



MANITOBA HEAVY CONSTRUCTION ASSOCIATION (MHCA)  
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March 2, 2023

Presentation to: **SPC Public Works**  
Councillor Janice Lukes, Chair  
Councillor Markus Chambers  
Councillor Devi Sharma  
Councillor Russ Wyatt

From: Chris Lorenc, B.A., LL.B., President & CEO, MHCA

Subject: **2023 Preliminary Operating & Capital Budgets**

The MHCA is pleased to support the 2023 Balanced Budget Update.

We acknowledge and appreciate the difficult fiscal challenges you face.

The recent announcement from the Government of Manitoba to increase grants to municipalities, including a substantial increase to the City of Winnipeg, was welcome news but only a first step of a necessary new fiscal deal discussion.

It also reflects, we note, the constrained abilities of municipalities to meet service demands with the resources they now have at their disposal. I will speak more on that point later.

Also welcome is the proposed increase in Budget 2023 to the investment forecasts for the Local and Regional Street Renewal program, 2023-2026, including by \$19 million this year. We recognize this was made possible by the decision to increase taxes, including the frontage fee.

The MHCA supports measured tax adjustments to ensure the quality of services provided to Winnipeggers do not falter, especially given the absence of a better, fairer distribution of tax revenues between levels of government.

Foundationally, the MHCA's long-standing approach to budget structures is based on three pillars:

- That budgets focus on growing the economy to grow revenues, to address rising demands for services;
- That they be socially progressive, focusing on community well-being to better the lives of all; and
- That they be environmentally responsible and advance resource stewardship.

Growing the economy is Job #1 of all levels of government. Without economic growth the revenues necessary to support and augment all services – core, cultural, social – simply will not be sustained.

The MHCA encourages all governments to view all expenditures through the lens of investment – leverage municipal budgets to grow the economy, to generate increased revenues in return.

Investment in infrastructure – in particular, core and trade-enabling infrastructure – is an investment in community well-being because of its immediate and long-term return to GDP. Our infrastructure moves people to jobs and goods to market; it protects our communities from the increasingly frequent extreme weather events that come with climate change.

We applaud two important, supportive investment measures set out in Budget 2023:

1. Funding the design study of projects central to expanding Winnipeg's transportation system: extending Chief Peguis Trail; and, widening Kenaston Boulevard – both, key corridors in the trade network.
2. Confirmation of servicing CentrePort Canada South with water and waste-water infrastructure. CentrePort Canada North has spun off more than \$1 billion in private investment, benefiting all levels of government, including the RM of Rosser. The same, if not more, can be expected by the development of the CentrePort South footprint, a potential that will be unlocked with serviced land.

Before I move on, I want to applaud the decision to review the future of the Arlington Street bridge. The bridge has a long history, as we know, in lives of North Enders and connecting our neighborhoods. While it has outlived its capacity for heavy vehicles, the Arlington Street bridge can continue to serve our neighborhoods and celebrate our history.

Reimagining the use of the bridge can unlock innovative ideas that serve the broader goal of community well-being. Other major cities have cleverly repurposed decommissioned transportation assets; let's reimagine what this iconic bridge can become.

The cost of replacement, \$320 million at the low end, may be better invested in other transportation routes, assets and cultural amenities in the city's northwest coupled with re-imagining /re-purposing the existing structure to something new and attractive.

I specifically draw to your attention the New York High Line. The line is a 1.45-mile-long elevated linear park, greenway and rail trail created on a former New York Central Railroad spur on the west side of Manhattan in New York City.

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/the-high-line>  
[ps://www.thehighline.org/](https://www.thehighline.org/)

I have attached to my presentation an article about the New York High Line and encourage the Committee and Council to in the proposed review, broaden its scope to consider a re-purposing of the Arlington Street Bridge based in part on the New York experience.

So, imagine this storyline -- emerging from a community-based urban planning engagement --for our Arlington Street Bridge.

*"Arlington Street Bridge Highline Opened"*

*The Arlington Street Bridge Highline was opened today by Mayor Scott Gillingham and Winnipeg City Council, celebrating the conversion of a bridge thought to have outlived its life.*

*For more than 100 years the Arlington Street Bridge has held prominent pride of place in in Winnipeg's skyline. Officially opened on **February 5, 1912**, the overpass served to span the CP Rail Yards to connect two important neighborhoods.*

*Now closed to vehicles, the Arlington Street Bridge High Line ("The Arlington High Line'), welcomes pedestrians, community clubs, cyclists, and all regardless of mobility restrictions to enjoy a beautifully landscaped, heritage structure, with views augmented by audio-visual resources.*

You know I can continue – *but I hope you envision my point*. I invite this discussion – of what the Arlington Street Bridge can and should become. That is the kind of conversation our community should now be engaged to join.

