

From Promenade Plantée to the New York High Line



Fig.1: Promenade Plantée



Fig.2: Promenade Plantée

A recently completed promenade that sweeps over Paris from the Bastille to the Bois de Vincennes reveals the potential for New York's proposed High Line. Paris challenged the urban designers of the entire world with the creation of this promenade, which has helped to reclaim the glow that Paris once had as "the city of the lights." Soon the High Line will offer New York City a similar chance -particularly if we learn from Paris's new high promenade.

The High Line is an elevated rail structure built in the 1930s on the West Side of Manhattan. Held aloft by a series of rough iron columns, it runs from 34th Street, parallel to the Hudson River, above West Chelsea's art galleries and into the Meat Packing District. By the middle of last century the structure had been abandoned. Although many developers wish to demolish it, some visionary New Yorkers want to keep it. They see that this neglected landmark offers the opportunity to give New Yorkers a public promenade

that moves high above their city but preserves and observes the industrial heritage of some of their city's most intriguing neighborhoods.

Although the far-seeing New Yorkers who propose turning the dilapidated High Line into a splendid high promenade may be visionaries, they are not pioneers. Across the Atlantic, the City of Paris has blazed the way. Just four years ago, that city completed the world's first urban high promenade by restoring an old viaduct now lushly planted as if it were an aerial garden, to create what Parisians call their Promenade Plantée. Any New Yorker who has strolled across the rooftops of Paris via the Promenade Plantée, and who has delved quickly into the promenade's origin, can easily imagine a day when delighted New Yorkers will meet to promenade together above their city and along their wondrous, new High Line. A stroll above the roofs of Paris shows not just splendid vistas. It shows also how easily Paris could have demolished what it fortunately saved; how transportation in eastern Paris is becoming environmentally friendly; how the restoration of the Promenade Plantée has also restored the neighborhoods beneath it; how what seems a potential cost can become both an asset and an originator of wealth for an entire section of the city, and how



Fig.3: Promenade Plantée

raising money and taking advantage of private funds can make such a project feasible. And the Promenade Plantée also shows how New Yorkers can use the Parisian experience to improve the design of their promenade.

Splendid vistas of Paris open immediately to anyone hiking today atop the Promenade Plantée, which since 1859 has crossed the entire 12th arrondissement from La Place de la Bastille to the Bois de Vincennes at the eastern edge of the city. Beginning in 1998, this old track bed was converted by the landscape architects Philippe Mathieu and Jacques Vergely into a high promenade, allowing a magic aerial walk into the city. Parisians taking a stroll along this grand promenade find they have stepped into a botanist's dream, filled with thousands of plants growing in communion with birds and butterflies. Parisians say that when you begin a walk along this high promenade, you first climb some steps that pull you away from the noise and traffic of the city. Then you begin the real adventure, by changing landscapes as you travel a high-flying path. Early on, you pass through a trellised arcade and later through a bamboo forest that undulates in the wind. All of a sudden, a balcony opens, revealing the heart of Paris. Continuing on the high promenade, once more you traverse yet another green paradise, which gives you a rest from the city. At one point you cut through a white contemporary building, splitting it in half. Then you see the mansard of a seventeenth-century building and around its corner, looking down, a boulevard that disappears far away. Thirty feet below you runs the always-busy Avenue Daumesnil. At another point you rise on to a bridge and then descend into a quiet, humid forest, as your journey continues. As was imagined by its creator, Philippe Mathieu, the Promenade Plantée is a way to contemplate the city or to forget about it. The designers of this landscape dramatized the happenings on this high promenade that shuts through Paris

like an arrow through a forest.

Paris easily could have demolished what it fortunately saved. The viaduct of the Promenade Plantée, built from heavy bricks in 1859, has been restored 140 years later with a minimalist architectural language. But before that restoration, like New Yorkers with their High Line, Parisians planned to demolish their viaduct. After closing the viaduct for 20 years, the Parisian Urban Department faced a dilemma similar to the one New York is facing now: Should they restore the high promenade, in order to redevelop the surrounded neighborhoods? Or should they demolish the decaying structure to enlarge the already jammed Avenue Daumesnil and to recover the space occupied by the viaduct?

