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High Line Reversal

by Anne Schwartz
December, 2002 [printer-friendly format](#) [e-mail this article](#) [most emailed articles](#)

The Bloomberg administration has taken the first step toward making the abandoned elevated freight line known as the High Line into a public park and promenade. The 1.5-mile viaduct goes from 34th Street to Gansevoort Street on the far West Side, running alongside -- and sometimes through -- warehouses and industrial buildings. Unused since 1980, the rusting rails have been colonized by wildflowers and even trees. Its gritty charm inspired a group called the [Friends of the High Line](#) to campaign for the transformation of the line into an aerial greenway, similar to the Promenade Plantee in Paris, an old elevated rail line turned into a green promenade that revitalized the district around it.

The Bloomberg administration filed a request for a certificate of interim trail use from the federal Surface Transportation Board, to preserve the route. In its filing, the city said that it would take on responsibility for managing the right of way as well as legal liability, according to New York Times. If the request is granted, however, it would be just the start of the transformation of the rusting structure into a usable pedestrian promenade. One unanswered question is how the city would find funding for the project in today's economic climate.

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The Bloomberg request was a complete reversal from the Giuliani administration's position. Late last year, Giuliani officials reached an agreement with the rail line's manager, the CSX corporation, to have the line demolished. The owners of commercial property along the High Line consider it a dangerous eyesore and an impediment to development in the area, and have sought to have it torn down for years. Mayor Bloomberg, who has shown himself willing to consider new and unconventional ideas, has come down on the side of the visionaries who imagine a new type of open space in New York City. City Council Speaker Gifford Miller supported the mayor's action, saying in the New York Times, "I believe - and I think the administration has also seen - that when you consider the possibilities for a preserved and reused High Line as a public space and a signature moment in the New York landscape, that the positives are almost limitless."

Christo, 20 Years Later

Signaling another potential change from previous city policy, the Central Park Conservancy has given its support to a smaller version of an installation in Central Park first proposed in 1979 by the artist Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude. The artists' plan is to erect a series of rectangular steel gates, each waving a panel of saffron-colored fabric, enclosing and giving definition to the park's curving pathways.

When the idea was first raised, it generated a storm of protest and was rejected in 1981 by the Parks department, in part because of the crowds it would bring into a landscape treasured by New Yorkers for its green beauty and peace.

The Conservancy approved the Christo installation with the caveat that it be considerably scaled down, with 7,500 gates instead of the 11,000 to 15,000 originally proposed, and that there be no disruption to sensitive park areas, no excavation, and minimal use of heavy machinery. Mayor Bloomberg has gone on record in favor of the project, which increases the likelihood that this time around the project will be approved by the parks department.

Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was the editor of the Audubon Activist, a news journal for environmental action published by the National Audubon Society, and an editor at The New York Botanical Garden.



The Top

Parks refers to those set aside by the city or federal government for public access and preservation of natural resources. These spaces relate to the creation, preservation, restoration, and maintenance, and these spaces.

The Conte

With more than 27,000 acres of parks, playgrounds, beaches and other recreational areas, New York City has the largest park system in the U.S. (that a state park in a borough, the Gateway National Recreation Area and four botanical gardens). Yet the city has few green spaces per person than any other major American city, and many neighborhoods lack green space. Community gardens on vacant city lots -- there are more than 750 -- are the only green oases for low-income, minority communities.

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Today's News Archives

Judge rules against demolition plans for New York's historic elevated rail

Story by Elizabeth Brennan / Mar. 14, 2002



Lower Manhattan's High Line (Joel Sternfeld)

The Friends of the High Line are "cautiously optimistic" that they'll be walking their dogs and taking evening strolls along the elevated rail structure on the West Side of Manhattan soon.

Yesterday, a New York state supreme court judge ruled that the city's Surface Transportation Board's plans to demolish the High Line, "undertaken in violation of 'lawful procedure,'" must undergo a review process.

The judge's ruling responded to a lawsuit filed last December by the New York City Council, Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, six Chelsea residents, and Friends of the High Line.

"Our mission is to preserve and reuse public space," says

Robert Hammond, [Friends of the High Line](#) cofounder and Greenwich Village resident. "Rarely do you have the opportunity to have so much open space that passes through three different neighborhoods."

The 1.45-mile-long stretch of track runs from 34th Street along the Hudson River through West Chelsea into the Meatpacking District. The High Line was built in the 1930s to elevate dangerous railroad traffic above city streets like 10th Avenue, which was known as "Death Avenue."