That could become a reality if we enable an imagined review of the bridge, in conjunction with rethinking how to facilitate north/south and east/west traffic.

And now to speak directly to the Local & Regional Street Renewal Program, 2023-2028.

As noted earlier, the decision to increase investment, against earlier forecasts, in local and regional street renewals is welcome and wise. Forecasted program budgets (Budget 2022) showed dramatic reductions, largely due to the completion of the tri-governmental agreement to accelerate renewal of regional roads.

We note, however, that the forecasted budgets for our regional street network will fall after 2023 successively out to 2028. That was never contemplated in the original plan and policy for regional streets when its dedicated annual tax was implemented in 2014. It was recognized then, as it should now, that budgets must increase incrementally to maintain (and construct new) regional roads to support a growing economy and population.

We urge your committee and Council to attend to this pressing issue. In service of that, press Manitoba and Canada for a successor agreement to continue the work to renew our regional roads.

The MHCA also once again urges Council to address the needs of our bridges and overpasses – and for our active transportation system – through a financial strategy dedicated to each of those programs. The 2% dedicated tax implemented for street renewal was not designed and cannot support all things – we implore Councilors to resist the temptation to diverting these revenues to other priorities.

Again, each is deserving of its own financing strategy.

2023 marks the last year “update” to Winnipeg’s first four-year budget plan. Council must be congratulated on the foresight in adopting a multi-year budget approach; it has served Winnipeg well, as evidenced by the fiscal challenges arising from the economic turmoil of the 2020 pandemic.

It is a good time, as City Council begins the process of setting out a new, multi-year budget plan, to take a holistic view of Winnipeg’s current and future needs from its critical transportation infrastructure, to craft and adopt a financial plan and strategy to deliver.

This is an opportunity for Winnipeg to set out a Strategic Transportation Infrastructure Plan, a plan that sets economic growth and community well-being as its core goals.

The MHCA urges you to anchor all considerations as you enter these discussions in the Job #1 of government, which is to grow the economy. This is why Winnipeg now has a Manager of Economic Development, a position we urge be elevated in profile to the equivalent of, or reporting to, the CAO.

A growing economy enables you, as civic leaders, to provide a growing population with reliable core services, world-class cultural amenities and, importantly, the betterment of public health and safety for all citizens.

It is clear the City of Winnipeg, as with all municipalities, cannot meet the increasing demands on its services without a better way to share in the fair, proportionate distribution of wealth generated by its citizens.

MHCA underscores, again, the need to press higher levels of government to negotiate a new fiscal deal with municipalities, to serve as a platform for to generate additional and new revenues, to strengthen existing and provide new services necessary to keep our growing cities and towns competitive nationally and globally.

To conclude, the MHCA recommends:

- **Focus on growing the economy:**

We recommend the manager of Economic Development be elevated to a level equivalent, or reporting, to the CAO and that EPC be tasked to develop economic growth strategies.

- **Transportation Master Plan**  
Ensure that the final plan embraces the reality and connection, between investment in transportation and economic growth; its connection to grow the assessment base and expanded revenues to Winnipeg with which to fund its service priorities.
- **Press for successor funding agreements with senior levels of government:**  
Press the provincial government to enter into a 'new fiscal deal' with municipalities; press Ottawa and Manitoba to negotiate a successor plan to the accelerated regional road program.
- **Develop a detailed strategic transportation infrastructure plan:**  
Task a stakeholder group resourced by the Office of Economic Development & Growth, to recommend a detailed Strategic Transportation Infrastructure Plan addressing targeted, strategic goals, including mode shift, induced demand and inverted mobility considerations.
- **Update full transportation system condition, needs and sustainable funding model:**  
Public Works should be asked to provide an updated assessment of the condition and needs of local and regional streets, AT and dedicated bus lanes, and bridges and structures. The updated Local and Regional Streets & AT Renewal Program must continue to see dedicated revenues. Bridges/structures renewal requires its own dedicated revenues and investment strategy.

As always, we appreciate, respect, and thank you for your service to the public through elected office.

We are always willing to work collaboratively to advance good governance policies.

