

RECLAIMING THE HIGH LINE

Design Trust for Public Space and Friends of the High Line Publish Seminal Study on the High Line As Its Future Hangs in the Balance

Imagine a public park elevated above city streets, where pedestrians can enjoy views of the Hudson River and the city skyline. A place where schoolchildren can learn about a variety of plant species at Manhattan's only botanical garden, or neighborhood residents can enjoy a coffee at an outdoor café. These are just a few of the visions for the elevated rail line, the High Line, proposed in *Reclaiming the High Line*, the first comprehensive study of this vital piece of New York's history.

Co-sponsored by The Design Trust for Public Space and Friends of the High Line, and presented as an exhibition by the Municipal Art Society through March 5, *Reclaiming the High Line* is the culmination of a 12-month study by Design Trust Fellow Casey Jones of the disused, elevated industrial rail line that runs along Manhattan's West Side from 34th Street to Gansevoort Street.

The High Line sits at the nexus of several dramatic and, in some cases, hotly contested development initiatives that have an historical and sometimes physical link to the structure. This includes the 30th Street Rail Yards, Hudson River Park, the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Station and proposed plans for a high-speed ferry terminal at the former 60th Street Rail Yards.

The timing of this study is critical and the stakes are high: the fate of the High Line—facing a pending demolition order signed in the last hours of the Giuliani administration—hangs in the balance as a new city administration settles in, and key appointments to executive offices are being made. However, a future for this historic icon is not lost. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is an advocate for the High Line's reuse, and contributed an introduction to the resulting publication.

"Today, on the west side of Manhattan, we have an opportunity to create a great, new public promenade," said Mayor Bloomberg. "This would provide much-needed green space for residents and visitors, and attract new businesses and residents, strengthening our economy."

Reclaiming the High Line examines the potential offered by the High Line to connect communities, generate economic activity, inspire bold design solutions and improve the urban condition through the creation of a 1.5-mile-long, 6.7-acre public space. The recommendations outlined in the study will be the basis for the next phase in the process of ensuring a future for the High Line, a design competition organized by Friends of the High Line, which will be officially announced this spring.

The Study

As part of its mission to provide resources to develop well-designed public space in New York City, the Design Trust sponsored two fellowships for the creation of a study and the development of strategies for reuse of the High Line, a proposal submitted by Friends of the High Line (FHL), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the reuse of this structure.

Fellow Casey Jones is an architect with the Office of the Chief Architect of the United States, General Services Administration, and a former associate director of the Van Alen Institute, where he organized a successful series of lectures and competitions aimed at improving the public fabric of the city, including the recent TKTS and Pier 40 design competitions. Jones spent 12 months meeting with community groups, development experts and design professionals to evaluate the feasibility of reuse alternatives, including transportation, commercial, arts-oriented and open-space scenarios, as well as demolition. He also studied the High Line's history and physical conditions, local zoning, current land use and community needs.

"This study demonstrates the viability and value to the city of transforming the High Line into a vibrant public amenity," said FHL co-founder Joshua David, who co-wrote the resulting publication. FHL has been working toward the goal of creating a comprehensive study of the High

Line since its founding in 1999. The publication will be available through the Friends of the High Line website, www.thehighline.org, and at Urban Center Books.

A second fellowship was awarded to architect/writer Keller Easterling, an assistant professor of architecture at Yale University. Easterling is creating a website comprising four speculative environments for the High Line. Not limited to attainable possibilities, its purely conjectural environments provide a counterpoint to the fact-based study. The user can experience the High Line from the perspective of a developer, an animal, a tourist and a partygoer. Still in development, the website will be accessible at www.thehighline.org in the near future.

“Together these projects demonstrate how public space issues can be resolved in imaginative, creative ways,” said Andrea Woodner, co-director of The Design Trust for Public Space. “The High Line is ideal for applying these principals, because of its urban and aesthetic merits, its extraordinary value to the neighborhood, and its universal significance as a precedent for the rehabilitation of disused infrastructure.”

