CRITIQUE OF THE NEW YORK CITY HIGH LINE PROJECT
by Professor Roz Hansen

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE PLACE

In 1934 the High Line railway project opened on the west side of Manhattan in New York City (NYC). As a riveted steel elevated rail line the High Line allowed for the delivery and collection of goods to and from nearby factories avoiding the need for loading and unloading activities to occur on the busy and congested streets of the city. The rail project extended for 21km, passed through several factory buildings and removed any need for at-grade rail crossings due to its elevated construction. With the advent of interstate trucking in the 1950s throughout the USA the volume of goods moved by rail declined resulting in the High Line becoming redundant.

Considered by some to be an eyesore and others to be an obstacle for redevelopment in the western part of Manhattan moves were afoot to demolish the rail structure in the 1990s. However local residents living close to the High Line formed a group – ‘Friends of the High Line’ – and advocated for the preservation of the elevated rail line and its conversion into a public linear park or ‘greenway’ similar to the Promenade Plantée in Paris. As a result of growing community support for the concept of an aerial greenway the NYC government agreed to retain the rail freight infrastructure and committed $50m to establish the High Line Park in 2004.

Today the High Line Park extends for 1.6km with its proposed Phase 3 resulting in a greenway 2.3km long. Whilst the public park or greenway is owned by the City of New York its maintenance, operation and public programming of activities and events is undertaken jointly by the not-for-profit ‘Friends of the High Line’ and the City Department of Parks and Recreation.

The High Line project continues to be an important catalyst for urban renewal in the Chelsea and Meatpacking Districts of NYC, as well as becoming a popular local resident and tourist attraction.

The website – www.highline.org – provides excellent information about the history of the former rail structure and its current use as an important component of the social, cultural and natural landscapes of NYC.

Watch the following YouTube video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T7unEvL2M8&list=UU0HkAxz-KbHXBJnU44obD-A&index=1

Image 1: Historic photograph of the rail line passing through industrial buildings.

Image 2: Alignment of High Line Project with stair and elevator access points.
2. A CRITIQUE OF THE NYC HIGH LINE PROJECT

The following critique of the NYC High Line Project applies the nine Key Qualities of Successful Places as listed in the PIA CPP Urban Design Course Manual. I have walked the High Line, taken photographs and undertaken further research into the creation, operation and design of what is regarded to be one of the city’s major parks and community assets.

2.1 CHARACTER: Sense of Place and History

The distinctive characteristics of the former elevated rail corridor which provide a sense of place and history have been sensitively incorporated into the design of the High Line greenway. More particularly, the following key characteristics which embody the fabric, form, function and appearance of the former rail line have been retained:

- The overall structural integrity, design and appearance of the elevated rail line have been retained including art deco style decorative metal balustrading and trusses.
- The historic linear alignment of the rail corridor has been retained with sections of the old rail line tracks restored and exposed in situ.
- Where the rail line passed through buildings the park has maintained some of these unusual features providing weather protection and opportunities for small bars and cafés.
- When viewed at street level the historic role of the elevated structure as a rail line is retained and revealed.
- The ability to view from the elevated greenway many of the former factories and warehouses of the Chelsea and Meatpacking districts as well as view the waterfront and harbour are all reminders of the importance of this area as part of the city’s industrial heritage.

Whilst the overall structural form, function and fabric of the place as a 1930s elevated rail line remains evident today there is little written or photographic interpretative information incorporated into the park. This is a lost opportunity in terms of visitors understanding the industrial history of the neighbourhoods, the important role above ground rail freight transport once played in ‘downtown’ NYC and creating an opportunity to inform the pedestrian of the significant landmarks (old and new) which can be viewed along the way.
2.2 CONTINUITY AND ENCLOSURE: Clarity of Form

The High Line project incorporates sections of the greenway which are enclosed by existing built form and other sections which are open enabling wider views of the surrounding urban landscape and city skyline.

Many of the buildings, and especially more contemporary residential and office buildings alongside the greenway overlook this landscaped elevated walkway providing reasonable passive surveillance and security.

Artwork and colourful billboards also contribute to the visual interest, richness of urban landscape and a sense of surprise enjoyed by users of the High Line.

Given the alignment of the former rail line there are crossing points to the road network below which provide ‘windows’ of city traffic and pedestrian movement at street level. This ability to look down as well as look out from an aerial walkway enhances the character of the place as well as an appreciation of the complexity of the surrounding urban forms.

The public greenway function of the High Line is clearly defined and celebrated by its attractive plantings, simple park furniture and relaxed atmosphere. Being a linear park it has a start and finish, as well as crossings along the way allowing entry and exit to this elevated public place.

