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# High Line in New York – An Unusual Park in the Centre of Manhattan

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**Abstract.** An unusual park – the High Line aerial garden – is an excellent example of restoring a deserted place to life which attracts everybody who wants to find an oasis of peace in the midst of a busy city. In the 1990s, the city authorities had the idea of demolishing a railway viaduct which had been part of the heritage of NY industrial history, and forgetting about it as soon as possible. Luckily, this did not happen. The High Line history dates back to 1847 when a railway line was constructed across the city centre so that a free flow of goods became possible. Unfortunately, the line went along streets, which resulted in a large number of fatalities. Therefore, in 1929 the decision was made to construct a viaduct which took the railway line above the streets, and sometimes even went directly through factories and warehouses. The lush vegetation, footpaths with remainders of railway tracks, streams, drinking fountains, mobile deckchairs and benches located at a height of almost 10 m above the ground, were an idea of a group of enthusiasts (Friends of the High Line), who in 1999 prevented the former railway viaduct from being demolished. Reconstruction of the viaduct started in 2006, the first part had already opened in 2009, and the second in 2011. The revitalisation of the railway route initiated by Robert Hammond (the founder of Friends of the High Line) brought about unexpected results. The plan of Fields Operations, specialising in landscaping, and the team of architects Diller Scofidio+Renfro, which envisaged the construction of a park preserving the original nature of the viaduct, hit the bull's eye. The High Line is a park created on the route of a railway line crossing 22 New York blocks along the west side of Manhattan. At present it is one of the most popular leisure sites for New Yorkers and a tourist attraction visited by 5 million tourists a year.

## 1. Introduction - A Viaduct Park

An unusual park – an excellent example of bringing a deserted place back to life – it attracts everybody who wants to find an oasis of peace in the High Line aerial garden in the midst of a busy city.

In the 1990s, the city authorities had the idea of demolishing a railway viaduct, which had been part of NY's industrial heritage, and then forgetting about it as soon as possible. Luckily, this did not happen. The history of the High Line dates back to 1847 when a railway line was constructed across the city centre allowing a free flow of goods. Unfortunately, the line went along the streets, which resulted in a large number of fatalities. The tracks crossed New York streets, and due to many collisions with vehicles and pedestrians, 10th Avenue became known as "Death Avenue". Therefore, in 1929 the decision was made to construct a viaduct to take the railway line above the streets, and sometimes it even went directly through factories and warehouses. The idea came true in 1934, when the viaduct was constructed.



However, the development of road transport caused a decline in the use of the route – the last train went along it in 1980, and the deserted viaduct became a derelict area cared for by no one, a hotbed of social pathologies. A process of merging and redefining terms has occurred. This process has resulted in citigenic grass-root activities complementing comprehensive plans. [1]

Now the viaduct looks completely different. Lush vegetation, footpaths with remainders of railway tracks, streams, drinking fountains, mobile deckchairs and benches located at a height of almost 10 m above the ground were the idea of a group of enthusiasts (Friends of the High Line), who in 1999 prevented the former railway viaduct from being demolished. Reconstruction of the viaduct started in 2006, the first part already opening in 2009, and the second in 2011. The third and last part opened in 2014. In addition, the neighbourhood has started changing. Today it is full of galleries, lofts, shopping malls. This area has become one of the most fashionable and most expensive sites in Manhattan. The redevelopment of a fragment of Chelsea in New York – the High Line – is first and foremost an excellent addition to the densely developed street network.

The regeneration of the railway route initiated by Robert Hammond (the founder of Friends of the High Line) brought about unexpected results. The plan of designers of Fields Operations, specialising in landscaping, and the team of architects Diller Scofidio+Renfro, which envisaged the construction of a park preserving the original character of the viaduct, hit the bull's eye.