Respectfully submitted,



Chris Lorenc, B.A., LL.B.,  
President & CEO, MHCA

cc. Mayor and All Members of Council  
MHCA Board of Directors

## Above Grade: On the High Line

*A native New Yorker traces the pre-history of the elevated park.*

PHILLIP LOPATE

NOVEMBER 2011

[HTTPS://PLACESJOURNAL.ORG/ARTICLE/ABOVE-GRADE-ON-THE-HIGH-LINE/?GCLID=EAIAIQOBCHMI-63H76Q9\\_QIVZHPUAR1IYAROEAAAYASAAEGINEPD\\_BWE&CN-RELOADED=1](https://placesjournal.org/article/above-grade-on-the-high-line/?gclid=EAIAIQOBCHMI-63H76Q9_QIVZHPUAR1IYAROEAAAYASAAEGINEPD_BWE&CN-RELOADED=1)



*Radial Bench, High Line Park, between west 28th and 29th streets. [Photo © Iwan Baan, 2011]*

**WHEN** in June 2009, the High Line Park opened to the public, it was declared an almost unqualified success. Some architecture critics nit-picked the design, but basically they endorsed it, and ordinary folk (I include myself in that category), less

fastidious, greeted it with enthusiasm. Crowds lined up for hours to have the elevated promenade experience, it became a (free) hot-ticket item in New York City, which typically over-embraces a novelty for six months, then ignores it. Especially in hot weather, the challenge soon became to grab one of the reclining benches on the sundeck and tan yourself for hours, while envious masses stumbled by. The crowded, restless carnival-grounds movement of the park-goers above-ground rhymed the pedestrian conveyer-belt effect of the gridded streets below: Manhattan is a place where loitering in one place is done at your peril. Paris has boulevard cafes for cooling one's heels, Rome comes to a rest at fountains and piazzas, but in Manhattan you keep moving forward. Well and good: I approve.

The High Line kicks off at Gansevoort Street, in the meat-packing district of Greenwich Village, and continues northward to Chelsea. A second phase, from West 21st Street to West 30th Street, recently opened in time for the summer of 2011. The crowds continue to come, and the trees in the initially opened sections have already grown to an impressive, even alarming height, so that at times one has the impression of filing into a forest. The glory of the High Line as presently reconstituted lies in its variety of spatial and recreational situations: narrow and wide paths, decked and open-air routes, limited and broad views of the city, beach-like lolling areas, conceptual artworks. The northernmost, recently opened section offers a charming green lawn, a thrillingly sharp curve and a vast, magical cityscape facing northward, over the sunken 30th Street West Side Rail Yards. A final spur, from West 31st to West 34th Street is still in negotiation, depending on the future dispensation of the West Side Rail Yards. (These are the very same rail yards once inadvisably proposed for a Jets football stadium, a proposal blessedly defeated, though there are still plans afoot for a massive skyscraper complex to arise on platforms which would be built over the yards; should the recession ever end and this development come to pass, goodbye magnificent northern vista.) If at this stage the High Line seems a bridge to nowhere, petering out anti-climactically at around West 30th Street, much enjoyment or distraction is available along the way: people-watching, ambitious if palette-restrained garden plantings, the varied seating arrangements and viewing platforms, a delightful amphitheater with wooden benches that faces a pane of glass framing the traffic below.

The fact that this new amenity sprang from older industrial infrastructure says a lot about the current moment in New York's evolution. A city that had once pioneered so many technological and urban planning solutions, that had dazzled the world with its public works, its skyscrapers, bridges, subways, water-delivery system, its Central Park, palatial train stations, libraries and museums, appears unable to undertake any innovative construction on a grand scale, and is now consigned to cannibalizing its past and retrofitting it to function as an image, a consumable spectacle. Productivity has given way to narcissism; or, to put it more charitably, work has yielded to leisure.

My first encounter with the High Line occurred before its present reconstruction. On a frigid winter day, a few years back back, I found myself walking in air, as it were, through and yet above the familiar streets of Manhattan's West Side. I was only at second-story eye level, and yet that modest extra altitude (18-30 feet high) made for a profoundly different peripatetic perspective: as in a dream where suddenly you can walk through walls, I was passing in and out of manufacturing buildings, staring into the backyards of private residences, saluting the Gothic Revival red brick fortress of the General Theological Seminary, and hovering within sight of the waterfront like a seagull. That the route felt this magically exhilarating to a first-timer, on a day of such inhospitable weather, convinced me the High Line would make a wonderful urban prospect in any and every season.