2.3 QUALITY OF THE PUBLIC REALM: Sense of wellbeing and amenity

In 2003 an open ideas competition was launched seeking proposals for the re-use of the High Line rail corridor as public space. A total of 720 teams from 36 countries entered the competition. A jury comprising architects, urban designers, landscape architects, business people, artistic curators, educators,
community representatives and a planner from the NYC Department of City Planning selected the winner of the competition. Open workshops with the community were also held by the Friends of the High Line and their comments on the competition entries forwarded onto the jury.

For a project of this nature the competition process combined with community input on the entries has considerable merit. It not only attracts a wide international field of experts with a wealth of experience in architecture, urban design etc but it enables the community to appreciate the potential of such a project and be exposed to a diverse range of ideas. Whilst other techniques of community engagement could have been adopted, three years prior to the competition being held the Friends of the High Line had consulted widely with the local community and planned and lobbied for the re-use of the High Line rail line as an elevated greenway for public use.

With the on-going gentrification and redevelopment of the Chelsea and Meatpacking Districts there is an increase in residential and office worker populations seeking public spaces for respite and relaxation as well as exercise. Apart from the Hudson River Park these neighbourhoods are lacking adequate public open space and so there will be a growing need for public open space to meet the needs of the local community.

The High Line is truly a place for people. As a place which is well-used by locals as well as visitors, the greenway offers a car-free, pedestrian environment which is attractively designed and landscaped, safe and comfortable to use (perhaps less so during wintertime when it can snow in NYC) and offers variety in experiences and surrounds along the journey/walk.

The palette of materials, colours and finishes is consistently applied with the quality of design and detailing of a high standard. Park furniture is attractive and functional; planting is grouped into clumps of the same species; the spaces to sit and relax are appealing and comfortable; the walkway surfaces are safe and friendly for all users including people with mobility problems; and the trail provides visual interest and places for a coffee, a small meal and a glass of wine.

At present some of the entry points at street level to the High Line are within parts of the west side that are still rundown and unattractive. There is a need to...
improve the public realm within the immediate proximity to these stair and elevator entries so as people feel safe and welcomed.

### 2.4 EASE OF MOVEMENT: Connectivity and permeability

As a linear greenway which is elevated a key challenge is to ensure that adequate access is available for all age groups at various points along this green corridor. A series of public stairways (some with elevators too) are provided to enable people, including people with mobility constraints, to access the High Line. These access ways are every 2 to 3 urban blocks, at crossroad locations and easily identifiable.

The walkways are flat with gentle ramps to deal with changes in levels. Rectangular shaped narrow aggregate concrete pavers are used throughout the walkway areas emulating a ‘timber like’ boardwalk appearance.

The encouragement of redevelopment in the surrounding urban neighbourhoods is resulting in higher density residential development, office buildings and conversion of former warehouses and factories into mixed use developments.

The north-south linear nature of the High Line provides an attractive alternative to street level for pedestrians accessing jobs, shops and other facilities and services close to the walkway. It provides a high quality car free route as well as promoting walkability in the city.

The Park Rules prohibit the use of bicycles, skateboards, skates and scooters in an effort to ensure that the High Line is for people travelling on foot. Such restrictions enhance safety and ease of movement for people.
The High Line is open from 7am to 8pm (summertime until 10pm) seven days a week. Given there are sections of the elevated greenway which abut blank walls of adjacent buildings and the up lighting is diffused and focused mainly around seating areas, it is not unreasonable to have the greenway closed late at night and early morning for security reasons.

2.5 LEGIBILITY: Ease of Understanding

The linear quality of the High Line edged by iron balustrading, multi-level buildings and attractive plantings help define the walkway as an elevated urban place. It is a legible and easily navigable route to traverse.

Whilst there are expansive views along specific sections of the High Line, there are also sections with a sense of enclosure. These changes in outlook enrich the experience of walking along the High Line where the element of surprise is enhanced by wider vistas of the NCY skyline.

There are pockets of public art in the form of sculptures as well as some interesting and visually eye catching billboards in the immediate vicinity which can be viewed along the High Line. There is also a calendar of events that include cultural and performing arts activities and markets selling arts and crafts, food etc.

Despite the elevated nature of the High Line there is a lack of information informing the public about nearby landmarks, buildings of architectural interest and heritage significance, focal points and other attractions which can be seen and accessed from the walkway.

