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To Rally Discussion: The Chelsea High Line

Hugh Hardy, FAIA

New Yorkers are known for their aggressive and pragmatic view of the world, but their countervailing romantic outlook is seldom recognized. When a place, such as Times Square, reaches the apogee of commercialism, rather than acknowledge its raw commitment to pushing products, they romanticize its electric splendor and call it “the Crossroads of the World.” Although the commercial structures of downtown Manhattan have been built as a random jumble of towers and boxes that compete with one another for height and corporate identity, the public voices concern about new development’s “effect on the skyline.” They believe these existing buildings represent a sacred profile that defines the city, instead of representing the venal results of marketplace dominance.

It is in the city’s parks where New Yorkers’ pragmatic and romantic sides most obviously confront one another. A balance between recreation and contemplation is not easily achieved, and with the advent of private entities operating public city parks, the tussle between commercial and noncommercial uses of parkland becomes intense. Add to this struggle the desire to prove the urban environment can offer a progressive forum for solving environmental problems, and you get passionate public debate. Converting the Chelsea High Line for public use has been no less contentious, and resulted in a multiphased design-team selection process administered by Friends of the High Line and the City of New York.

This redefinition of what were once elevated freight-train tracks from a utilitarian right-of-way to a community amenity is taking place during a time of a great change on the West Side of Manhattan. After decades of inertia, developers are converting vacant lots and warehouses into new high-rise housing, and property adjoining the High Line itself is undergoing major transformation, with unpredictable results. All this requires a plan of considerable flexibility.

At ground level, the High Line’s 1.5 miles of elevated, linear structure pass overhead without attracting much notice, bridging streets with beefy steel frames. On top, however, an astonishing vista appears, as the former trackbed glides through the city independent of its street grid. A remarkable metamorphosis occurs here, as the traffic roar and the city’s noise abate. Built to sustain heavy loads, the structure has survived without maintenance since the 1930s and also now sprouts a healthy growth of weeds, which offer a tempting alternative to conventional ideas of parkland.

As set out in the High Line competition the challenge of converting this space involved a number of tasks: proposing a vision that could be realized incrementally; exercising

environmental awareness; offering access in all seasons of the year; and considering what happens underneath as well as on top. In their responses, the design proposals of the four finalists were quite different. One promoted nature over structure (TerraGRAM Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates with D.I.R.T. Studio and Beyer Blinder Belle). Another was more concerned with built form (Zaha Hadid). The two others (Steven Holl with Hargreaves Associates and HNTB, and Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro) better balanced the natural world with the physical structure to produce a sequence of places for varied activities. The latter team’s winning entry, in particular, represented a thorough series of alternative environments with multiple access points that could be realized in phases.

