

Escape from Little Island



It's a hot Saturday night in late May and, like many others, I'm desperate to get onto Little Island, the new \$260 million park suspended above the Hudson River on Manhattan's West Side. Across the glittering surface of the water, what looks like a cluster of concrete mushrooms supports a tree-dotted, 2.4-acre landscape. Lit from below and glowing ominously, it suggests a vision of the future that has been passé for several decades now. "Dubai on the Hudson," *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman [offered](#) on Twitter. "A park on stilettos." From where I stand, it looks like

one of those mini-golf courses created for binge-drinking adults.

Tonight, the island is impassable. It's opening weekend, reservations are long gone, and when I arrive, the staff is telling hundreds of disappointed visitors that it has changed its open-admission window due to "[aggressive](#)" crowds the previous night. Everyone mills around by the preserved steel archway of what was once a Cunard-White Star port building, taking pictures. An officer of the New York City Police Department's Mounted Unit poses beside his flaxen Palomino. "It's supposed to be an oasis!" one staff member says.

But parks like this are not oases, nor are they a public good. Since New York City's High Line opened in 2009, high-designed green spaces with major private funding, like the 606 in Chicago and the BeltLine in Atlanta, have become reliable tools to increase property values and spur luxury development, uprooting working people from previously affordable neighborhoods in the process—in other words, tools to [engineer gentrification](#). Originally conceived by civic-minded community members, the High Line today is a model for cities and investors who want to remake whole neighborhoods for the wealthy.

Little Island, for its part, seems more like a death rattle than a new stage of life. The park was funded by media magnate

Barry Diller and will be overseen by the Hudson River Park Trust, a nonprofit created in 1998 by New York State to develop parkland along a stretch of Manhattan's shoreline. While Little Island is technically public, it has no clear purpose but to sell us a billionaire's sleek SimCity fantasy. What happens when a neighborhood reaches saturation point for gentrification, and a city simply gives up the ruse that it's anything other than a playground for tourists, the "creative class," and absentee real estate investors? Little Island may offer the first true post-High Line answer.

Like countless plutocrats before him, Diller wanted an island all his own. Only in today's perverse climate of billionaire philanthropy would he dream to impose it on the public. In 2013, shortly after Hurricane Sandy dealt a fatal blow to historic Pier 54—where commercial ocean liners docked in the early twentieth century, where queer communities made a haven later on, and where a sprawling blacktop hosted concerts in the new millennium—the Hudson River Park Trust approached Diller about a "solution" to restore it. The possibility that he had no business shaping urban life surely never occurred to him. Instead, Diller "chose to reimagine an entirely new type of public space" that would "create an immersive experience with nature and art," Little Island's website claims.

That meant enlisting architect Thomas Heatherwick,

mastermind of doomed projects like [London's Garden Bridge](#), a pricey bridge park that the city wisely torpedoed, and [the Vessel](#), a vacuous New York City tourist trap that recently closed after becoming the site of multiple suicides—only to reopen with paid admission and additional security. For Little Island, Heatherwick envisioned a floating utopia of “architectural innovation,” according to the park’s website, where the city’s commoners could “play, relax, imagine, and restore.”

Its innovations are mostly the cynical kind. Reusing the infrastructure of bygone labor to serve the tastes of the bourgeoisie is by now a standard of urban design. High Line [imitators](#) the world over make a too-conspicuous aesthetic of the railways, ports, and bridges they refurbish, simulating a kind of genteel decay. Little Island’s chief advance is to sanitize its postindustrial history completely—save for a few dozen wooden piles rotting charmingly in the Hudson. Heatherwick designed its prissy concrete stilts and rusticated steel walls to evoke the *idea* of disused infrastructure while erasing its reality.

One might ask why an area that already contains the High Line and Hudson River Park needs yet another green space. Unlike High Line-style parks, Little Island’s justification does not seem to be economic. Housing prices in the Meatpacking District and nearby Chelsea have long since

left orbit, and both neighborhoods hunker in the shadows of new, intergalactic architecture. Little Island apparently required none of the “feasibility studies” that typically determine the payoff of major public projects, nor was there real opportunity for community input. The Hudson River Park Trust and Diller simply carried it out by fiat. That’s not to say that no one put up a fight. One pesky real estate titan, apparently annoyed that the Trust had handed Diller the site on a silver platter, secretly bankrolled a series of legal challenges that, in 2017, nearly sunk the island altogether. Diller fought in court to “save” the project, in a mutant version of the legal battles community members fought to “save” the High Line from demolition back in the early 2000s. But this time, it was a fight over which whiny member of the ruling class would have his way. In the end, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo brokered a deal that would let Little Island float.

To Diller’s quarter-billion-dollar investment, the state kicked in a cool \$4 million, and the city added \$17 million to refurbish the paved esplanade along the river. Diller has committed another \$120 million to its maintenance. After those funds dry up, the expenses will presumably fall to whatever other rich donors the Hudson River Park Trust can turn up. Meanwhile, the city has [cut the budget](#) for the more than 1,700 public parks, playgrounds, and rec centers that deliver actual community space.

Little Island, then, is a symbol of the new urban ideology. What passes for public space comes more and more to resemble the kind of commodified spectacle that can only be secured by private capital. The logic of this ideology devalues the workaday spaces of urban life, ones that might actually bring us together to “play, relax, imagine, and restore”—or even to organize and revolt. It makes each of us a Robinson Crusoe, inhabiting our own island, primed for the endless pursuit of novelty, no matter the cost.

