PUBLIC PARKS, PRIVATE POWER: 
A Critical Analysis of Public-Private Partnerships in New York City

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Rooted in lessons from Yellowstone National Park, Central Park and Bryant Park, and propelled by current models of public-private partnership, strategic branding and land use regulation, New York City’s High Line is poised to balance the civic, economic and site responsibilities essential to a successful public cultural heritage site.

In the United States, private enterprise has played a principal role in historic preservation, shaping the formation and management of public parks since Yellowstone National Park in 1872. As stewards of the nation’s heritage sites, preservationists play an ongoing role balancing the challenges of public-private partnerships. Preservationists must weigh civic, economic and site responsibilities to ensure that public good, not private power, is the controlling message of public parks. For nearly 140 years, evolving methods from the private sector have been adopted to achieve economic sustainability for public parks in the United States. The current model for managing public parks in New York City is a public-private partnership that allocates increasing responsibility to the private partner. This trend emerged in the 1970s, in cases such as Central Park and Bryant Park, when an economic crisis rendered the City unable to fiscally support proper site management of its public parks. In the past two decades, strategic branding campaigns (communicating a tangible or intangible name, symbol, set of beliefs or expectations used to identify and differentiate one site or organization from another) have been actively used to leverage a site’s cultural capital and create opportunities to connect stakeholders and enhance the civic engagement and economic support of a public park. Given the current economic downshift, what are the implications of the private sector’s prevalent role in managing public parks today? Like many urban public parks, the High Line, New York City’s newest park, plays a dual role as a public space and a catalyst for local economic stimulus. The High Line—while unquestionably an anomalous trifecta of an extraordinary economic climate, exceptional political support and visionary leadership—exemplifies the benefits of a strong public-private partnership and branding campaign. The regulatory land-use opportunities the public sector imparted on private development interests, and the resultant funding, were integral to the project’s realization. While the High Line’s entirety might not be feasibly duplicated, its public-private land use relationship can be replicated to structure a sustainable model for other urban public parks. New York City’s High Line public park is a contemporary example of the integral role private enterprise continues to play in historic preservation in the United States.