Friends of the High Line, along with the Design Trust for Public Space, released a 12-month study in early February outlining the High Line's potential for reuse.

A host of prominent supporters, including New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), and actor Kevin Bacon, support the groups' plans to transform it into a trail. Hammond estimates the cost at \$40-60 million; a feasibility study is under way.

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Art dealers join battle to save the High Line

A \$40 million plan to re-develop the elevated train passageway in Chelsea is under threat

By Steven Vincent

NEW YORK. Every visitor to Chelsea has seen it, although its rusting brown mass is easy to overlook, the 70-year-old elevated train passageway that runs from 33rd Street, along the Hudson River, through Chelsea to Manhattan's Meat Packing District.

Called the High Line, this 1.45-mile-long viaduct, unused for 20 years and overgrown with weeds and wildflowers, would make a nice pedestrian park, say a group of local residents, architects and business owners. Calling themselves the Friends of the High Line (FHL), this group, headed by writer Joshua David and artist Robert Hammond, has for the last two and half year lobbied city government to transform the nearly 300,000-square foot High Line into a public space, modelled after the Promenade Plantée in Paris.

Prominent among the FHL's supporters have been Chelsea's art dealers. "I'm for anything that beautifies the city and neighbourhood," says dealer Mary Boone. In July, Boone donated her Chelsea gallery for an auction to benefit the FHL. The sale featured works by artists such as Christo, Alexis Rockman and Tom Sachs, as well as the photographs of Joel Sternfeld, whose images of the flower-strewn passageway running through the canyons of New York give an idea of the High Line's strange beauty.

But time is running out for the FHL. Landlords, who own property beneath the elevated tracks, and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who maintains that the High Line is a dangerous eyesore, are pushing forward a 1992 court order to demolish the passageway, hoping to reach an agreement before the New York mayoral election this month. (The candidates vying for the mayor's job have all endorsed the High Line project.)

"The demolition would take over 18 months and result in increased traffic congestion," the FHL recently informed its supporters. "This is not what the city needs right now."

That may not be true. The climate for developing major public works in the city has changed radically since the World Trade Center attack, which plunged New York into its worse financial crisis in a generation. With costs estimated at \$40 million to convert the High Line into a public

space, the city and State governments will almost certainly view such expenditures with a wary eye.

Moreover, the company that owns the rail lines, CSX Transportation, pays around \$400,000 in property tax a year on the structure and reportedly would like to relieve itself of the responsibility.

Nevertheless, High Line supporters are not abandoning their plans. Recently, New York's non-profit Design Trust for Public Space awarded fellowships to architects Casey Jones and Keller Easterling to study the project's feasibility. Their findings will be released this autumn and will form part of an exhibition, "Reclaiming the High Line", planned to open at the Municipal Arts Society in January, 2002.

In addition, Easterling will present a companion study on a website this month.

Finally, the FHL have announced a design competition for the High Line development, scheduled to take place next year.

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Towers & Tenements

by J.A. Lobbia

One Track Mind

Chelsea Group Works to Save an Abandoned Rail Line



The High Line as it bends around 14th Street and heads north, from the meatpacking district to Chelsea
(photo: Sylvia Plachy)

December 27 - January 2, 2001

Enjoyed lunch on the Gowanus Canal lately? Schussed down ski slopes in Pelham Bay Park? Made a quick exit through the Holland Tunnel via the Cross-Manhattan Expressway?

Well, neither has anyone else in this town. All those projects were just dreams—some might say delusions—advanced by New Yorkers over the years. But while none have yet come to pass, they show a creativity and desire to enhance the city, to tinker with possibilities, and even to turn obstacles into assets. These are exactly the goals of a year-old group that wants to revitalize an abandoned West Side elevated freight line and make it a public promenade under the federal Rails-to-Trails program.

The track, called the High Line, is the mile-and-a-half-long remnant of what once was a 13-mile railroad that stretched from Spuyten Duyvil to Spring Street, delivering goods to West Side warehouses and meat markets. But from the time the High Line delivered its last cargo in 1980, it seems that the stout iron panels

along its trestle have served mainly as a magnet for dreamers with visions as varied as light-rail systems, trash-hauling schemes, and now, a parklike mall that would line the Chelsea art gallery district, two stories up.

"You have to realize the great sweep of this structure," says Joshua David, a cofounder of Friends of the High Line. Running from 34th Street near the Jacob Javitz Convention Center to Gansevoort Street in the West Village, with an elevation of 14 feet and a generous double track bed (to accommodate two trains, one running north, one south), the High Line darts into buildings, curves east and west, and shows itself only in occasional crosstown peeks. "Piece by piece, you can't figure it out; it seems dark . . . but once you get the sense of the whole thing, you realize how wonderful it is."

