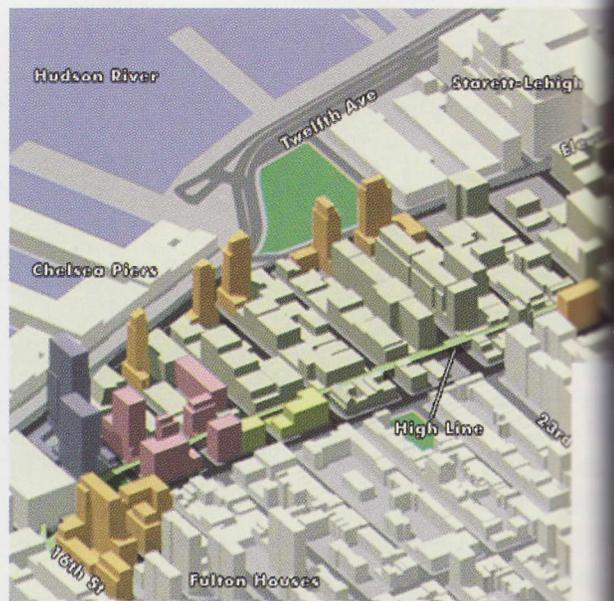


A rusting, dilapidated, overhead rail structure on the far west side of Manhattan—traversing less than two miles of a transitional area characterized by high-end art galleries and auto body shops—wouldn't seem like an obvious place for an urban park. But the elevated rail line, which hasn't been used since 1980, has gone from cause celebre to fait accompli in just six years, a lightning-fast turnaround given the glacial pace of New York City urban planning.

By Lisa Chamberlain



Open Space Overhead

Construction of a unique overhead greenway space will begin later this year. Meanwhile, nationally known and local architects alike have already designed a dozen structures surrounding the High Line.

Built in the 1930s, the High Line solved a deadly problem of rail traffic tangling with cars and pedestrians along sections of 10th and 11th Avenues. But in the 25 years since the trains stopped running, the elevated tracks have been an urban oasis for wildflowers, birds, and, of course, trash.

Surrounding property owners fought with the railroad and various levels of government to have the structure dismantled while nearly everyone else forgot it existed—that is, until Friends of the High Line formed in 1999. The nonprofit advocacy organization propelled the issue into public view and got support from planners, politicians, and celebrities alike.

In 2005, the city planning department, led by Amanda Burden, AICP—an early supporter of the Friends' preservation efforts—devised a plan to transform the High Line into an urban park. The city overcame the objections of property owners (the structure sits on privately owned land) by rezoning the area to allow for the transfer of lucrative development rights. The community at large got on board with the plan's mandate that low- and moderate-income housing be included in all new development resulting from the new zoning.

For creating an unlikely urban park in a unique public space, the New York City Department of City Planning is the winner of the 2006 Outstanding Planning Award for a Special Community Initiative.

2006
PLANNING AWARDS

Outstanding Planning Award for a
Special Community Initiative

West Chelsea/High Line Plan
New York City Department
of City Planning

“The lesson here may be to look differently at what is in your community and apply creativity to preservation efforts.”

Staci Hulseberg, AICP, Director of Planning and Development, Glen Ellyn, Illinois

At build out, the elevated park will stretch from 16th Street to 30th Street in Manhattan (above). Special zoning allows transfer of development rights from “granting sites”—properties in the High Line Transfer Corridor—to “receiving sites” in the Special West Chelsea District. The master plan developed by a team led by Frank Gehry + Renfro, envisions an at-grade plaza and retail and event space at Gansevoort Street, the park's southern terminus (below).

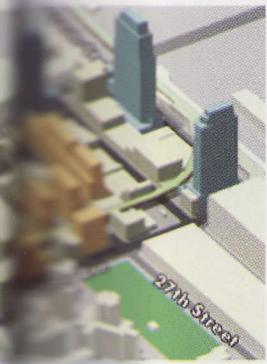
Uncertain future

The High Line came about as a result of the West Side Improvement Project of 1929, a massive reorganization of Manhattan's transportation infrastructure. By the 1960s, however, the railroad industry was in decline, and trains stopped running on the High Line within a couple of decades. The structure inevitably began to deteriorate, and property owners surrounding the tracks called for it to be torn down.

Viewed from the ground, the High Line is a rusting hulk of steel, depressing property values and casting shadows that, like an urban petri dish, are the perfect incubator for unsavory activities. A lack of consensus among stakeholders about who was responsible for dismantling the structure resulted in a benign neglect that allowed nature to flourish atop the High Line. Meanwhile, West Chelsea was spontaneously being reinvented by an influx of high-end art galleries fleeing escalating rents in Soho.