I return to Little Island at nine o'clock on Sunday morning, at which point I am permitted easy entry via one of the two footbridges connecting it to the esplanade. The park's opening has collided with the first burst of post-vaccination travel, and all manner of visitors stream by beneath a kind of archway formed by two of the island's concrete mushrooms. Surrounded by families and tour groups, it feels like entering an upscale amusement park.

The first sight that emerges is a grassy slope where adults lie barefoot on blankets and kids take turns barrel rolling. Staff in lime-green shirts bustle around talking to each other on handheld radios like a crew of anxious stagehands. To my left is a wind-chime audio installation that you can sound by stepping on large buttons, a little like Tom Hanks in *FAO Schwarz* in the movie *Big*, only more Zen. To my right is a concrete lot where floral-painted food trucks sell pricey

“homegrown” concessions, like \$10 avocado toast and local canned rosé; Little Island’s press materials call this area “The Play Ground” [*sic*], drawing attention to the fact that the park is devoid of any *actual* playground. Pathways wind around an ambitious array of trees and grasses over grounds that critics so far have almost uniformly called “undulating.” The description sort of makes sense when you view the park from the outside, but inside, it looks like regular old hills.

Which is to say that once you get past the cool, otherworldly quality of the structural mushrooms and the fact that you’re suspended above the river, Little Island is basically a not-so-big, blandly pleasant, and heavily patrolled city garden. It’s not technically a linear park, but it functions like one: my route is softly coerced by crowded paths and special places to climb beige rocks. When I reach the zenith of the park, there’s an overlook packed with people taking pictures of the river with the Hoboken skyline in the background, a scene perfectly calibrated for social media. All of us are trained to prove the experience by posting a selfie before fresh waves of visitors arrive to replace us.

At one point during my pilgrimage, a kid wearing a Superman cape dashes into a flower bed, prompting a frantic staffer to fetch him and scold his adult guardian. The incident is a reminder that Little Island isn’t really free to roam. Once you’ve walked the marked-out paths, there’s little left to see

or do. So buy a craft beer, you absolute rube. Perch on the grass that they planted for you. Sit in "the Amph," which is what they cutely call their nearly-seven-hundred-seat amphitheater, and feel for all the world like a maven of the ballet. Take in a view that was worth the price of a legal battle between the people who hold power over such things.

It should go without saying that real public spaces allow you to linger. On Little Island, life is carefree, but time feels squeezed. Reservations regulate your access to the park, as do the guarded entrances. Nothing encourages you to commune with others or settle in. You must consume the spectacle and make way. How many people can Little Island accommodate? No one will give me a straight answer. One staffer, apparently improvising, likens the park to a bar where people will become enraged if denied admission. Another tells me that he can't share the capacity, but the last count of his half of the island yielded three hundred. Heatherwick's [website](#) describes "a main space for 3,500," but that seems provisional—based on design specs rather than anything official. When I email the Little Island press office, a representative tells me, in light corporate nonsense, that they can't "share out" a number, but they have taken Covid-19 into consideration and they "do monitor the park for safety and comfort."

This is all extremely stupid, and it nags at me. The

restrictions and opacity are proof that Little Island isn't for us. After all, nobody asked for it. The park is a "civic mitzvah," to use Michael Kimmelman's [phrase](#), only if you think it's a good deed for an undertaxed billionaire to build spaces that are deliberately small and expensive to maintain while real parks crumble. San Francisco's [Salesforce Park](#) is perhaps Little Island's closest spiritual kin. Funded by its ludicrous corporate naming deal, it's a secret garden accessible by elevator, escalator, and gondola that floats atop a renovated city bus terminal. Like Little Island, it's stunning—and sanitized. A branded environment in an already gentrified district, it exists for the corporately named skyscrapers around it to gaze on. Perhaps New Yorkers should praise the minor miracle that Little Island itself [isn't](#) called "[Diller Island](#)." We are bound to see more mitzvahs of this kind in the coming years.

Meanwhile, a new threat to New York City's real public spaces has emerged as [Mayor Bill de Blasio directs NYPD to shut down city parks at will](#), citing concerns over late-night parties and drug use. Already, NYPD's notorious Strategic Response Group is patrolling Washington Square Park and Tompkins Square Park in their [dorkiest Batman body armor, violently removing and arresting people](#) who violate an arbitrary curfew. This security theater conjures a bleak future vision in which cities offer us a choice between a dwindling number of over-policed public parks and a proliferation of

glossy spaces supported by private donors.

The commodification of public space is a final insult to working residents of American cities, so many of which are racing to refashion themselves as gated communities for the ultrarich. These post-High Line parks also represent a failure of imagination in those we've entrusted with stewarding our public space. City planning, in the end, is about power over the future, as urban geographer Samuel Stein argues in *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*.

"Planning is the way we shape space over time," Stein writes. The ruling class will happily shape the spaces of our future if we let them. But it's possible to imagine otherwise.

"Communities and movements," he writes, "plan strategies for survival and resistance, and produce 'insurgent' plans that chart the way from deprivation to freedom." It's only in the context of our radically diminished expectations for existing civic infrastructure that vanity projects like Little Island can look like public gifts at all. Breaking with the false freedom that privatized city planning offers is not just about rejecting Little Island, and the many parks that will surely float behind it, as useless distractions. It will mean defending our real common spaces from disinvestment, neglect, and violent regulation by the neoliberal state.