

West Side

The rise
and fall of Manhattan's High Line

BY JOE GREENSTEIN



1934: nearly complete,
the two-track High Line
will lift trains out of
nearby Tenth Avenue.

New York Central

story



2001: wildflowers grace the moribund High Line above Long Island's car yard at 30th Street.

Joe Greenstein



State-of-the-art St. John's Park Terminal anchored the south end of the High Line.

GHOSTLY SILENT, an old railroad viaduct still winds its way down Manhattan's West Side. Once a bustling New York Central freight line, it has not seen a train for 20 years, and most New Yorkers barely notice the drab structure. But the "High Line" has sparked an impassioned debate between those who think it is an important historical legacy worth preserving, and those who view it as an ugly impediment to the area's economic growth.

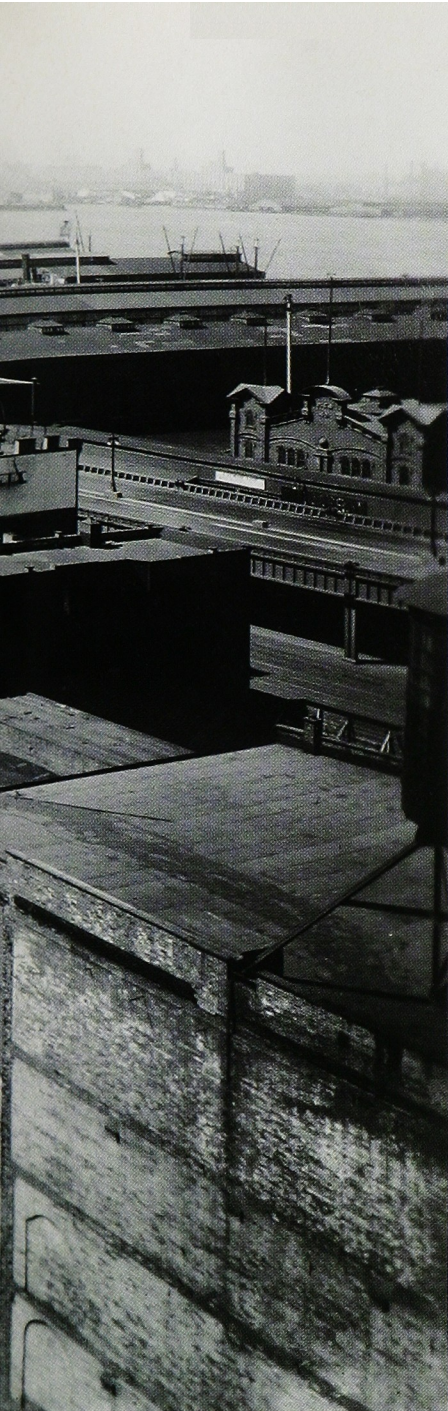
On the one side is Friends of the High Line, a group that would like to see the viaduct transformed into a 1.45-mile elevated park, under the auspices

of the railbank conservancy, a federal program that converts unused rail rights-of-way to recreational trails, with the understanding that railroads may someday reclaim them. In opposition to this idea is the Chelsea Property Owners Group, which views the High Line as a colossal white elephant that depresses property values and inhibits commercial development.