*Looking East on 30th Street on a Morning in May, 2000. [Photo © Joel Sternfeld, 2000]*

What remains of the High Line is a 1.45-mile elevated rail structure that was built in the 1930s to move rail freight parallel to, and about a block east of, the docks along the western spine of Manhattan Island. A mere 30 years later it was deemed obsolete, due to the trucking industry's domination over rail freight and the removal of the Port of New York to nearby New Jersey. It stood for several decades as a characteristic piece of abandoned industrial infrastructure, such as has increasingly come to litter the American urban landscape. Both as a discarded engineering marvel and a defunct railroad line that could metamorphose into a

"rail trail," it offered a highly visible, symbolic opportunity for historic preservation through adaptive reuse.

Being a native New Yorker, skeptical by birth and by a lifetime's exposure to jive planning schemes, I was frankly not expecting to be enthralled by the experience of walking the High Line. I'd passed the raised, rusty brown metalwork railings for years without their registering sharply on my consciousness. (It doesn't look like much from the street; then again, you only see it at the cross-walks). But ever since the notion of turning the viaduct into an elevated park first appeared in the media, I'd been dying to take a look. [Joel Sternfeld's evocative photographs](#) in *The New Yorker* of the High Line as a sort of junkyard meadow further whetted my appetite. Still, I knew I would have to call in several favors for permission to see it; and the prospect of thus abasing myself deterred me, until the magazine *Preservation* requested I write about it, providing the perfect excuse for entry.

CSX, the railroad company that at that point still owned the High Line (inheriting it, along with other properties, from a bankrupt Conrail), assigned me a guide, Laurie, for my meander. Laurie swore me to secrecy about our method of gaining access to the overhead railroad line (I will say that it involved climbing from the back-window of a Chelsea building onto the tracks). Until the property could be transferred over to the city government and turned into safe public space, CSX had no desire to let curiosity-seekers wander there, not only because it *was* private property but because broken glass and potholes bestrewed the terrain, inviting twisted ankles and insurance suits.

We walked along the tracks, which were covered with a high meadow of weeds and wildflowers, planted willy-nilly by wind-borne seeds. It was certainly mythic, this vision of Nature surging back to reclaim the postindustrial

landscape. There was also something “retro-futurist” about the High Line, reminiscent of Hugh Ferriss’s fantastic, [1929 Metropolis of Tomorrow drawings](#), where New York was envisioned as giddily multi-leveled, with elevated roads and walkways threading the skyscrapers.



*Bell Laboratories, now Westbeth Artists housing, corner of Bethune and Washington streets, 1934. [Photographer unknown]*

One unique aspect of the High Line is that it was built in the middle of the block. At the time it went up, the public was already turning against elevated structures, such as “El” trains, on the grounds that their shadows gloomed the adjoining streets. It was therefore sensibly proposed that the project be erected mid-block and run through buildings of such massive industrial nature as could absorb a rail line in their midst and profit from its freight deliveries. Though the viaduct did pass by smaller residential structures, these were mostly tenements and sailors’ boarding houses; the line could never have been permitted to barrel through or by well-off apartment houses. In any event, walking the High Line that first time, I found myself looking usually at the backs of commercial buildings, a more furtive, piquant sight than offered by their street facades. Whereas the fronts of these buildings boast whatever decorative pretensions they might possess, their posteriors are barer, balder, with rear entrances, backyards, fire escapes, chimneys, parti-walls patched with tar. The effect is like spying on their private, unguarded existence.

The High Line’s metal railings facing the cross-streets sport handsome Art Deco details; but in an economy move, the railings not visible from the street below were constructed of blunt metal pipes. Another curiosity is that the outer railings could be manufactured only in straight angles, so that where the train rails curved, a triangular addition had to be inserted outward for the railings to meet. These jutting nooks, which were filled with muddy stagnant water when I encountered them on my first visit, were sure to make admirable lookouts when drained and weatherproofed.

There is a breathtakingly dramatic, unobstructed view around 23rd Street, gazing west at the Chelsea Piers and the Hudson River, where the High Line suddenly widens from 30 to 60 feet. You can also see Hudson River Park, the newish bicycle/pedestrian corridor snaking its way along the river’s edge. Running parallel to each other, a city block apart, the High Line and Hudson River Park seem almost to be siblings in their efforts to open the waterfront to the public. If I prefer the former, it is partly because Hudson River Park can never escape its proximity to the jangling traffic of Route 9A — a rebuilt West Side Highway in the guise of a boulevard — whereas the High Line, raised above the street, is separated from motor vehicles, and gives us an eerier, slower, quieter experience of the city. We feel lordly, seeing the metropolis we do every day, but from a more protected and contemplative viewpoint. In that respect, the High Line functions like [The Gates](#), Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s intervention in Central Park, whose chief virtue was that it redirected our attention to the lineaments of Olmsted and Vaux’s masterpiece, or Olafur Eliasson’s [temporary waterfall](#) plunging off the Brooklyn Bridge. Maybe we have grown so jaded to the modern city’s beauty that we will increasingly need such reframing aids to rekindle our admiration and awe.