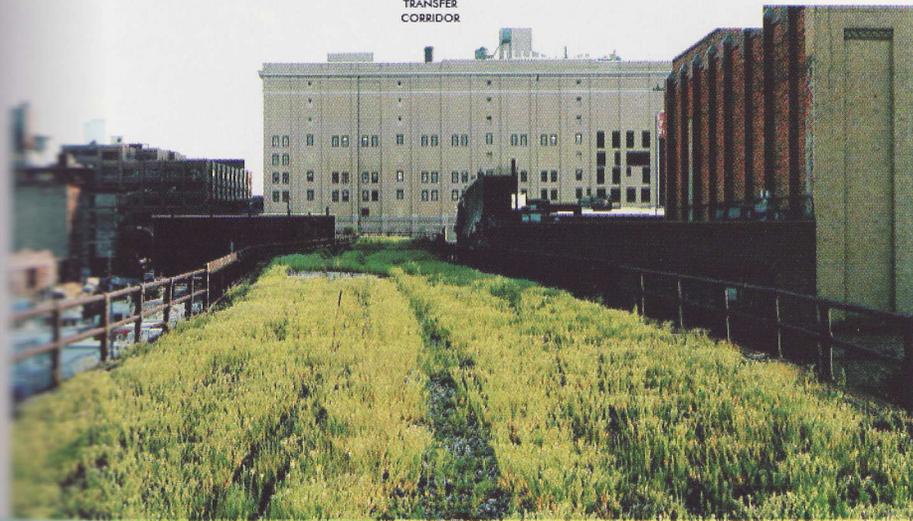
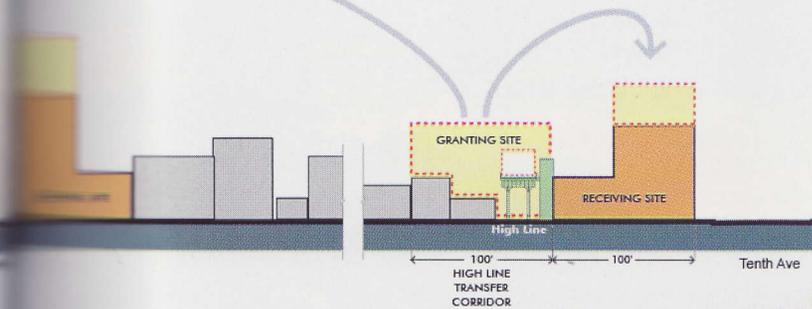
Joshua David and Robert Hammond, cofounders of Friends of the High Line, had no intention of making an elevated railroad their central focus when they both attended a community meeting.



Construction begins later this year on the High Line (below), seen looking south from above West 19th Street.

we had the expertise to do this, but we got a lot of people to help, and Amanda [Burden] was one of them. The most important thing we did was raise the flag.”

Burden was a city planning commissioner appointed during Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s administration. Giuliani sided with the property owners, so Burden’s support was personal, not representative of the city. But when Mayor Michael Bloomberg was elected in 2001, he not only supported efforts to



Courtesy: Joel Sternfeld

save the High Line, he appointed Burden chair of the commission as well as director of the city planning department. What had been thought of as a quaint idea to turn this urban oasis into a landscaped park had suddenly become a top priority for the city.

“My first visit up onto the High Line made it perfectly clear that this was an irreplaceable opportunity for the city of New York,” Burden says. “Then when I was appointed as commissioner, my challenge was to persuade others that the High Line created economic value by giving this neighborhood a true sense of place found nowhere else.”

Friends of the High Line, meanwhile, had been hard at work raising the public’s awareness, the cornerstone of which was recruiting Joel Sternfeld to take photographs of the structure. The large-format photographs—published in a 2002 book titled *Walking the High Line*—captured the wildlife and conveyed the unique aspect of

the space: an above-the-fray viewpoint of the city. Unlike Central Park, which removes one from urbanity, the High Line is very much a part of the fabric of the city. Sternfeld’s photographs enabled the public to grasp this unusual perspective.

Very quickly, Hammond and David’s group went from an obscure organization to a much admired fund raising and public relations machine, leveraging the support of U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and actor Ed Norton, among others, to raise about \$2 million annually.

Early in his administration, Mayor Bloomberg floated the idea that would ultimately win over property owners—namely, the transfer of development rights. In December 2002, the city took the first step in converting the High Line to a public greenway through federal rails-to-trails legislation. The planning department developed a new zoning district with three priorities: preserving and transforming the High Line, creating new housing, and protecting the art gallery district. The zoning allows the owners of the land underneath the elevated line to capitalize on their property through a transfer of floor area to “receiving sites,” where new residential and mixed use development is now permitted on land previously zoned for manufacturing. The city held more than 100 meetings with public and civic organizations to get input and ultimately secure broad-based support for the plan.

By any measure, it has been wildly successful. Landscape architects Field Operations and the architectural firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro won the competition to redesign the High Line in 2004. The design was featured in 2005 at the Museum of Modern Art, which described it as “comprising a series of gardens in the form of pits, plains, bridges, mounds, ramps, and flyovers [which] aim to create and preserve experiences of slowness, otherworldliness, and distraction.”

According to the *New York Times*, 10 new residential or mixed use buildings and two commercial properties have been approved in the new zoning district, some of which will be important architecturally, including two Frank Gehry-designed buildings. Gwathmey Siegel & Associates has been commissioned to add a residential component to the famed Chelsea Market (formerly a Nabisco factory).

“Changes were coming to Chelsea with or without the High Line,” Hammond says. “But the rezoning preserved light and air around the High Line, allows the galleries to thrive, and promotes affordable housing. It’s going to be one of the most unique public spaces in New York City.”

Lisa Chamberlain is a freelance writer who covers real estate for the *New York Times*.



meeting about its imminent demise in August 1999. “When we first got involved, we thought some other group or civic organization would take it on,” Hammond says. “We didn’t feel like