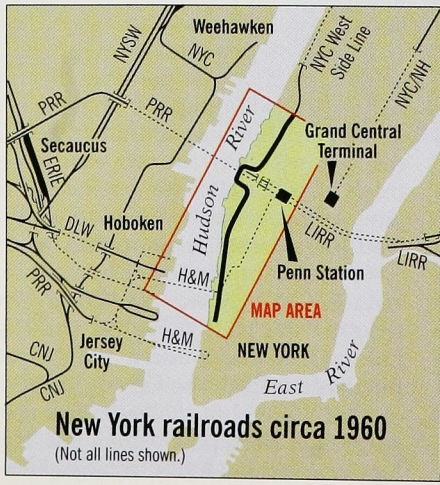
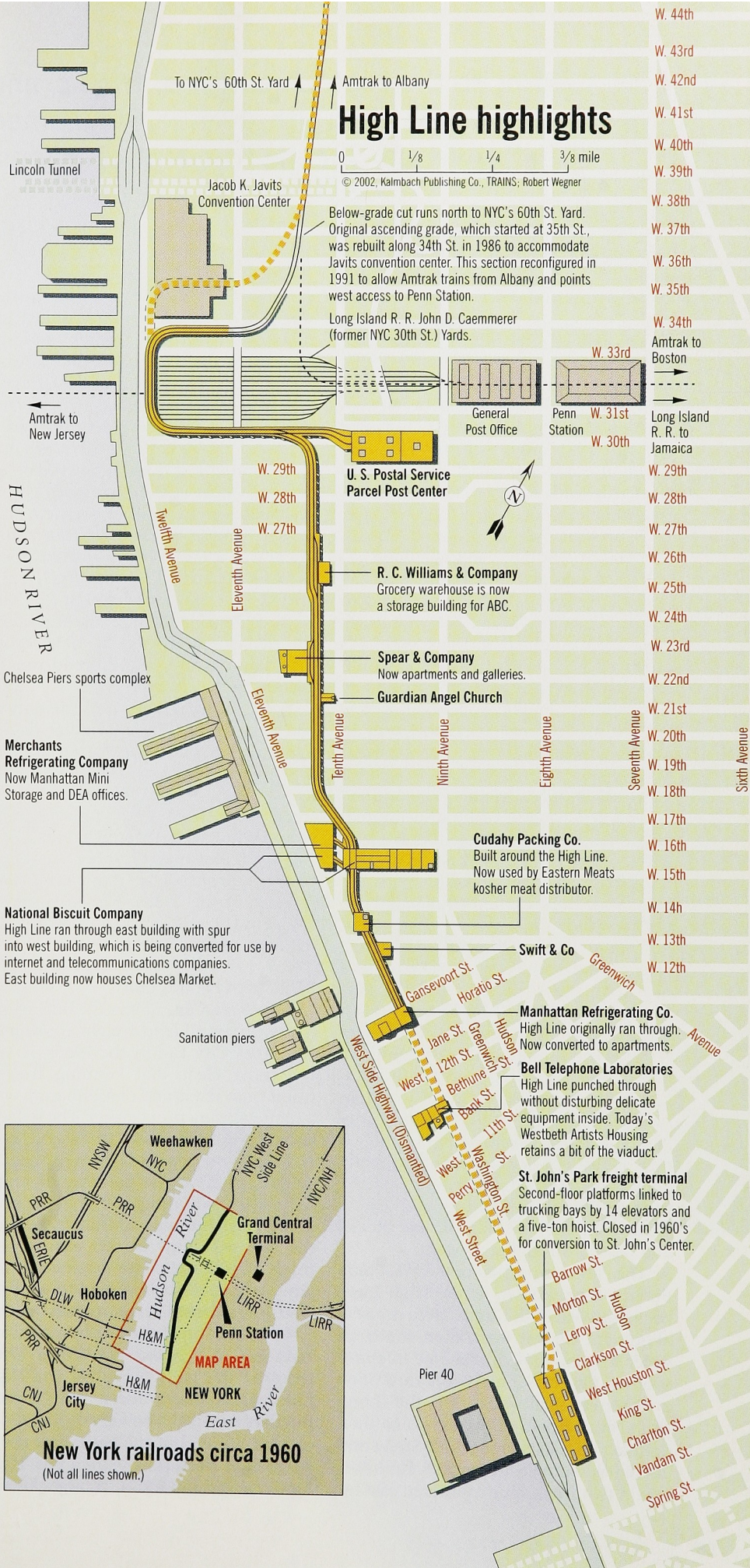
Friends co-founder Robert Hammond sees railbanking as the ideal way

to preserve this unique vestige of Manhattan's industrial past. Indeed, in view of recent catastrophic events here, the idea of paying homage to the city's transportation history has taken on a new poignancy. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said. "The High Line was originally built for the public good, and we'd like to see it returned to the public good."

The property owners thinks the public good would best be served by tearing



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the line down. It contends the structure is a public hazard, as evidenced by falling chunks of concrete and steel that indicate an advanced state of decay.

"Not so," said Debra Frank, a spokesperson for CSX Transportation, which inherited the line in its portion of the 1999 Conrail acquisition. "It was originally designed to hold two fully loaded freight trains at one time," she said, and added that the basic structure is still sound. That conclusion is supported by several engineering studies, including one completed by Conrail in the 1980s.

Outgoing Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had sided with Chelsea property owners, new mayor Mike Bloomberg seems

Prior to the High Line, trains, trucks, and wagons jam 11th Avenue, nicknamed "Death Avenue" for the frequent collisions.

to favor preservation, and Friends is gaining political clout: supporters now include high-profile politicians, architects, artists, and entertainers.

TRAINS TAKE TO THE SKY

The High Line was born in the 1920s to resolve congestion on Manhattan's West Side. Confrontations between burgeoning automobile and truck traffic and street-running freight trains in this warehouse and industrial district were occurring with increasingly disastrous consequences—one local thoroughfare, 11th Avenue, was nicknamed "Death Avenue." Something had to be done.

