

Citizen activists (supported by Mayor Michael Bloomberg) have turned an abandoned rail line into an elevated park called the High Line. The southern section starts at Gansevoort Street.

MIRACLE

ABOVE

MANHATTAN





When it opened in 1934, the High Line stretched into lower Manhattan, often passing right through factories (above). That southernmost section was torn down in the 1960s. Today the surviving tracks are being reinvented as an urban park (right).

COURTESY FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE (ABOVE)



BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIANE COOK AND LEN JENSHEL

Parks in large cities are usually thought of as refuges, as islands of green amid seas of concrete and steel. When you approach the High Line in the Chelsea neighborhood on the lower west side of Manhattan, what you see first is the kind of thing urban parks were created to get away from—a harsh, heavy, black steel structure supporting an elevated rail line that once brought freight cars right into factories and warehouses and that looks, at least from a distance, more like an abandoned relic than an urban oasis.

Until recently the High Line was, in fact, an urban relic, and a crumbling one at that. Many of its neighbors, as well as New York's mayor for much of the 1990s, Rudolph Giuliani, couldn't wait to tear it down. His administration, aware that Chelsea was gentrifying into a neighborhood of galleries, restaurants, and loft living, felt the surviving portion of the High Line, which winds its way roughly a mile and a half from Gansevoort Street to 34th Street (a section farther south was torn down years ago), was an ugly deadweight. They were certain this remnant of a different kind of city had to be removed for the neighborhood to realize its full potential.

Never have public officials been so wrong. Almost a decade after the Giuliani

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administration tried to tear the High Line down, it has been turned into one of the most innovative and inviting public spaces in New York City and perhaps the entire country. The black steel columns that once supported abandoned train tracks now hold up an elevated park—part promenade, part town square, part botanical garden. The southern third, which begins at Gansevoort Street and extends to West 20th Street, crossing Tenth Avenue along the way, opened in the summer of 2009. This spring a second section will open, extending the park ten more blocks, roughly a half mile, to 30th Street. Eventually, supporters hope, the park will cover the rest of the High Line (map, pages 128-29).

Walking on the High Line is unlike any other experience in New York. You float about 25 feet above the ground, at once connected to street life and far away from it. You can sit surrounded by carefully tended plantings and take in the sun and the Hudson River views, or you can walk the line as it slices between old buildings and past striking new ones. I have walked the High Line dozens of times, and its vantage point, different from that of any street, sidewalk, or park, never ceases to surprise and delight. Not the least of the remarkable things about the High Line is the way, without streets to cross or traffic lights to wait for, ten blocks pass as quickly as two.

NEW YORK IS A CITY in which good things rarely happen easily and where good designs are often compromised, if they are built at all. The High Line is a happy exception, that rare New York situation in which a wonderful idea was not only realized but turned out better than anyone had imagined. It isn't often in any city, let alone New York, that an unusually sophisticated concept for a public place makes its way through the design process, the political process, and the construction process largely intact. The designers were landscape architect James Corner of Field Operations and the architecture firm of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, who joined forces to produce the winning scheme in a competition that pitted them against

such notables as Zaha Hadid, Steven Holl, and landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh.

Their plan struck a balance between refinement and the rough-hewn, industrial quality of the High Line. “We envisioned it as one long, meandering ribbon but with special episodes,” Corner told me. “We wanted to keep the feeling of the High Line consistent but at the same time have some variations.” The design included sleek wooden benches that appear to peel up from the park surface, but also kept many of the original train tracks, setting them into portions of the pavement and landscape. Working with Dutch landscape architect Piet Oudolf, Corner recommended a wide range of plantings, with heavy leanings toward tall grasses and reeds that recalled the wildflowers and weeds that had sprung up during the High Line’s long abandonment. (The line, which opened in 1934, was little used after the 1960s, although its final train, carrying frozen turkeys, didn’t travel down the track until 1980.)

Early in the two and a half decades that the High Line was unused and untouched, an obsessive rail buff named Peter Obletz purchased the elevated structure for ten dollars from Conrail with the intention of restoring it to rail use. Obletz’s ownership was held up in a five-year legal battle, which he lost. He died in 1996 but is, in a sense, a spiritual parent of the High Line preservation effort. So is photographer Joel Sternfeld. During the derelict years he made striking images of the High Line as a ribbon of green snaking through an industrial cityscape. Widely reproduced, his photographs played a significant role in building a constituency for saving the line for public use. Sternfeld showed that this clunky industrial object really could look like a park.

But the real heroes of the story are two men who met for the first time at a community meeting on the future of the line in 1999. Joshua David was then 36, a freelance writer who lived on West 21st Street, not far from the midsection of the High Line. Robert Hammond, an artist who worked for start-up tech compa-

nies to earn a living, was 29 and lived in Greenwich Village a few blocks from the southern terminus.

“I saw an article in the New York Times saying that the High Line was going to be demolished, and I wondered if anyone was going to try to save it,” Hammond said to me. “I was in love with the steel structure, the rivets, the ruin. I assumed that some civic group was going to try and preserve it, and I saw that it was on the agenda for a community board meeting. I went to see what was going on, and Josh was sitting next to me. We were the only people at the meeting who were interested in saving it.”

“The railroad sent representatives who showed some plans to reuse it, which enraged the people who were trying to get it torn down,” David explained. “That’s what sparked the conversation between me and Robert—we couldn’t believe the degree of rage some of those people had.”