The Findings

The study advocates a unified, progressive design response that reflects the original vision of the High Line as a vital component of the “City of Tomorrow,” and inclusive planning that considers the needs of community members, business and property owners, and the State and City. The study provides specific recommendations for each of the neighborhoods that the High Line intersects. Among the overall findings are:

- **Reuse rather than demolition:** the study affirms the value of preserving the High Line due to its irreplaceable historic significance and one-of-a-kind urban experience it offers; its public benefit to an area of the city that is experiencing significant growth, yet has one of the lowest amounts of open space in the city; and its ability to strengthen the surrounding communities economically, as well as socially.
- **Catalyst for smart growth:** As a new and carefully programmed open space amenity, a redeveloped High Line should be conceived of as a generator, rather than an inhibitor, of smartly planned real estate development, especially since it overlies one of Manhattan's fastest growing areas.
- **Integrated Design:** A well-designed High Line must take into account (and improve) the streetscape below it and the property adjacent to it, as well as the experience up on it.
- **Pedestrian use:** the study considers various transportation uses including subway, light rail and bicycle pathways. Pedestrian use was found to be the most viable alternative given the structure's height, width, and length.
- **Greenway use:** the study recommends transforming the structure with a variety of plantings, with options including: self-seeded meadow and grassland environments similar to what exists on the High Line today; Manhattan's only botanical garden with a range of specimens suited to the particular conditions on the line; a bird or butterfly habitat to attract the many species regularly observed on the structure.
- **Art use:** located in a thriving arts district, the study found the High Line particularly well suited for exhibitions of outdoor artwork, open-air performances and other activities.
- **Commercial use:** the study found that limited commercial activity, such as cafés and small-scale retail and dining venues, would be beneficial to stimulate use, create variety and excitement, provide a secure environment and generate revenue for maintenance of the public space.
- **Manufacturing use:** With many light manufacturing and commercial activities currently located under and around the High Line, the study recommends respecting the industrial nature of the neighborhood by promoting their continued presence in spaces beneath the High Line.

Implementation and Financial Strategies

The study identifies financial mechanisms to drive private and federal investment toward the High Line's conversion to an elevated public space, thus minimizing the need for City funding.

- **Tax Increment Financing:** In areas with substandard economic performance, bonds are issued to make improvements that encourage private investment, and the increased tax revenues resulting from the private investment pay back the debt. Mayor Bloomberg and the New York City Department of City Planning have identified TIF as a public/private funding opportunity for the convention center area.
- **Zoning Incentives:** New York City's zoning system offers established incentive structures to direct private funds to public amenities and open space. The study recommends utilizing these mechanisms with a maximum of community input.
- **Federal Funding:** The study identifies federal funding streams that can be tapped for open space and transportation-related infrastructure projects.

The Exhibition

A related exhibition at the Municipal Art Society explores possible re-use scenarios through:

- Historic photographs and documentation;
- Past design and redevelopment proposals from prominent architects such as Steven Holl;
- Current schemes for redevelopment in the area, including the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill plan for Pennsylvania Station and Jean Nouvel's mixed-use redevelopment project at Little West 12th Street;
- Video footage by photographer Joel Sternfeld that evocatively captures a walk along today's High Line; and
- Text, drawings and maps illustrating the study's recommendations for redevelopment.

The Design Trust for Public Space (www.designtrust.org) is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality and understanding of the public built environment in New York City. The Design Trust funds collaborations between private and public sector design professionals to explore design and development issues confronting the open space, public architecture, and infrastructure of our urban realm.

Friends of the High Line (www.thehighline.org) is a not-for-profit group of residents, business owners, civic organizations, and members of the art, architecture, and design communities dedicated to the preservation and reuse of the High Line.

The Municipal Art Society (www.mas.org) is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to enrich the culture, neighborhoods and physical design of New York City. The MAS advocates for excellence in urban planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

ATTENTION EDITORS: FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OR IMAGES CONTACT:

Friends of the High Line, Robert Hammond, 917-523-5194 or rhammond@mail.com
Design Trust for Public Space, Bay Brown, 212-695-2432 x10 or bay@designtrust.org