The High Line was originally built to transport all manner of freight, but particularly New York’s daily supplies of butter, milk, eggs, cheese, dressed poultry and meat (conveniently, it passed through the Gansevoort meat market). Before it was constructed, the New York Central Railroad had operated a rail freight line at grade, or street level, along Tenth Avenue, and men on horseback (“West Side cowboys”) had ridden ahead of the train with red flags or lanterns to warn pedestrians of its coming; yet even with this picturesque alarm system, so many careless, inebriated or simply unlucky citizens had gotten run over that the street acquired the notorious name “Death Avenue.” For

over 70 years, since the mid-19th century, public outcry had agitated against this danger to life and limb, demanding a safer solution: thus, the High Line.



*View north from West 17th Street, 1934. [Photographer unknown]*

The removal of tracks from the city streets was a link in a much more ambitious master plan, the original West Side Improvement, overseen by Robert Moses. The New York Central freight line had run at grade through Riverside Park as well, and Moses, then Parks Commissioner, saw an opportunity to conceal the lines by building a platform over them, meanwhile greatly widening the park. The freight would then proceed south underground to the 30th Street–West Side Rail Yards, after which they would ascend, via the High Line, all the way down to the then-newly constructed St. John’s Park Terminal, a huge 12-story building that covered four city blocks, bounded by West, Washington, Spring and Clarkson Streets, at the border of Greenwich Village and Soho. There the High Line would debouch into the terminal’s vast second floor and the freight would be sorted for its final destinations.

A *New York Times* reporter [waxed enthusiastic](#) at the opening of the High Line on June 3, 1934: “High in the air, it cuts through city blocks. It passes into big buildings in its path and emerges on the other side to continue on its way, leaping any cross streets it meets. Along its new aerial course large new buildings have already been erected, and others are under construction for packing companies and similar concerns.”

The vision was for a whole manufacturing and refrigerated warehouse district to spring up, spurred by proximity to the waterfront’s port cargo. The president of New York Central, F.E. Williamson, predicted at a dedication ceremony for the West Side Viaduct: “With the completion of the West Side Improvement, of which this viaduct is one of the more important features, West Side manufacturers, distributors and merchants in general will have transportation facilities unsurpassed anywhere. I think it is a safe prediction to say that in time this viaduct and other portions of the route will be covered with air-right buildings whose tenants can bring in their raw materials and ship out their finished products swiftly, safely and efficiently over rails at their very doors. This simple event today may well mark a transformation of the West Side that will affect its development for the better for decades to come.”

Some of that transformation did occur: the National Biscuit Company, the Morgan Parcel Post building, the Merchants Refrigerating Company and other factories and packing houses congregated around and benefited from the line. The pre-existing Bell Telephone Laboratories provided a particular engineering challenge: special design precautions had to be taken, including laying new foundations, to insulate the laboratory’s delicate equipment from

excessive noise and vibrations during the railroad line’s construction and subsequent operation, straight through the building itself.



*Elevated tracks, West Side Rail Yards, 1953. [By James Shaughnessy]*

The double-line viaduct, built of steel with concrete floor construction, was strong enough to support two fully loaded freight trains—over-built, in fact, the thought being that trains would keep getting bigger and heavier, which didn’t happen. What did happen was that trucks and airplanes cut so significantly into the rail freight business that by the 1960s the railroad line was operating deeply in the red. The southern part of the structure, which ran from Greenwich Village’s Gansevoort Street to



St. John's Terminal at Houston Street (some fifteen city blocks away), was dismantled. A great shame and missed opportunity, in retrospect, though it seemed to bother no one at the time. The last freight delivery on the remaining northern part of the line took place in 1980. There that northern section sat, awaiting the wrecking ball, its complete demise deferred only by the interminable litigation that accompanies any property matter in New York City.

