Arts & Humanities

Walk the Line

The fight to put Manhattan’s High Line on a whole new track.

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Around the corner from Chelsea Market, past the stylish restaurants of the Meatpacking District on the western edge of Manhattan, a shadow looms over 14th Street on the way to the Hudson River. What is it? Perhaps it’s a remnant, something like the old elevated tracks long removed from 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 9th Avenues. It takes a moment to register that it doesn’t run above the street, but cuts instead

through the middle of the block.

Imagine walking on top of the structure, 20 or 30 feet above the ground. The rusted rails are overrun with wild grasses and flowers swaying in the breeze. Make your way up to 23rd Street, where you look down to see the Half King bar, tables on the sidewalk, while beside you is the third story of an old factory. You're in the city and above it at the same time. It's an astonishing perspective.

Welcome to the High Line — the New York Central Railroad freight route designed to get trains off 10th Avenue and directly into factories and warehouses. Its obsolescence set in not long after it was completed in the 1930s, as a nascent trucking industry began to displace the railroads. Penn Central and Conrail continued to use it, but after the last train ran in 1980, it was abandoned, and the line drew the ire of nearby property owners and city officials.

"Pople saw it as an obstacle," says Moji Baratloo, an architect and adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP). "It blocked views. It created shadows. It was dirty underneath, and rusted." There was, she explains, much pressure, both from developers and local residents, to simply knock it down.



Jim Shaughnessy photographed this New York Central locomotive on the High Line above 30th Street in April 1957.

Meanwhile, amateur explorers and planners had found their way onto the putatively inaccessible line. There were whispers about what they saw there, and what they dreamed it could be.

Steven Holl, a practicing architect and GSAPP faculty member, says he was fascinated by the High Line almost from the moment he arrived in the city: “I saw the last car go by in November 1980, a load of frozen turkey.”

Even then, the structure’s alternative potential was apparent. “When I first came to New York in 1977, I had no clients,” Holl recalls. “One of the projects I did, as a kind of visionary urban insertion, was called the ‘Bridge of Houses.’ The idea was to turn the High Line into a long pedestrian park, inserting multiunit houses along the way. Saving it was obvious back then.”

Baratloo, too, had been atop the High Line early on, “way before it was known by others, way before you were allowed to be up there,” she says. “It’s one of those amazing kinds of public spaces that wasn’t designated as a public space.”

In 1999, with the Giuliani administration making noises — loud noises — about taking the railway down, a pair of local residents named Joshua David and Robert Hammond formed Friends of the High Line, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the structure and turning it into an unusual public park. An old train viaduct in Paris had recently been converted into an elegantly landscaped walking path, the Promenade Plantée; surely. New York deserved no less.

Philip Aarons ’73CC, ’76LAW, a real estate developer and former president of New York’s Public Development Corporation, has been the chairman of Friends of the High Line since 1999. (He owns no properties near the project.) According to Friends cofounder Joshua David, Aarons “has been instrumental in the success of the High Line project . . . at every stage of our work.”

Without any assurance that the line could or would be preserved, the organization sponsored a conceptual design competition to generate interest and excitement. (The winner: a whimsical — and very long — lap pool.) They negotiated with owner CSX, which got the property when it acquired half of Conrail in 1998; the company saw the High Line as too expensive to maintain and even more expensive to

remove. When the Bloomberg administration arrived, the Friends lobbied city, state, and federal officials. They commissioned studies, courted property owners, and worked the media.

And they won. The city tookover ownership of the property in 2005, and the High Line's seven narrow acres between Gansevoort and 34th streets — 30 feet wide and 1.45 miles long — will now be turned into a unique urban park designed by the architectural firms Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro. The working plan calls for a varied program of trees, grasses, and flowers, dotted with ponds, terraces, seating, and viewing areas. Construction began this past summer, and the segment south of 15th Street is expected to open in 2008.

"It's an extraordinary civic accomplishment," says John H. Alschuler, a real estate consultant and an adjunct professor at GSAPP. "A group of disciplined, imaginative, committed New Yorkers came together with a vision, and they had the political savvy, the design vision, and the communications skills to rally a disparate community to convince the city and the state and the federal government to preserve an historic treasure."

Aarons says he found inspiration in the grassroots nature of the project. "The notion that young people in particular were willing to get engaged and do something that everybody else said would be impossible to do sparked my interest," he says.

David Mazzuca '07CC, an urban studies major who was an intern for Friends of the High Line, says the process offers a lesson in working with the city to achieve your ends. "Rather than just demonstrating in the street, [David and Hammond] blended grassroots efforts with the business savvy you need to succeed," he says.

Indeed, the skillful work of the Line's advocates has found its way to a GSAPP course. Alschuler uses the High Line as a case study in his course The Political Environment of Real Estate.

It was Alschuler whose early study concluded that the viaduct-turned-park would increase property values and therefore tax revenues, making it worth the city's while to get onboard. And his predictions have been borne out: "Real estate values around the High Line have skyrocketed," he says. "The High Line has captured the imagination of New Yorkers, and it's natural that people would want to live near it and be a part of it."

Holl agrees. “Whether it’s the sky, the geometry of the buildings, or the river horizon, the sense of passing through space from the High Line is a completely different experience from walking at street level,” he says. “You can walk for 30 minutes uninterrupted, not at the stop-start, honk-honk cadence you get used to in the city. This is a phenomenally important element of the experience.”

But Holl also recognizes the challenges that lie ahead.

“One has to make this rather raw steel structure somehow inspiring from below as you pass in and out,” he explains. “If you can make this thing work in all dimensions, so that the lower level works as well as the upper level, it really becomes an asset.”

Friends chairman Aarons says the High Line’s backers organized their efforts with an eye to negotiating in a complicated urban environment. In a city where high-profile proposals are often delayed or abandoned as a result of community opposition, he says the ultimate success of the High Line demonstrates that there is still room for extraordinary, visionary projects. “From start to finish, it is one of the fastest-progressing public projects ever,” he says. “You just have to build awareness of what the potential value is. When people want something, it really makes a difference.”

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