Useful signage and way markers are lacking, both at the street level entries to the High Line and along the journey itself. Although there may be a desire to unclutter the place with such information, including
interpretative material, this is a lost opportunity to entice visitors/tourists to other places nearby and to gain a greater appreciation of their urban environs.

Image 18: A mural viewed from the High Line.

2.6 ADAPTABILITY: Ease of Change

The High Line offers flexibility in use. Not only does it function as a successful pedestrian only greenway within a densely developed part of NYC but it a wide range of activities and events. Art and craft markets, cafés, bars, food kiosks, festivals, gardening programs, musical events, cinema nights, snow sculpting competitions, tours of the High Line and other programs activate the place throughout the calendar year.

The High Line has also stimulated adaptive use of adjacent older buildings as well as urban renewal and redevelopment projects which benefit from overlooking this elevated park and close access to public open space. Former industrial buildings which had the rail line pass through their structures have also been revitalised with rooftop additions to these buildings providing dramatic bird’s eye views of the High Line route.

The High Line offers open air and covered spaces for a range of uses and cultural, social, educational and entertainment activities catering for local residents and visitors.

Image 19: Kids art programs at the High Line

Image 20: Film nights at the High Line.

2.7 DIVERSITY: Ease of Choice

The High Line caters for a diverse range of needs. It is a stimulating, enjoyable and attractive place catering for all age groups and a wide range of interests. It offers open air spaces as well as weather protected spaces under buildings which once had the rail line passing through their properties.

The ongoing gentrification and revitalisation of the Chelsea and Meatpacking Districts has attracted local residents, including families, to use the High Line as their local park. The increased residential density in the locality is increasing public use of the High Line and broadening its activities and events to cater for the interests of a more diverse community.

The planting regime ranges from woodlands, to grasslands, thickets and lawn areas. The diverse plantings contribute to the visual interest and aesthetic values of the place.

2.8  SUSTAINABILITY: Environmentally, socially and economically

By restoring and re-using the historic structure of the former elevated rail corridor the High Line is an excellent example of embedded energy. From an environmental perspective the High Line has not only avoided the environmental and energy costs associated with demolition of the rail infrastructure but established a strong planting regime which adds natural beauty and greenery within a high density urban environment.

The project also delivers on social sustainability by providing a public place for recreation and leisure, social and cultural events and a place just for ‘hanging out’. According to the High Line website 3.7 million people visited the park in 2011 of which 50% were New Yorkers.

The provision of public open space of this type also reinforces the importance of walkability in our cities – a key principle which underpins healthy city planning. As a public place which attracts volunteers to assist with the organisation of various activities and events, as well as providing a meeting place for locals, the High Line contributes to social cohesion and the concept of building strong communities.

The economic benefits of the High Line include the revenue earned from a range of uses and activities occurring along the greenway. These funds assist in the on-going maintenance and operational aspects of the High Line recognising that it is managed by a not-for-profit organisation supported by volunteers and overseen by the NYC Parks Department. As a public place it is not unreasonable to expect that the provision of such an innovative and enjoyable place comes at a
cost to the wider NYC community but this cost is far outweighed by the growing numbers of people, including tourists, who use this greenway and the environmental and social benefits derived from the project. The annual running costs of the High Line are approximately USD$3 million.

A wider economic benefit of the High Line is its catalytic role in revitalising the Chelsea and Meatpacking Districts, especially in the housing market and attracting fashionable restaurants and retail outlets in these neighbourhoods. It is estimated that since the opening of the High Line there has been more than USD$2 billion invested in these areas. According to the New York Times between 2003 and 2011, property values near the High Line increased 103%.

2.9 SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE: Events, activities and cultural infrastructure

An annual calendar of events and activities is provided for users of the High Line. These events cater for all age groups and include the display of public artworks, youth unemployment projects, educational programs, family events and more than 450 free community activities.

As a venue for film nights, artistic performances etc the High Line offers a unique venue being an elevated greenway offering marvellous views and vistas of this part of NYC, its old and contemporary architecture and its picturesque skyline.

3. SUMMARY

In critically evaluating the New York City High Line Project I find that the project has many strengths but also some unexplored opportunities in terms of being a successful urban place as summarised below.

The High Line exudes a sense of place by retaining, revealing and cleverly adapting the use of a former elevated rail freight route into a public park or greenway. Whilst the pedestrian can see the robust nature and decorative detail of this transport structure there is still untapped potential to tell the story of the history of the place and its former use serving the industrial neighbourhoods on the west side of Manhattan. Greater use of interpretative material and information, including simple signage, an historic walking tour or audio head set and lookout points identifying key landmarks viewed from the walkway would enhance the experience. Also information about how the High Line project transpired would be beneficial to the visitor.

