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New York's secret garden

In June 2009 New York City lost a wilderness and gained one of the world's most remarkable public parks. Jonathan Ives reports on the opening of the High Line

The High Line has been part of New York City since the 1930s but only in the last few months has it become part of the life of the city, part of the public realm that makes New York one of the most engaging and fascinating cities in the world. Originally conceived and built to serve the industrial west side of Manhattan, the High Line now serves as a public open space that lifts New Yorkers high above their usual environment of sidewalks and city blocks. This elevated linear park has quickly become one of the city's most popular attractions, providing new perspectives of New York for visitors and new perspectives of the possible for those working in the field of urban design.

While it would be stretching a point to suggest that a thirty-foot high mass of steel running for twenty blocks through Manhattan had gone unnoticed, for many years the High Line had been thought of by the majority of New Yorkers, if they thought of it at all, as part of the city's industrial past rather than its future. While not exactly hidden, it had been largely forgotten while the city that had become a metaphor for bankrupt urban decay got on with the uphill task of reinventing itself. Only the intrepid few who had taken the dare to climb up to see what was happening among the disused tracks had any idea of what the city looked like from the High Line and, having found a modern wilderness in the heart of the city as nature slowly reclaimed the structure, most of them were keen to keep this secret garden to themselves. That they failed is testament to the imagination and determination of a small group of activists and campaigners who persuaded the city authorities that the High Line was better used for public good than private gain.

The High Line story began in the middle of the nineteenth century when the City of New York gave permission for the construction of a street-level railway through the industrial West Side. Accidents became so commonplace that Tenth Avenue is known as Death Avenue and men on horseback – the West Side Cowboys – rode ahead of the trains waving red flags. By 1929 public outcry has forced the passage of the West Side Improvement Project which included the High Line. Over \$150 million (the modern equivalent of \$2 billion) was spent to eliminate 105 level crossings and add 23 acres to Riverside Park. From 1934 the High Line ran around and even through the buildings of the West Side, connecting the docks, factories and warehouses, delivering milk, meat, raw materials and finished goods without adding to the traffic on the streets below. By the 1960s, with trucking putting rail freight under pressure, the southern part of the High Line was demolished and by the 1970s traffic on the High Line had dwindled. In 1980 a train took a load along the tracks for the last time and within a few years the property companies that owned land under the High Line were urging the city to demolish the whole structure to free the area for development.

The name of Peter Obletz is recorded in the history of the High Line as the first person to say no to the developers. A resident of the Chelsea district by choice and an activist by nature, Obletz was also a dance company manager and a railway enthusiast. Having set up home in two railway cars behind Penn Station, Obletz set about trying to prevent the demolition of the High Line and ultimately put rolling stock back on the tracks where he believed it belonged. Although this quest failed, he had sparked the interest in the future of the defunct railway and in 1999 Joshua David and Robert Hammond founded the Friends of the High Line as an action group to campaign for the creation of a new elevated open space. In March 2002 the city gave its first support to the plan for the High Line as part of the public realm and in April 2006 work on section one of the project began. Early in June 2009 the city's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, was among those who gathered to officially welcome it as one of the city's open space amenities.

It has quickly become one of the most popular and most celebrated. As a concept the High Line is not unique (Paris has had something similar, La Promenade Plantée, for a number of years) but it is a remarkable reminder that public realm projects can, with a bold vision and innovative and sympathetic design, still produce something extraordinary. Climb the broad double flight of steps on Gansevoort Street up to the deck and you are immediately transported. Ahead the Standard Hotel straddles the ribbon of the track bed on which some of the original tracks are still visible. A boardwalk of concrete strips creates a pathway through plantings of trees, flowers and grasses skilfully designed by landscape architects James Corner

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The High Line: the tracks of NY's tiers

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The other side of the tracks

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Field Operations and Netherlands-based Piet Oudolf to echo the self-seeded landscape that had grown since the trains stopped running. Here and there the boards lift to create benches and drinking fountains, the run-off from which serves to water the plants. After walking what equates to a few blocks at street level, the High Line bends and splits into two planes as it winds closely through the buildings it used to serve. The wide curve of the deck provides space for a row of hardwood sun loungers, some of which can be rolled along the old tracks to offer a better view of the Hudson River. At 14th and 16th there are more stairs and the lifts that make the High Line fully accessible. At 17th Street the route sweeps across Tenth Avenue where a tiered auditorium offers visitors a seat and a huge picture window from which to watch the city pass below. At around 18th Street you get your first view of the Empire State Building and at 20th Street you reach what for now is journey's end.

But not, we hope, for long. Section two of the High Line project, which will extend the current park from 20th up to 30th Street, is scheduled to open next year. As this issue of *The Leisure Review* went to press the Friends of the High Line were also able to announce that the Department of City Planning had confirmed that the city authorities are to initiate the process to acquire the High Line north of 30th Street. This, according to the Friends, represents a significant step towards the goal of preserving the historic structure beyond 30th Street, including the 10th Avenue Spur, and completion of the High Line project all the way to 34th Street. This would be a remarkable achievement for the Friends but section one of the High Line is already just that: a remarkable achievement and a breathtaking addition to the City of New York.

For more information on the High Line visit www.thehighline.org

The Leisure Review interviewed Adrian Benepe, New York's commissioner for parks and recreation, in the March 2008 issue.

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