Then, in 1999, the [Friends of the High Line](#), started by Joshua David and Robert Hammond, campaigned for the structure to be turned into an elevated public promenade. This idea, at first improbably romantic, began to gain momentum, thanks to its organizers' political acumen and ability to attract A-list supporters, but also to the lack of valid reasons why it shouldn't be done. The structure was sound; it would require a sophisticated new design for pedestrian access and repaving, but not that much overhauling. With a newly-elected mayor, Michael Bloomberg, enthusiastically behind it (New York's previous mayor, Rudy Giuliani, had been all for tearing it down), and the High Line's owner, CSX, amenable to turning over the facility to public use, it only awaited approval by a Washington railroad oversight bureau (and the settling of a legal challenge by one recalcitrant property-owner) to become a reality.

Key to advancing the promenade idea was the Federal rail-banking legislation, which had been drawn up to protect defunct railroad lines from seizure by adjoining property owners, through putting them in a "rail bank." This provision ensured that even if the rails were physically removed, the route itself would not be lost as a national resource, and could be returned to rail use at some later date for national security or other reasons. In the meantime, some routes could be converted into "rail trails," allowing walkers to promenade picturesquely past rivers or suburban neighborhoods. Obviously, when the abandoned rail line ran through a busy city neighborhood, the permit process would become much more complex and the perambulation a different experience.



*Secret garden, irrigated with a hose from a nearby apartment, 2005. [By [Charles Star](#)]*

As it happened, there already existed an extraordinarily successful model for the conversion of an abandoned railroad into an elevated urban walk: the [Promenade Plantée](#) in Paris. I visited that facility one summer, when it was so lushly abloom it looked like a levitating botanical garden. My first thought was, the French really know how to pull off this sort of show; we could never manage to do it so elegantly in New York. The Parisian promenade is also much wider than the one in Manhattan, and the total walking distance is longer, so its landscaping opportunities are consequently more lavish. Added to which, their original line was built for passenger service, not freight, and

the adjoining 12th arrondissement is a residential Paris neighborhood rather than a manufacturing zone, which makes for a cozier surround of private flats, skylights, mansards and art nouveau apartment houses. Finally, the Paris viaduct is a freestanding edifice, built on top of large vaulted spaces, which have been converted into fancy boutiques that sell furniture, computers, or wine, and which draw shoppers to the elevated park. There is no way the underside of New York's High Line could ever be turned over to similar retail uses, particularly since much of it already passes through buildings and is not even visible from the street. In short, the High Line could never be anything as *grand* as its Parisian counterpart. But it could be more peculiar, fugitively spying on the workaday, like a coal tram passing into and out of mountain seams.

The High Line passes through West Chelsea, a "neighborhood in transition" — usually the euphemism for blight but, in this case, the opposite. What began as a ragtag assemblage of warehouses, factory buildings and four-story

tenements has been transformed, in the last decade, through Manhattan real estate mania, into a high-end art district: the large floors of unbroken space, formerly given over to industry, have proven perfect for chic austere galleries displaying large sculpture or multimedia installations. Meanwhile, restaurants, watering holes, Japanese tearooms and ancillary cultural offices have taken root near the galleries. The new Chelsea, which has supplanted Soho as New York's premiere art district, flaunts a spacious interior aesthetic that makes the most of its industrial origins (exposed timbers, tin ceilings, concrete columns), embracing plain, functional warehouse architecture as the new purity. In a densely crammed city where space envy trumps all other deadly sins, several thousand unobstructed square feet in a Chelsea art gallery translates visually into the quintessence of good taste.

Looking east from the High Line, along Tenth Avenue, you also see an atypical (for Manhattan) number of parking lots, taxi garages, gas stations. They bring their own raffish film noir atmosphere to the area. But these under-used lots also read ominously, to the New Yorker's trained, nervous eye, as markers held in place for future speculative high-rise development. Here we face a paradox: the Friends of the High Line have defended the expense of constructing and maintaining a free elevated promenade by saying that there is no need for this public space to pay for itself; its costs will be more than offset by the increased real estate values of properties abutting the new amenity. True enough: but raised real estate taxes will only spur owners of the land to compensate by developing their own properties. The many unobstructed views the High Line presently offers, thanks to the generally low height of buildings and parking lots alongside its route, could dramatically change, should a wall of luxury high-rise spring up on either or both sides. This is already starting to happen.