Instead of demolishing the abandoned struc-



Fig.4: Old view of the Viaduct Daumesnil



Fig.5: Aerial view of the Viaduct Daumesnil

ture, Parisians have transformed their Promenade Plantée into a rich, 21st-century combination of shops and parkland. They landscaped the upper deck with plants, paths, pools of water and pergolas to create a surreal high promenade above, while placing commercial space within the vaults below. The designers accentuated the original form of the arcades by setting back the shop windows from the facades and by uniformly using wood, metal and glass. One great lesson embodied by Paris is that in order to make cities interesting, a city must save the best of its past, which



Fig.6: Sketch of the Promenade Plantée

can be enriched by modernization. A successful city, as Paris shows, is a mix of memory and invention: the old viaduct can be reinvented as a new promenade. The new and the old can comment on each other.

the 3rd and 9th Avenue lines that once graced Manhattan. In 1963 New York City even began the demolition of the High Line, one of the only elevated transportation structures remaining in the City.

application to demolish the remaining segment of the High Line. Four years later, and after many lawyer's battles, only the southernmost five blocks of the remaining High Line were demolished, leaving its present southern terminus at the Meat Packing District. Even after losing 19 blocks, however, the High Line still sweeps across 22 of the most remarkable blocks of lower Manhattan, ending at the site reserved for building a Stadium that New York hopes will hold the 2012 Olympic games.

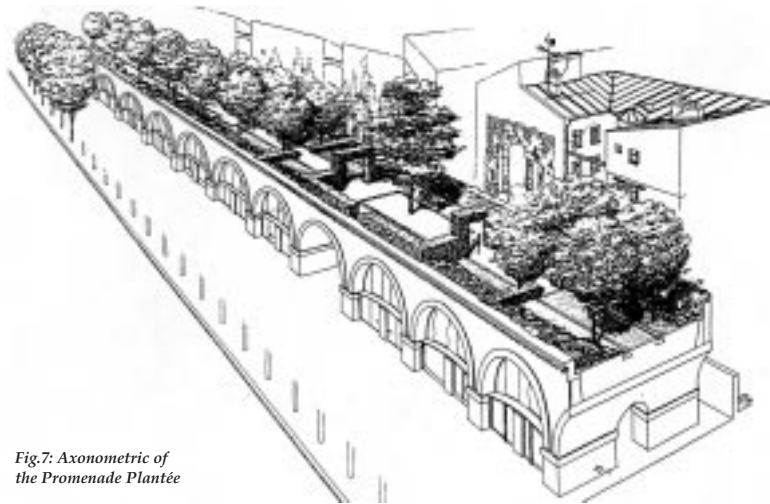


Fig.7: Axonometric of the Promenade Plantée

Like Paris, New York by the middle of the 20th century had a number of impressive elevated viaducts running above its streets. But unlike Paris, New York by the 1960s was tearing down its elevated rail lines, including

The south end of the line was demolished first, starting from Spring Street, in order to begin the redevelopment of 14 blocks along Hudson Street in the West Village. In 1987, a group of Chelsea property owners filed an

The idea that New York might save the one-and-a-half miles that remain of the High Line is posing an interesting challenge for urban planners, businesses and residents. But New Yorkers now, like Parisians in the 1970s, have not yet decided if the High Line offers a high-flying opportunity or a hulking obstacle.

No Parisian today who has taken a stroll along the botani-



Fig.8: Old view of the High Line



Fig.9: - End of demolition at Gansevoort Street

cal highlands of the Promenade Plantée will have doubts that transformation trumps demolition. But New York remains mostly blind to the French experience. People who see the High Line only as a decaying hulk offer a variety of plans for its future: leave it as it is; let it decay and tear it down; convert it into a highway; integrate it with the subway or transform it into a light rail or railroad again. But those New Yorkers who think the High Line might offer more than an obstacle to the city's development do not need to engage in guesswork about how the High Line would function as a high promenade, arching above the city. Those New Yorkers can find a vision for their High Line by wandering along the newly-completed Promenade Plantée, arching above the streets of Paris.

Transportation can become more environmentally friendly, as New Yorkers will find, thanks to a high promenade. Already, many Parisians are finding a transit opportunity by using the Promenade Plantée to commute in ways that feel both old and brand new. Commuting has become the high point of the day for those who use the promenade. Going to work or to the Opéra Bastille along this relaxing environment has changed their transportation routine. Far from the noise of the city, Parisians walk past a bamboo



Fig.10: Circulation at the Promenade Plantée



Fig.11: Circulation at the Promenade Plantée

forest in which children are playing and through fragrant trellises of roses. Nothing can really beat this relaxing trip to work. While saving a decrepit form of transportation, Parisians created the best of today's transportation and at the same time safeguarded the opportunity to develop future means of transportation.

Back in New York, the proposal to convert the



Fig.12: Walking above the High Line

High Line into a high promenade can also safeguard the city's opportunity to develop future means of transportation while providing a recreational amenity. In contrast with Paris, most of the future alternatives for the High Line create an imminent danger of losing the viaduct forever. Only its transformation into a high promenade -an aerial version of what Americans might call "greenway" or "linear park"- seems likely to save it.