The High Line is a park created on the route of a railway line crossing 22 New York blocks on the west side of Manhattan. At present, it is one of the most popular leisure sites for New Yorkers and a tourist attraction visited by 5 million tourists a year. It is a city park with an unusual form and layout. The extraordinary experience of spending time in the aerial park should be complemented by an exercise in the imagination, namely imagining the viaduct before its renewal – the ephemeral, thin steel line, going between Gansevoort St. and W 34th Street, across the very densely built-up Manhattan. The image will comprise tones of steel profiles, riveted joints, a railway viaduct and urban nature: grass and miniature trees. All this creates an ephemeral hint of the industrial past of New York. In the immediate vicinity, there are bicycle stations, part of the city's smart transport network [2]. The design principles of Green Architecture [3], and in particular respect for the user and the environment, can be seen in the use of automation and smart systems within the range of impact of the park – in neighbouring buildings and streets.

The park located between Gansevoort and W 34th Street is about 2.5 km long and only a few metres wide. The whole project costed almost 223 million dollars and was financed in part by the city authorities. The residents of New York made a substantial contribution to the cost of construction, as they raised the funds needed. This is only possible in a place such as NY, in a world financial centre, in a fashionable neighbourhood undergoing gradual gentrification. Gentrification means a change in the nature of a specific part of a city (an enhancement of its quality and an increase in its value).

This project, as with all initiatives which are seen through to completion, has a very specific material nature. When writing about it, one cannot neglect the ideological sphere, as architecture without ideology remains a mere engineering show. The ideological side is the symbolism and philosophy of the High Line Park viaduct – a path flowing over streets. After the park had been created, prestige objects began emerging in the vicinity. This indicated a citygenic and therapeutic impact of this project on the neighbourhood.

Before the park was built, it was intended to renew the neighbourhood, which would include demolition of the viaduct. Luckily, there were people such as Joshua David, a writer, and Robert Hammond, who decided to stand up and promote the saving of the post-industrial structure. They founded Friends of the High Line, which was to give a second life to the “forgotten railway tracks in the city centre”. The revival of the idea was successful.

The term “committee architecture” was coined [4] due to the very large number of bodies participating in this project, including grass-roots initiatives. This meant that the essence and the strength of the project lay in the fact that any architecture in this area is the architecture of a “committee” consisting of residents. This was in line with the customs prevailing in Manhattan, where e.g. in a rich part of this district (near Central Park), a decision on renting an apartment is made at a

meeting of the “Council of Widows”. This name may appear ridiculous, but it is absolutely genuine; it actually is a council of residents (homeowners) consisting of rich women aged 60+.

Friends of the High Line had a simple idea – to turn the viaduct into a promenade, which would combine public functions for both city residents and tourists. An urban planning competition was announced and over 720 entries from 36 countries were submitted to it.

Many different functions and forms were used to refurbish the viaduct. The design and use of the High Line showed an innovative method of creating a green leisure space in the city, utilising its post-industrial facilities. Starting a walk in the High Line park from its southern end you can see:

- “solar decks” (in the initial section), for rest – sunbathing,
- scenic views with a gorgeous panorama of the Centre and the Hudson river (further along the route),
- an amphitheatre for concerts and performances,
- lush vegetation alluding to overgrown peat bogs, housing climatic benches located among trees,
- footpaths and walking areas.

The High Line park is complemented by the individual initiatives of New Yorkers – free concerts, spontaneous performances, or common yoga practices....

Along the redeveloped High Line promenade, monumental residential and public utility buildings designed by world-famous top architects have been built:

- by Jean Nouvel, an apartment block in Chelsea
- by Frank Gehry, IAC Headquarters Chelsea
- by Renzo Piano, the Whitney Museum of American Art building
- by Foster + Partners, Luxury Condo Manhattan
- by Todd Schliemann of Polshek Partnership Architects, The Standard New York

The final stage will be the section of the High Line surrounding Hudson Yards, a site where a dozen or so high-rise buildings will be erected by the end of 2024. The new projects, including tens of high-rise blocks, are largely residential buildings, and the commercial element is only the core of Hudson Yards. These buildings have a great open area at the Hudson riverside, and most important they have something unique in a big city – spectacular panoramas. Hudson Yards is compared to the double Rockefeller Center complex, or London’s Canary Wharf.