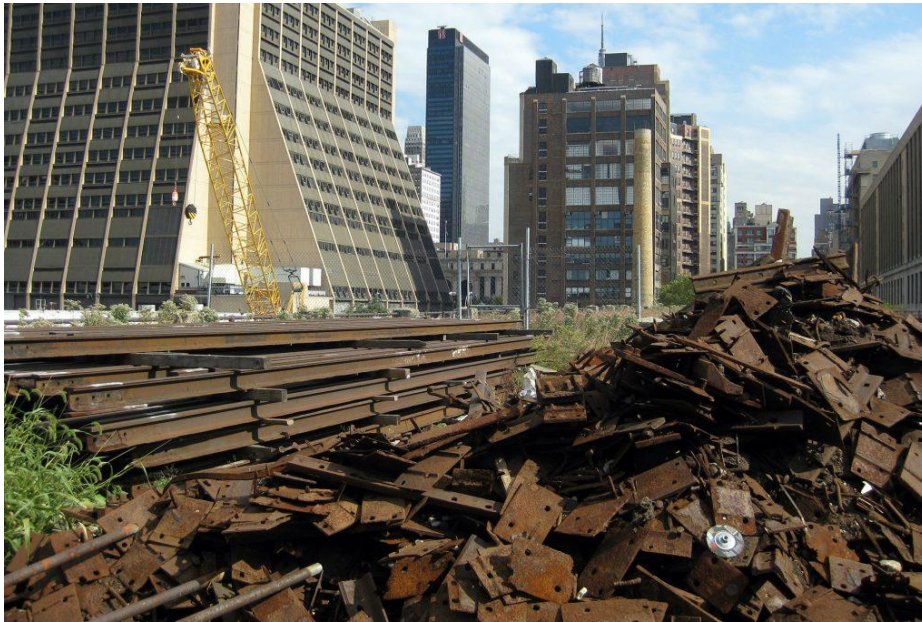


*26th Street Viewing Spur. [Photo © Barry Munger, 2011]*

Much of the High Line's present magic stems from its passing through an historic industrial cityscape roughly the same age as the viaduct, supplemented by private tenement backyards and the poetic grunge of taxi garages. It would make a huge difference if High Line walkers were to feel trapped in a canyon of spanking new high-rise condos, providing antlike visual entertainment for one's financial betters lolling on balconies. The High Line exemplifies a preservation conundrum: how do you protect not only the older structure itself, through intelligent adaptive re-use, but also retain the flavor of its original surrounding context? A certain amount of luxury high-rise will inevitably occur along this route: the question is how much. Only strict zoning regulations might prevent a forest of new apartment buildings from flanking the High Line, but the city seems to be encouraging more, rather than less, high-rise residential development in the Far West Side. We can only pray that the current recession, which has temporarily brought a halt to some of the new construction, will last as long as possible.

While wringing our hands, we should also remember that when the High Line was built, one of its initial purposes was to spur "air rights" development over the site. Living cities change and grow; they cannot remain picturesquely frozen in time. Whatever happens, the High Line will still afford spectacular unobstructed views eastward, at street corners, and westward, at a good many spots, to the river.

It seems another paradox that fragments of the industrial past can be preserved only if they are willing to relinquish their uses. In this post-industrial phase, cities are undergoing a complex reevaluation. Factory buildings, once regarded as soul-destroying blights on neighborhoods, “dark, satanic mills,” have come to be cherished as honest, noble architecture, and then converted into festival marketplaces. The infrastructure of viaducts, overpasses, and elevated highways has evolved, in a hundred years, from engineering marvel to hideous eyesore to charming troglodyte erector set. The industrial archaeology movement, which began in Europe, has done much to enlighten city-dwellers about the historic and aesthetic values of these remnants. Other, more pragmatic motives are at work, of course: space-hungry metropolises, looking to turn over their last available undeveloped land to a mix of recreation, office, housing and retail, find such parcels mainly in their emptied-out manufacturing zones. So brownfields are tamed, power plants converted to museums, and chimneystacks treated like venerable memento mori, as castle ruins were regarded in the Romantic period.