Diana Balmori, a professor at the Architecture School of Yale University and a pioneer of linear parks, says that "greenways, in their function as recreational movement corridors between areas, join parts of the city and give maximum accessibility to all." These new parks develop the articulation of the different parts of the city, becoming as essential to the city as the circulatory system is to our body. She envisions the High Line moving New York's suit-clad people and joggers, with equal ease and pleasure, along an aerial garden as appreciated as the one that now brightens the mornings of Parisian commuters.

For Paris, the restoration of their viaduct has also restored the neighborhoods beneath it. The Promenade Plantée has become the unifying component of a major program that revitalized the east of Paris. The east, representing 45% of the area of the city, is well known as the poorest section of Paris. The Eiffel tower and the Champs-Élysées are of course part of the west. This high



Fig.13: Map of Paris

promenade unchained the development of the decaying eastern area by crossing it and making it accessible to the rest of the city. The Promenade Plantée also has attached the center of Paris with an outer beltway: La Petit Ceinture - the little belt- another abandoned rail line that rings the city. Parisians in the near future will be able to circle the entire city walking or biking, without meeting any car, starting at the Bastille.

In Paris, what at first seemed a potential cost became the economic catalyst for a decaying section of the city. According to the City Hall of Paris, the Promenade Plantée's 2.5-mile pedestrian walkway cost 25 million dollars. It was opened



Fig.14: Commercial space at Promenade Plantée



Fig.15: Commercial space at Promenade Plantée

to the public in 1998 and was finished in mid-2000. Since its creation the neighborhood has seen the addition of 75,000 square feet of new commercial space and more than 200,000 square feet of office space. Another key to the success of this linear park was that much of the length of the Promenade Plantée was soon surrounded with new housing. Beginning in 1990 and with unbelievable speed, 88 old buildings containing over

1,000 new residences were restored along the promenade. The remaining 25 vacant lots were quickly leased or put under contract for housing, commerce, schools and recreational activities. By the time the promenade was finished, people had brought new vibrancy to these neighborhoods. Due to the simple presence of the Promenade Plantée, housing rent increased by 10% in the area, reaching today between \$1 and \$1.3 per square foot. Paris, through the revenues of the shops underneath the high promenade, found a way to pay off the cost of maintaining the park.

Back in New York, maintaining the unused viaduct is now extremely expensive: the City pays over \$300,000 a year to maintain the High Line. Razing it might cost up to \$43 million dollars. Recently an organization called Friends of the



Fig.16: Map of the High Line

High Line carried out a reuse study with the help of the Trust For Public Spaces. The feasibility study looks at some of the economic benefits that the city may see in a 20-year-period once New York turns the viaduct into a high promenade. The cost of creating this open space is estimated at 60 million dollars. This cost includes two different stages: first the restoration of the existing structure and second the establishment of the park

itself. Experts predict that it would cost \$10 million annually just to maintain the structure of the High Line after it has been converted to a greenway. Questions are being raised about who will pay and how much use this elevated promenade will get. Paris has answered these questions.



Fig.17: View of Promenade Plantée



Fig.18: The bridge at the Promenade Plantée

To self-finance the High Line promenade, Friends of the High Line looked at similar spaces as Central Park and Battery Park City, which show how much economic value parks and open space convey to their surrounding neighborhoods. By looking at several other parks and other real estate studies across the country, in addition to interviewing local real estate agencies in the city, the Friends determined that a 4 % increase in the value of the surrounding properties would result solely from the presence of the High Line. By the Friend's calculation, the increase in property values and tax benefits derived from the High Line in

a 20 year period, will produce almost double the amount of money that was required to build it.

Raising money and taking advantage of private funds, a strategy that New Yorkers know well, is what made the Promenade Plantée feasible. According to Professor Balmori, Promenade Plantée offers a "perfect example" of how a city like New York can partner with the private sector in order to "recycle an existing structure into a neighborhood connector." Such recycling is the goal of Friends of the High Line, which was formed to defend the high promenade from the people that saw it only as a decaying hulk. Their vision was to convert it to open public space by bringing the High Line under the Federal Rail Banking Program. Since the Friend's creation, they have been involved in a continuous fight that seems to be reaching an end. Joshua David, co-founder of Friends of the High Line, explains that the Rail Banking Program started in 1983 as part of the National Trail System in Manhattan. It was designed specifically to preserve out-of-use rails that may have some potential value as future means for transportation and that could never be recreated in today's real estate markets.