The construction of this complex, which will cost about 15 billion dollars, has begun with a 47-floor office building. Investment forecasts, which as recently as 2013 were not good, have improved in the years which followed and have given the stimulus to property investment. New York has become the best place for investments. This is also confirmed by the development of Brooklyn and Queens. The whole project is overseen by Kohn Pedersen Fox & Associates, the authors of the Hudson Yards Master Plan.

The Hudson Yards Master Plan converts an empty space into another large district of New York, which will combine apartments, offices, hotels and commerce. It will be vivid, creating the New York style. Not only are Hudson Yards investments about erecting high buildings, but the creation of dynamic spaces to be used by the residents is equally important. It is also another attraction for tourists from all over the world. Hudson Yards aspires to become a model for global leadership of sustainable development by combining cheap housing and various styles.

Finally, it is a reference point for the Hudson riverbank area. The A class office function is a sure method of driving the city’s development and confirming its status as the world capital for trade.

## 2. The physicality of a platform as an element of the design experience.

The subject of the paper involves specific terms which need to be discussed to be able to tackle the role of tradition in the High Line project. Their selection reminds one of long-lasting concepts, both in the context of passing and in the collective memory.

Two of these are: 1) New Urbanism, 2) plane-platform-base.

The former concept is mentioned due to the conscious return of the precursors of this trend to the classics, the latter is due to its associations with the bedrock upon which solid edifices can be built (as told by tradition).

The New Urbanism means a return to traditional (often classical) patterns and principles of urban design. The New Urbanism is a trend in urban planning developed in the 1980s in the USA. It is associated with Leon Krier, a theoretician of urban planning and an architect. The New Urbanism is a return to pre-industrial, often classical urban and architectural forms. The New Urbanism is a utopia, a vision of an ideal city which is based upon principles including the multifunctionality of centres, moving away from settling in suburbs, introducing traffic calming and pedestrian zones instead of expressways intersecting cities (including their elimination in city centres and the removal of any obstacles for pedestrians, e.g. subways, overpasses, or traffic lights), and the modernisation and construction of efficient public transport networks, all introduced at the cost of reducing car usage. This trend is a response to modernism, an extreme rejection of historicism in architecture and urban planning. This trend has been popular in the USA (e.g. the regeneration of the centre of Portland), and now it has been widely developed in Europe (Poundbury, UK).

The realisation of the New Urbanism concept is the classical shaping of space (modelled upon historical layouts) to support the balance between various methods of using streets and squares.

There is a room for any form, which means harmony and comfort. The design principles motivating people designing in this spirit can be presented in a nutshell: the task of ecologically understood urban planning is to reduce the number of kilometres that are made by residents between their work and home or e.g. place of daily leisure activities. [5] The High Line, a green ribbon directly under the windows of offices and apartments, is just like this.

The design principles making the concept of New Urbanism happen are as follows: when designing the size of a residential area one should take into account the possibility of pedestrian access. The area outlined this way is a circle with a diameter of about 500-600 m, which means a 10-minute walk. An area like this should have a clear hierarchy of squares and streets forming a grid. This means that the impact of an aerial park is not limited to the width of a few metres of the viaduct itself, but is much wider. Taking into account its location in a densely developed area, this project is even more impressive.

The area of city blocks should decrease as they approach the centre. This will influence the sense of being in the centre and in the city by an increased number of street corners, entrances, etc. The feeling of security also increases when the network of streets with pedestrian traffic becomes denser. The construction of the High Line viaduct park can actually serve this purpose.

