

# Student Research Fellows

## From Promenade Plantée to the New York High Line

Javier González-Campaña



The High Line



Promenade Plantée

Promenade Plantée



Promenade Plantée's vistas



Map of the High Line © Friends of the High Line

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 five 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, 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.



Old view of the High Line © Friends of the High Line

Before the 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. 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 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.



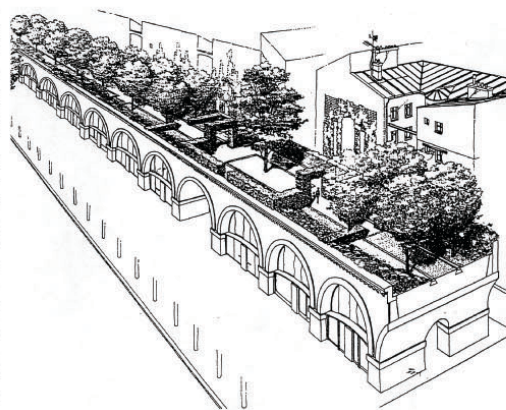
End of demolition at Gansevoort Street

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.



Sketch of the Promenade Plantée © Philippe Mathieu and Jacques Vergely

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 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.



Axonometric of the Promenade Plantée © Philippe Mathieu and Jacques Vergely

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. The 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.



Aerial view of the Viaduct Daumesnil © Mairie de Paris

Transportation can become more environmentally friendly thanks to a high promenade. 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. 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.

Map of Paris with the promenade



Circulation at the Promenade Plantée



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

Commercial space at P. Plantée

High Line
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
Design competition: 2003

Promenade Plantée
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
Design competition: 1988

Back in New York, maintaining the unused viaduct is now extremely expensive. Recently an organization called Friends of the High Line carried out a reuse study with the help of the Trust for Public Spaces. The cost of creating an open space is estimated at 60 million dollars. 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. 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. New Yorkers, by learning from the Parisian experience, can improve their promenade in ways that

Paris did not imagine. 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. 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.