Any discussion of financial possibilities leads to a crucial question: How can the high promenade be paid for? Although New York has imagined that the City must pay for the whole thing, Friends of the High Line have a different vision, because federal funding is available for this type of project. "We have identified probably 30 million dollars that can be targeted to this project," Joshua David said. "We are looking at this as a 10-year project in phases. So there is a lot of federal money that can be directed for this. And you will fund it as you go."

Perhaps those visionary New Yorkers that look to Paris should also consider the alternative that public-private partnership has to offer. If New York cannot obtain federal funds it may, as Paris did, find that private funding is available. To make a large-scale investment possible, in the early 1990s the city of Paris partnered with a private development company and began transforming the elevated bed of the viaduct into the promenade, dividing the process into seven phases in order to make it feasible. Such public-private partnerships are not new for New Yorkers: real estate in New York City has also been governed by this type of investment. Battery Park City, Bryant Park and the Redevelopment of 42nd Street are especially ambitious examples. A current example of such a situation is Ground Zero, and the High Line could follow suit.

New Yorkers, by learning from the Parisian experience, can improve their promenade in ways that Paris did not imagine. While walking recently along the Promenade Plantée, Professor Balmori said, "thinking in terms of the High Line, these days, one should be more environmentally responsible in its design, trying to make the most of the local planting that it already has." She pointed out that in comparison with the Promenade Plantée, the High Line is already planted. The stones and white gravel of the High Line are covered with exceptional vegetation, ranging from wild grasses to little shrubs, all spontaneously developed since the railroad was abandoned in 1960. This unique feature, which had been lost in the French promenade, could play a vital role in the future design of New York's High Line. Joshua David describes the High Line as a long concrete bathtub that is filled with gravel. With all of the plants that are spontaneously growing it looks like a rock garden.

Since New York does not now have a specific plan, New Yorkers cannot yet picture all the advantages this project will bring to their city. To illustrate some possibilities, Friends of the High Line are organizing a design competition that will culminate with a jury and public exhibition in the summer. This competition seems likely to cast away many doubts.

In the near future, New Yorkers may be able to reminisce about the day they first strolled on the High Line. They will recall this extraordinary experience and will tell their friends how wonderful it felt to climb for the first time onto this magic aerial promenade. They will tell you how coming from Battery Park City through the Hudson River Park -with the river on one side and traffic on the other, the High Line's aerial promenade changes how

you see New York. Gansevoort Street is the starting point of this adventure that needles past Chelsea art galleries. Leaving cars behind, they will say, you follow an inclined surface that lifts you from the Hudson Parkway and penetrates the city, to fly over its roofs. With a ninety-degree turn, one block away from the Parkway, you face uptown along a meandering grassland, with the Empire State Building rising in front of you. As in Paris, at one point you cut through a contemporary building. Here, protected by the shade of the building you stroll beside an outdoor restaurant somewhere above the Meat Packing District.



Fig.20: The High Line

Then you walk back into the glare of the New York sun. At another point you look down and the ever-hectic 14th Street seems still. Trucks and cabs hurtle all over the place, grey and noisy, but apparently far away. Later in this magic walk you



Fig.19: A cut through a contemporary building

sense a spray of mist while crossing a moss garden and then the smell of prairie flowers and the refreshment of flowing waters. This meandering path leads you past buildings that sometimes shade you from the sun and always delight your eyes. As you move uptown, you realize that your destination is the much hoped-for Olympic Stadium at 33rd Street. The high promenade you

see, can aptly transport the world's visitors above the great city of New York on their way to Olympian heights. Thirty feet below you struggles old New York, now more like new Paris than ever, and ever more a mix of memory and invention: remade and reinvented by its old-new High Line.

by
Javier Gonzalez Campaña

<i>High Line</i>
Length: 1.52 miles
Total area: 6.7 acres
Buildings travel through 2
City blocks crossed: 22
Total streets traversing: 25
Maximum width 88ft
Minimum width: 30ft
Height: 29ft above
Materials: steel frame, reinforced concrete deck, gravel ballast, metal handrails.
Design competition: December 2002

<i>Promenade Plantée</i>
Length: 2.81 miles
Total area: 16 acres
Buildings travel through 2
City blocks crossed: 20
Total streets traversing: 21
Maximum width 100ft
Minimum width 30ft
Height: 30ft above
Materials: brick structure with wood, metal and glass details.
Design competition: 1988

NOTES - Credits

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- 4- *Old view of the Viaduct Daumesnil* - © Mairie de Paris
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- 12- *Walking above the High Line* - Photo by Javier González-Campaña - Not for publication
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- 14- *Commercial space at Promenade Plantée* - Photo by Javier González-Campaña
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