The organizers have not shown an ability to connect discourses across dimensions in ways that make sense for their project and enhance each dimension’s discourse.
Both projects focused on design, but the FHL was able to combine their focus on design with the economic logic of neighborhood development, and reconcile that with the logic of building an esplanade used daily by both residents and tourists. The Lowline has put forth striking designs, but they face the problem of internal inconsistency. The largest pot of money available for the project is probably from public agencies and depends on the park being a park. But, as described earlier, it is not really a park. Thus, the problem.

To paraphrase Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, you need to say what you mean and mean what you say. If the LL straightforwardly describes what they are really planning, the project feeds community fears about gentrification, and creates an opportunity for opposition to coalesce against it. Many members of the community are not happy about rich developers trying to build what looks like a fancy plant museum, in an underground room, in the middle of their gritty and historical neighborhood (Hawkins, 2015; Hu, 2016). If the LL does not straightforwardly describe what they are really planning in their discourse around the space, the renderings and space descriptions are in conflict with each other, and with the real constraints of the space. The founders seem to acknowledge the bind they placed themselves in, and have begun calling the space a “culture park” (Lange, 2013) because it is not open to the sky. So, now the space is a “park”, not a park? That confuses people more, not less. It appears the Lowline founders have made a devil’s bargain in their choice of descriptive adjectives.

In addition, I demonstrated that entrepreneurs need to communicate often, using a variety of themes (Prahalad 2011; Prahalad, 2011a), at multiple levels. The more radical the idea, the more communication is required (Prahalad, 2011). To return to the Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis dimensions mentioned earlier, all three dimensions of discourse matter for a venture’s viability. Using discourse to focus on the design (Envisioning) and how the neighborhood will look when
it is complete (Legitimating) just does not work without consistent and comprehensible details of how a project will get there (Creating); “if it’s completely open and not clear how you would actually do it the imagination is just not there” (Prahalad, 2011a).

Finally, comparing projects like the High Line (wildly successful) and Lowline (in-process, partially successful) may shed more light on the process of institutional entrepreneurship and how institutional entrepreneurs use discourse in support of institutional innovation and change. In addition, many studies of institutional entrepreneurship focus on the organizational or individual level of analysis. Institutional entrepreneurship is a collective action and it needs to be studied as such (Schoonhoven and Romanelli, 2001).

We know language has power, reflecting and contributing to social meanings and patterns. The words we use can affect how people make decisions about the distribution of urban rights and resources. As cities like Philadelphia, London, Charleston, Atlanta, Vancouver, Mexico City, and others look to reclaim unused spaces in support of community building and economic development, they will, increasingly, turn to sites like both the High Line and the Lowline for lessons learned. If the conversations around abandoned sites change to support their transformations, requires advocacy groups, “with their ongoing…and embedded activities, …[to] provide [literal and metaphorical] spaces in which meaning is generated, making explanations possible from which we can build…expectations.” (Fine, quoted in Sassatelli, 2010, 91). As advocacy groups provide the space to generate meaning, they also, hopefully, provide the space to use the meanings generated to change the conversations around their projects.
REFERENCES


### Table 1
Types of Data Sources Mapped to Discourse Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension/Theme</th>
<th>FHL</th>
<th>LL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Envisioning Aesthetic/ Design</strong></td>
<td>2001 Joel Sternberg photos in the New Yorker Images Presentations Community Board Meeting Minutes FHL Design Trust for Public Space 2002 report FHL RFP Architectural drawings and renderings Photographs Interviews Articles Blogs Patrick Cullina, FHL Director of Horticulture, Lecture at Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy Meeting. Video presentation and slides. 10/02/11 James Corner, Landscape architect, James Corner Field Operations, The Atlantic, print interview 07/05/11</td>
<td>New York Magazine photos Images Presentations Community Board Meeting Minutes EDC proposal, 2016 Architectural drawings and renderings Photographs Interviews Articles Blogs Kickstarter Video for Lowline Lab Lowline Lab – object, articles, videos, and images Articles, videos and images related to the solar technology needed to pipe sunlight underground</td>
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### Changing the Conversation: How Institutional Entrepreneurs Use Discourse Themes to Reshape Urban Space