David and Hammond asked railroad officials to take them to look at the High Line. “There’s a legend that we snuck in, but it’s not true,” Hammond said. “When we got up there, we saw a mile and a half of wildflowers in the middle of Manhattan.”

“New Yorkers always dream of finding open space—it’s a fantasy when you live in a studio apartment,” David said.

Amazed by the expansiveness of the space, the two men were determined to keep the High Line from being torn down. In the fall of 1999 they formed Friends of the High Line. At first their ambitions were modest. “We just wanted to fight Giuliani to keep it from being demolished,” Hammond said. “But preservation was only the first step, and we began to realize that we could create a new public place.”

The organization crept forward slowly. Then came the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. “We thought no one would care about the High Line at that point,” Hammond said, “but the increased interest in urban planning and design with the ground zero design process paved the way for heightened interest in our project. People felt this was one positive thing they could do.” In 2002 Friends of the High

Line commissioned an economic feasibility study, which concluded that, contrary to the Giuliani administration's claim, turning the High Line into a park would help the neighborhood, not slow its development. Not long before, an abandoned rail line in eastern Paris, near the Place de la Bastille, had been turned into a highly successful linear park called the Promenade Plantée, which gave the group's idea for the High Line a serious precedent. Although Parisian models don't transfer easily into New York, the existence of the Promenade Plantée did a lot to increase the credibility of David and Hammond's crusade. They began to think their idea of turning the High Line into a new kind of public place might be achievable.

Friends of the High Line may have been a grassroots group, but its roots were planted firmly in the world's most sophisticated art and design community. In 2003 the pair decided to hold an "ideas competition"—not a formal architectural contest but an invitation to anyone to submit an idea and a design for what the High Line might become. They expected a few dozen proposals from New Yorkers. Their call brought 720 entries from 36 countries.

As New York recovered further from the trauma of September 11, Friends of the High Line continued to grow. It began to attract the attention of younger hedge fund managers and real estate executives with a philanthropic bent, people not established enough to join the boards of the city's major cultural institutions but eager to make a mark. The High Line was tailor-made for them; its annual summer benefit became one of New York's favorite causes and one of the few with a critical mass of supporters under age 40.

It didn't hurt that Michael Bloomberg, who succeeded Giuliani, had a sympathetic view of saving the High Line. Bloomberg, a billionaire who had long been a major donor to the city's cultural institutions, offered support for the High Line plan. The city struck a deal with Friends of the High Line, working with the group to design and construct what would become a new park and offering \$112.2 million toward the projected \$153-million cost of the first two phases, with another \$21.4

million from federal and state funds. Friends of the High Line agreed to come up with \$19.4 million and pay the majority of operating costs once the park was open.

In 2005 City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden crafted zoning provisions for the area, setting rules for new construction that was cropping up. By the time the zoning was in place, the surrounding area had become one of the city's hottest neighborhoods. Buildings by celebrated architects were in the works, including the IAC headquarters designed by Frank Gehry. In spring of 2006 the first piece of rail track was lifted off the High Line, the equivalent of a groundbreaking ceremony, and construction began.

FROM THE DAY the first section of the High Line opened in June 2009, it has been one of the city's major tourist attractions, and you are as likely to hear visitors speaking German or Japanese as English. Yet it is just as much a neighborhood park. When I joined Hammond for a walk along the High Line on a sunny day last fall, a section the designers had designated as a kind of sundeck was jammed, and there seemed to be as many locals treating the area as the equivalent of their own beach as visitors out for a promenade.

The sundeck area is one of the places James Corner likes to refer to as "episodes" along the High Line. There are more in the first section, because the route bends and turns, slips under three different buildings to become briefly tunnel-like, then opens up to offer vistas of the midtown skyline or the Hudson River. At the point at which the High Line crosses Tenth Avenue, it morphs once again, this time into an amphitheater-like space suspended over the avenue, allowing you to sit and watch the traffic glide beneath you.

The route of the elevated line straightens out in the second section, north of 20th Street, presenting the designers with a different kind of challenge. "It's all wide open with views of the city, and then all of a sudden you're walking between two building walls," Corner said. "It's dead straight, and we had to make it so you didn't

feel you were in a corridor.” He decided to start off the second section with a dense thicket of plantings, much heavier than anything in the first section, on the theory that if he couldn’t make the tightness go away, he should accentuate its drama for a block or so, then quickly downshift to a relaxed, open lawn. After that comes what the designers call the flyover: a metal structure that lifts the walkway up and allows a dense landscape of plantings to grow beneath. North of that is another seating area, this one looking down onto the street through an enormous white frame that alludes to the billboards that once adorned the neighboring buildings. Just beyond, a long stretch of promenade is lined with wildflowers.

On the day I toured the new section with Robert Hammond, much of the planting was already in place. Even though construction was still going on, it was strangely quiet. We walked the length of the new section; Hammond said the quiet reminded him of the way the High Line was at the very beginning, before the crowds started to pour in. “I thought I would miss the way it was,” he said. But the High Line’s overwhelming success, he has realized, has given him a satisfaction far beyond the pleasures of seeing the old steel structure empty. □

^ RETURN TO BEGINNING



The glassy Caledonia is one of many apartment houses newly constructed along the High Line.



Not long ago, the entire length of the High Line was an unkempt jumble of weeds and wildflowers. The third and last segment, to the north of 30th Street, still is.