As a linear greenway the park has a sense of continuity which is enhanced by its corridor configuration.
Planting, seating, water features, artwork, bars and cafés as well as other furniture are all located on either side of the walkway creating well defined edges to the main promenade. The uniform use of the aggregate concrete pavers laid as long slim planks emulate a ‘boardwalk’ character and lead the pedestrian onwards. There is good clarity of form which, over time, will strengthen as the plantings mature. The changing surrounds – from narrower walkways aligned with tall buildings to wider paths offering open expansive views of this part of the NYC skyline – adds to the complexity of urban form. There is no sense of sameness about the journey along the High Line.

The High Line has a high quality public realm. It has avoided being over engineered by encouraging casual and informal spaces within which people can sit or wander. The choice of materials, colours and finishes is consistently applied along the route and the detailing is both innovative and functional. A key opportunity for the High Line is improvement to the street level environs at each of the stairway/elevator access points. A stronger sense of arrival and safety is required at each of these access points with an emphasis on being pedestrian friendly, attractive spaces.

Being a former elevated rail corridor there is limited change in gradient along the route and where this occurs ramps have been installed to ensure the greenway is easily accessible to all age groups and levels of personal mobility. Opportunities exist for better signage and orientation information especially at each of the stairways and elevator rises so that visitors know where they are at any point along the route and can depart to access other attractions along the way.

The legibility of the place would benefit from more way markers. Because the High Line is attracting greater numbers of tourists the surrounding neighbourhood attractions, shops and businesses would benefit from more signage and other way markers directing visitors to these places of interest and enjoyment. A simple information booklet or brochure would avoid the prospect of clutter along the greenway such as signage and widen the economic benefits accrued from development within walking distance of the High Line route.

The High Line does not offer fully enclosed spaces and hence its use for a range of activities and events is confined to those that rely upon reasonable weather. Despite the open air nature of the greenway there is still a diverse calendar of events and activities offered to the public. The linear spaces themselves vary in width allowing the use of the walkway itself as a venue for activities. The opportunities for adaptability focus more on further revitalisation and re-use of older buildings adjacent to the High Line and providing an even more varied calendar of events etc as community needs and expectations change.

Diversity is a key strength of the High Line. Each section of the journey offers a different urban backdrop and this is complemented by the seating or resting spaces within the High Line being different from one another. The diversity of cityscape and spaces within the High Line itself are matched by the diversity of activities, uses and events offered at this place. There are opportunities for more choice of food and drink related venues and more informal market stalls selling locally made goods, artworks and fresh produce.

As the process of gentrification and urban renewal continues in the surrounding neighbourhoods close to the High Line the place will strengthen its sustainability outcomes. However, the downside of these processes is the loss of affordable housing and the more traditional businesses serving the lower income groups who reside in the local area. Efforts should be made to maintain these community characteristics so that people of different socio-economic and ethnic groups can co-exist. This diversity is fundamental to building strong communities and places which are socially inclusive.

It would appear that the soft infrastructure of the High Line is well programmed and diverse in its offer. As community needs, aspirations and expectations change it will be important that the High Line
management keeps abreast of these changes so as to retain the vitality, appeal and popularity of the place as a destination as well as a walkway linking one place to the next. A great strength of the activities and events offered is that they are usually free and open to everyone.

To conclude, the High Line Project in NYC is a successful urban place. It emulates the Planning Institute of Australia’s definition of urban design, namely:

“Urban design aims at the creation of useful, attractive, safe, environmentally sustainable, economically successful and socially equitable places.

Good urban design pursues local identity and sense of place, cultural responsiveness and purposeful environmental innovation.

It achieves a high level of quality, comfort, safety, equity, beauty and cohesion in the overall physical outcome of all the development, planning, engineering, architectural and landscape design decisions that contribute to urban change.”

Source of Images:

Front cover illustration from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/03/opinion/a-high-line-thats-good-for-new-york.html
Images 3,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,13,15,17,18 and 24 – photographs taken by Professor Roz Hansen in 2012.
Images 19,20, 21,22 and 26 – photographs on www.highline.org
Images 1 and 2 - photographs on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Line_(New_York_City)
Images 9,12,14, 16 – photographs on http://atasteoftravelblog.com/2012/walking-new-yorks-high-line/
Image 23 – photograph and invitation on http://www.friendsforourriverfront.org/2012/03/youre-invited-to-walk-high-line.html
Image 25 – Map from the New York Times