The High Line park can also be perceived in the semantic aspect. Plane – platform – floor – their physicality is constant, and not variable. This is the ground under our feet, which hides amazing possibilities in terms of its strength of expression. Everything that exists and is subjected to the force of gravity depends on the foundation upon which it rests. The floor has always been a logical continuation of a structure. Floors in buildings and streets usually are, or at least one strives to make them, flat, level and free from frequent changes of plane. This is caused by convenience of use. Of course, slopes in a floor are inevitable, but one strives to make them familiar and to give them a functional shape. Another idea directly tectonically related to a pedestrian in a city is the plane – an architectural promenade. The architectural promenade has existed for ages; it is part of composition very much liked by architects in the 20th and 21st centuries. They have always attached a great significance to the promenade, e.g. Le Corbusier, in the five points of modern architecture, would juxtapose an order – a spatial rhythm with a free movement of people. Ramps were amongst components of the scenery in the theatre of movement of Le Corbusier. They would extend the

journey between levels. Contemporary architects take advantage of Le Corbusier's ideas, this can be observed, for instance, by looking at drawings by Alvaro Siza. Other contemporary architects also support the promenade. In this context, the following names are worth noting: Rem Koolhaas and Tadao Ando. A journey through a city and a building is a very hot topic, almost a ready recipe for success when combined with a bit of architectural talent.

The platform is morphologically related to the floor and stairs. The elevation of a building – placing it on a platform, expressing aspirations of a solid, may create added value to the space around the building, lifting it above the claustrophobic city stretching around. The platform expresses the idea of dividing the space into two parts, which semantically are not equivalent: the served and the serving space. One cannot understand that nowadays so little significance is attached to the platform as part of an urban planning and architectural composition. I believe this is related to the pragmatic approach of the investor to architecture, expressed in the reduction of the costs and time needed to complete a project. This instrument, which is so attractive to the investor, plays the main role, and a platform deprived of its function is simply redundant. It is a different story, when we can assign a specific function to a platform. Such cases are quite frequent, e.g. arranging car parks within a platform. This is the case of the High Line.

A path – the park – should be understood precisely as a platform. The pragmatism of understanding what the park should be and what it should look like, and the high costs of completion of the overhead project, did not have enough power. They did not cause rejection of the idea.

### 3. Conclusions

The subject of the paper is related to specific terms which needed to be discussed to be able to tackle the role of tradition in the High Line project, such as the new urbanism and plane-platform-base.

The new urbanism means a return to traditional (often classical) patterns and principles of urban design. The realisation of the new urbanism concept is the classical shaping of space (modelled upon historical layouts) to support the balance between various methods of using streets and squares. This seems the most important input – the value of the project and the park realization – for the contemporary urban planning. Public spaces, including parks serving the purpose of leisure, are most significant for the assessment of a city for friendliness to its residents and tourists.

I advance the thesis that it was the result of the unique project location and the will of the local community. Certainly, the future generations will appreciate and remember this fact.

The most unusual ideas in the most prestigious locations will always have a good chance of being accomplished. The other, maybe even more important, factor is a grass-roots interest in the changes. Of course, such an interest must be supported by power, which means money and influence. If enough residents have the above, then the project will go ahead. There is nothing new or innovative; it only confirms that not much changes in history.

On the one hand the above mentioned thesis sounds like a cliché, but on the other, awareness of the essence of regulatory mechanisms in urban planning and the ability to use these mechanisms are the most important elements of the design experience

To conclude, one must strongly emphasize that only the courage in space shaping decisions provides an opportunity for creation. This is something that all participants of the “urban game” should bear in mind unless they want to be remembered as the people who preserved the bad tissue. Unfortunately, the courage inevitably involves a risk, and thus a punishment. The “creators” of the city life also have to bear it in mind. A nice comparison gives an idea about dangers faced by the city administrator – a courageous creator who can be compared to a surgeon before the era of general anesthesia. “Unless the patient dies, he will live” – it sounds sarcastic but it reflects the hazard of the profession.

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