*Dismantled tracks, 2008. [By [Wally Gobetz](#)]*

I’ve sometimes thought the best, most radical use of the High Line would have been to restore it to its original function. New York, alone among major American cities, has no freight rail delivery system, making it overly dependent on trucks, which pollute the environment and raise local asthma rates alarmingly. A rail freight tunnel under New York Harbor has been sensibly proposed, and never built, for close to a

century. So the High Line was hardly redundant. CSX, shortly after it took over the line, did a study to see if it made financial sense to employ the elevated structure again for moving freight, and decided in the negative. Here we may pause to ask whether a wise national policy might have yielded another outcome: Since the triumph of the airline and automotive industries over shipping and rail freight did not come about merely through impersonal “laws of the marketplace,” but was aided by countless governmental subsidies, direct and indirect, could we not have developed a more sanely balanced transportation policy? And should we not fight for one still? Pragmatically speaking, it was probably too late to return the High Line ever to rail freight service — it would have cost too much to rebuild the southern, dismantled section, and the present upscale Chelsea community would never stand for a noisy reactivated railroad line in its midst — so we may as well just guiltlessly enjoy the new promenade.

Anyone who had the good fortune, as I did, to walk the High Line in its “natural” state cannot help wishing that more of its self-seeded, primeval meadow look had been retained. But to make it safe for the public to walk on, the entire surface — uneven, potholed concrete, gravel, debris, rails, soil, and meadow — had to be stripped, and the lead paint removed: there was no getting around that fact. A competition was held for the redesign of the High Line, and the winning design team, [James Corner Field Operations](#) and [Diller Scofidio + Renfro](#), devised clever, cutting-edge solutions for retaining some of the unruly charm of the city-pasture wilderness into which it had fortuitously evolved. The new surface consists of planking composed of precast concrete, which meanders in a winding path along the High Line’s length. The planks (sometimes diverging into two smaller paths, sometimes rising up or dipping down) taper and blend into the plantings, and vice versa, so that the effect is of grass coming up through cracks in the pavement. The planned mix of native grasses, flowering meadow and woodland thicket suggests a conscious effort

to retain some of the scruffy, weed-like feeling, with emphasis on wildflowers and self-sustaining, low-maintenance plants that can coexist together. Of course the landscaping is still in its earliest stages, and we won't get the full effect for at least another 20 years. The plantings will vary seasonally, attuned to patterns of visual interest, much as with the city's green roof gardens, and with the same sort of soil and drainage considerations, or headaches.



*Gansevoort End, Plaza and Stairs. [Photo by Iwan Baan © 2009]*

The aesthetic effect of the High Line as a whole may be more busily contrived than beautiful, more self-consciously theoretical than inevitable, in a way that sums up the dilemma of making new public spaces or monuments during a period when late-modernist minimalism and fussy post-modernism have fought to a standstill. Still, the resulting design is as good

at these things get nowadays. So I am happy with it — as I would be with any new public space that worked, in this era of relentless privatization.

Since the promenade needed to be made easy to get up to and off of, access has been provided in the form of regularly placed stairways, and a few elevator/stairway combinations. Some of the entrances are designed to deliver the public from the street to mid-promenade in a rather gradual manner, through stairs and ramps which offer a chance to inspect the undersides of the elevated structure, its steel girders and hand-hammered rivets, and appreciate its engineering sophistication, while preparing visitors for the amble above ground.

In its proposal, the design team promised to “refer to” the freight rail line by reinstalling a few rail fragments, which they have done, as well as letting the planking system “evoke” the rails themselves. (“Refer to” and “evoke” are architectural jargon that usually mean the eradication of history, followed by reinsertion of obscure design metaphors meant to be read as palimpsests.)

It would be a tall order indeed to get tourists or, for that matter, native New Yorkers to perceive the High Line's historical place as an essential link in the ambitious West Side Improvement, that is, in a massively integrated regional transportation system that included the then-ubiquitous piers, the Holland and Hudson Tunnels, the George Washington Bridge, the lighter system that floated railroad cars on barges from New Jersey rail terminals across the Hudson River, where they were brought into the Starrett-Lehigh Building's enormous elevators, loaded onto trains of the High Line, and sent a few miles south to St. John's Park Terminal. Nor, even with the best efforts to illustrate this past through design cues or interpretative signage, would it be easy to convey what a daring engineering feat once was necessary to hack through existing buildings without unsettling them.



*West Side Cowboy, 1934. [Photographer unknown]*

So let us not exaggerate the educational effectiveness of High Line Park as a history lesson. Some strollers may experience it more as a dinky curiosity than an archival thrill, a sort of tame, horizontal roller coaster that has ground to a halt.

Still, what matters is that a piece of the freight rail line has been rescued from extinction, and that the city will have gained a well-used, effective public space, which offers an escape from the street at the same time as an intriguingly fresh angle on it.

If this mysterious structure vexes the visitor with unanswered questions, that is all to the good. May it also stir the imaginations of future urbanists and send them back to the library to understand what such an improbably elevated promenade was once all about.