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<tr>
<th>Dimension/Theme</th>
<th>FHL</th>
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<td></td>
<td>parks on residential real estate</td>
<td>Blogs</td>
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<td>FHL Invitations to fundraising events</td>
<td>Videos</td>
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<td>FHL Invitations to park section openings</td>
<td>Presentations</td>
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<td>FHL Facebook and other social media posts</td>
<td>Letters written by elected officials to City Council</td>
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<td>Articles</td>
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<td>Presentations</td>
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<td>Creating/Development/Cost</td>
<td>City Council Meeting Minutes</td>
<td>CB Meeting Minutes</td>
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<td>CB Meeting Minutes</td>
<td>HR&amp;A and Arup advisory report on Low Line</td>
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<td>HR&amp;A 2002 advisory report on High Line impact on neighborhood</td>
<td>impact on surrounding neighborhood</td>
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<td>Essex Crossing and SPURA materials</td>
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<td>Architectural drawings and renderings</td>
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<td>Videos prepared by the New School Visual Arts program</td>
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<td>Whitney Museum relocation and opening articles and images</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Community Board (3) meeting minutes (2009-onward)</td>
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<td>Community Board (2 and 4) meeting minutes (2000-onward)</td>
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<td>FHL Articles in local newspapers (Villager, Chelsea today, etc.)</td>
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<td>FHL Articles in New York Times and larger papers</td>
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<td>Census Data</td>
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<td>FHL RFP and Contest for High Line (2003-2004)</td>
<td>Low Line Young Designers program images and articles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>FHL Bowery Boys podcast (2009)</td>
<td>and articles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>FHL Photos taken by people illegally</td>
<td>Lowline Lab photos and articles, Kickstarter Videos</td>
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Table 2

Strategies for Reconciling Competing Institutional Logics

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy for Reconciling Logics</th>
<th>New York High Line</th>
<th>New York Lowline</th>
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<td><strong>Augment</strong></td>
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<td>• Envisioning and Creating discourses weakening each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Creating and Legitimating Discourses augmenting each other</td>
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<td><strong>Connect</strong></td>
<td>• Aesthetics and Neighborhood themes connecting</td>
<td>• Creating and Neighborhood themes connecting – includes mention of gentrification</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discourse balanced and consistent across themes and dimensions</td>
<td>• Discourse somewhat balanced and consistent across themes and dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variegate</strong></td>
<td>• Neighborhood themes becoming variegated over time as the neighborhood changes – includes mention of gentrification</td>
<td>• Envisioning Aesthetics theme and Creating themes causing each to be slightly variegated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Neighborhood themes becoming variegated over time -includes mention of gentrification</td>
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Figure 1: Map of New York’s High Line Park

Reprinted from OpenStreetMap, under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 license (CC-BY-SA 2.0).
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Figure 2: Lowline Location

Reprinted from Lowline Proposal: Presented to NYC EDC, 2016

Figure 3: The Lowline Rendering
Figure 4: Comparative Distribution of Institutional Work Dimensions in the Coded Discourse, High Line and Low Line, 2000-2017
Source: The Author
Figure 5: Early Image of the Undeveloped High Line
Reprinted from NYC.gov West Chelsea Zoning Proposal, 2005
Figure 6: Undeveloped Lowline space, Current Condition, 2016, and Lowline Lab, 2016

Reprinted from Lowline Proposal: Presented to NYC EDC, 2016
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Figure 7: Changes in Census Tracts, Park-Adjacent and City-Wide, 2000 and 2010
Source: census.gov

Figure 8: Median Household Income ($), Park-Adjacent Census Tracts and City-Wide, 2000 and 2010
Source: census.gov