Stephen Holl Architects with Hargreaves Associates and HNTB

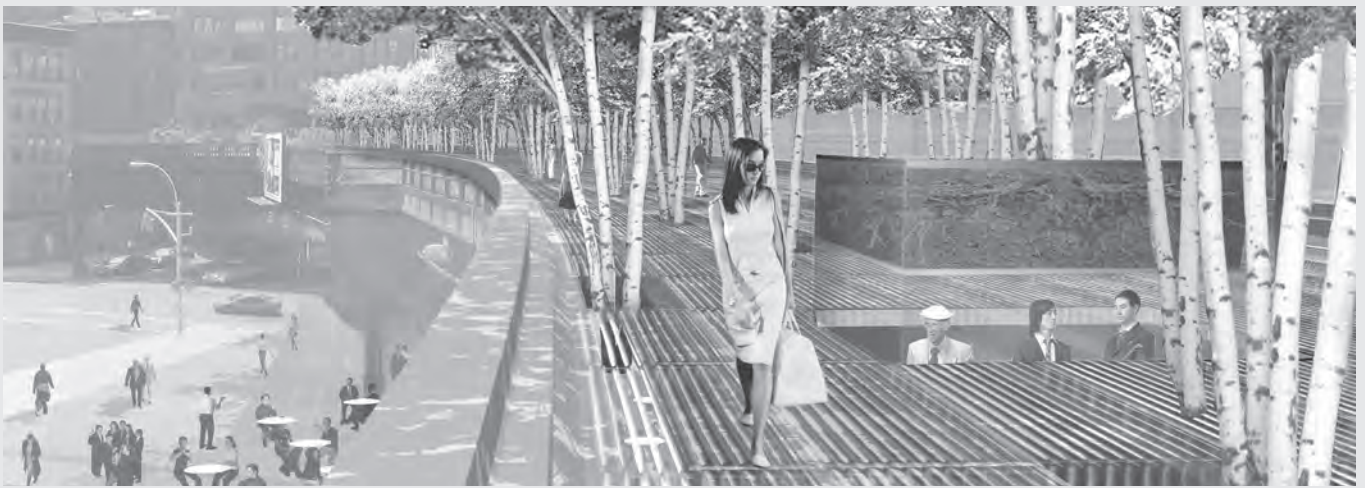
This design connected the High Line with the Hudson River, giving access from the water inland as well as leading from the new park to the river. It addressed the experience of being underneath the roadway by both opening up portions to the sky and illuminating others with LED programming. A series of incidental landscape events, some temporary, enlivened the length of the structure on top, using the existing roadway as a base. Contemporary artists were included, to respond to various community uses. This proposal enjoyed an ad hoc character, implying that the place will change over time, adapting to different activities — some not yet imagined. An ambitious groundwater treatment plant was also included to filter and recycle water for use in the park and the neighborhood.

TerraGRAM Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates with D.I.R.T. Studio and Beyer Blinder Belle

Taking a more matter-of-fact approach, this team was more concerned with giving the structure back to nature, encouraging the growth of forests, meadows, and grassland along the roadbed. Staircases and elevators would bring visitors up to the trackbed level, where nature would take over. Recommending techniques that apply to cleaning up “brown fields” instead of superimposing a new identity, this proposal worked directly with the existing nature of the place.

Zaha Hadid Architects

The existing structure was to be used as an armature for a totally new environment. A ribbon-like curvilinear structure made of an unknown material would wrap around the High Line’s steel bridges. It would create changes in spatial



volumes along the roadway, but remain a consistent, seamless whole. Experimental art organizations would be given places to explore their ideas, and the general nature of the result would unfold as something in direct contrast with the surrounding urban environment, making new public spaces for “the everyday life of local residents.” More a built intervention than a landscape solution, this proposal to a large extent ignored the natural world.

Field Operations with Diller Scofidio + Renfro

The winning design proposed a systems approach that layered various types of places with different natural environments to create a rich series of experiences. Perhaps offering the greatest variety of spaces, the proposal included a thoughtful combination of physical and natural components. Its physical elements included pit, plains, bridge, mound, ramp, and flyover, while the natural environments were marshland, tall meadow, wetland, woodland thicket, mixed perennial meadow, and young woodland. All these places and ecologies would be connected by an angled series of boardwalks along the length of the composition, offering a diversity of access points.

A lively panel discussion and presentation of the four schemes was held with the designers at the Center for

Architecture. It was a sold-out success, proving that New York benefits from the public’s interest in the design of communal places. Although the winning scheme will take time to realize, its flexibility permits phased implementation that will, over time, bring a novel amenity to public life in New York.

The chosen solution seems to strike a balance between recreation and contemplation, public and private, commercial and noncommercial, urban and environmental. The public’s newfound interest and participation in the city’s design is well served at the Center for Architecture, with a mini-exhibition that encapsulates New Yorkers’ penchant for both confrontation and romance.

Editors’ Note: *Places* first reported on the High Line in the Fall of 2001 (Vol. 14, No. 2), when we published a portfolio of photographs of this remarkable urban space by Joel Sternfeld. Since the above commentary on the design competition was written, the city has signed a contract with Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro to produce a master plan, and it has committed \$43 million in capital funding for the project.

Above: The winning High Line proposal imagines an elevated landscape interweaving places of activity with a variety of natural environments. Competition images courtesy of Friends of the High Line.