Unfortunately, piece by piece is how the property owners with businesses under the High Line see it. "We're living every day with the problem of this thing just standing there, occasionally shedding concrete or steel," says Doug Sarini, vice president of Edison Properties, which owns several parking lots under the High Line. Sarini is a member of the Chelsea Property Owners, which represents about two dozen businesses—mostly parking lots, machine shops, warehouses, and the trendy Chelsea Market—under the elevated tracks. "It's dangerous, and we feel the only thing to do with it is demolish it."

Indeed, while last year the city's buildings department listed 63 violations, including rusted rails and loose concrete, Mario Palumbo, who is on the board of advisers to the Friends of the High Line, says a private consulting engineering firm has concluded that the line is safe. He says that the fact that a gas station recently opened up directly under the tracks' curve at Tenth Avenue and 14th Street casts doubt on claims that the High Line is unsafe. Arguments of that ilk, he says, cloak a different interest of property owners. "If the High Line comes down," says Palumbo, "it's a one-time bonanza for all of them."

Indeed, as the city ponders local rezoning, owners of property under the tracks could command sky-high prices from developers eager to tap into the meat district and West Chelsea boom. Robert Hammond, a cofounder of the Friends of the High Line, says the group does not oppose development. "The point is that a public reuse of the High Line could work along with development; it could actually increase property values."

The line itself is owned by CSX Corporation, which in 1999 bought all the old Conrail lines east of the Hudson River. CSX refused to comment for this story, but both friends and foes of the High Line say CSX is working with them to keep its options open. Passed from one bankrupt railroad (New York Central) to another (Conrail) and tied up in years of litigation, much of the High Line's

future depends on legalities. In 1992, the Interstate Commerce Commission granted a permit to allow demolition so long as property owners under the line pay for costs over \$7 million. Sarini says the owners and CSX are negotiating.

At the same time, the Friends of the High Line are hoping the elevated will win Rails-to-Trails designation. Hammond says half the City Council and a handful of other pols support the plan, not including Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who, like his predecessor, wants the High Line razed. Architect Robert A.M. Stern and celebs like designer Todd Oldham and entertainer Sandra Bernhard have joined the cause. Federal transportation dollars may be available to help develop a reinvented High Line. Hammond estimates the project would take up to seven years and cost up to \$43 million.

Friends of the High Line presented its plan at a public meeting on December 7, opening with a slide show. Lush, hip-high brush and foliage sprouting in the bed of the industrial ruin pose a stark contrast of vibrancy alongside decrepitude. "The place is full of botanical treasures," said neighborhood resident Susan Sands. "There are species up there that don't grow anywhere else in New York City." But to others, they were just weeds.

"The pictures are the best arguments for taking it down," said longtime Chelsea resident Dorothea Macalduff, who recalled that hundreds of homes (640, plus one church and two schools) were torn down to build the High Line. Opinions ranged widely. The High Line was variously an "interesting and important window to the city's industrial past" and "a one-of-a-kind monument to the city's railroad history," or an "eyesore" that makes neighbors feel "like we're standing behind a prison bar." Mark Kingsley, who once lived at 95 Horatio Street, where in 1991 developer Rockrose Realty tore the southernmost legs off the High Line to build what he called "cookie-cutter crap" housing, praised the old railroad. "Blight," he said, "is a point of reference that is personal to everyone."

The High Line was built in the 1930s as part of the West Side Improvement, an epic New York City endeavor that included the West Side Highway. Uptown, the tracks were covered over and became part of Riverside Park. Downtown, an elevated portion replaced street-level freights that barreled up Eleventh and down Tenth avenues—a traffic nightmare that earned each street the name Death Avenue. On Tenth, horse-mounted riders with lanterns would precede trains, shouting warning to pedestrians. One of the last Tenth Avenue Cowboys to make the trip, in advance of a train hauling a load of oranges, was George Hayde on his horse Cyclone in the late 1930s.

The debate over the High Line's future is long-standing. It is regularly presented to architecture students as a problem to solve. A slide show and lecture on "The Fight to Save Manhattan's

Forgotten Railroad" was held in 1984 by the now defunct West Side Rail Line Development Foundation; earlier this month, a cocktail-and-caviar fundraiser was held for the same cause, this time by Friends of the High Line. Dreams for the abandoned track—including both its demolition and resurrection—have been around so long, they too, are tinged with history.



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