The solution was to eliminate all the grade crossings by realigning, and in places elevating, New York Central's West Side freight line. Driving this as probably no one else could or would was the autocratic and monomaniacal Robert Moses, public works czar of New York City whose legacy includes over 50 major bridges, tunnels, expressways, and parks.

Moses, hardly a friend of the railroad companies, wanted to build a limited-access expressway along the Hudson River on Manhattan's West Side. This required an accommodation with the New York Central, and thus was born the West Side Improvement plan.

Though it's likely both Moses and the New York Central viewed the plan as a deal with the devil, it served the purposes of all concerned. The plan called for the complete reconstruction and realignment of the Central's freight-dedicated line extending south into Manhattan from the Water Level Route in the Bronx. Most of the right-of-way passed through Riverside Park, where a new highway was to be built directly above the tracks, which followed the river as far as the Central's 60th Street Yard, then curved inland a few blocks and passed through a new cut.

The elevated portion of the West Side Freight Line, known as the High Line, began at West 35th Street. Here the new alignment turned west, then south, in order to gain enough distance to climb over the Central's 30th Street Yard (now a commuter-car yard for the Long Island Rail Road). The High Line then doubled back east along 30th Street and curved downtown to parallel 10th Avenue. A two-track spur continued east for

another half block to reach the U.S. Post Office's Morgan Parcel Post Building.

The High Line's crown jewel was the St. John's Park Terminal, a huge freight-house at its southernmost point just above Spring Street. This 800-foot-long, three-story structure had eight railroad tracks with a capacity of 150 freight cars. Fourteen elevators transferred freight down to street-level docks with spaces for 127 trucks. At the south end of the building, a five-ton hoist handled especially heavy loads. Equipped with a sprinkler system, built of concrete, and virtually fireproof, St. John's Park Terminal was state-of-the-art for the era.

Work began in 1925, but the 13-mile project was not completed until 1935. With appropriate fanfare, the High Line was dedicated on June 28, 1934. From that date onward, the railroad ran 14 feet above the city streets.

Some of the High Line's customers had second-story lineside loading docks, while others had spur tracks directly into their buildings. A few large businesses used freight elevators to lift trucks from the street up to track level, to speed unloading of freight cars.

High Line motive power was completely appropriate for a modern urban railroad of the 1930s: NYC's tri-power box-cabs (diesel-electric, third-rail electric, and storage-battery electric).

RELIC OF A FADING ERA

New York Central was the only trunk line with an all-land freight route into New York City. But by the 1960s, it was becoming clear that running freight trains onto the island of Manhattan was a money-losing proposition. The golden age of railroading was at its end, and nowhere was this more evident than in Gotham, where the patterns of commerce were shifting and the price of doing business was soaring. Much of the city was now served entirely by truck. Rail-borne cargo destined to the city was increasingly routed to west-of-Hudson railheads, then trucked in.

Construction of the Jacob Javits Convention Center, which opened in 1986, required the realignment of the High Line's ascending grade at 35th Street. Builders installed a new grade just south of 34th Street, but the work was never completed because by then the High Line was without traffic. A large portion



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had already been demolished, from Gansevoort Street to the St. John's Park Terminal. Five years later, a section of the West Side line was reconfigured to allow Amtrak Empire Corridor trains from Albany and points beyond to enter Pennsylvania Station.

Hopes flickered for a rejuvenation of the High Line in the late 1980s, when city officials announced their plan to phase out the giant Fresh Kills landfill



on Staten Island. Conrail saw the High Line as a potential conduit for outbound shipments of municipal solid waste, recyclables, and construction debris.

But the politics were just too complicated, according to Jonathan Broder, Conrail's General Counsel. Local property owners took legal action to prevent trash hauling on the High Line; the mayor's office wanted it torn down; and changing market conditions made the

economic equation unworkable.

What's more, Manhattan's West Side, the borough's last bastion of industrialization, was becoming gentrified. Realizing the winds of change weren't blowing in its favor, Conrail bailed on the plan. "Since then, the High Line has existed in a state of suspended animation," says Broder.

And that's the feeling one gets when walking on the structure today. These

are not exalted city vistas as from the Empire State Building or other lofty heights. The High Line is only once-removed from the streets, yet it's still on intimate terms with them. It's a modest vantage point, offering fascinating vignettes of the urban tapestry that is Manhattan. The experience is not without irony, because over the years this raised platform of steel and concrete has become carpeted in plant life: wild



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The "Tenth Avenue Cowboy" flags a tri-power locomotive leaving 18th Street Yard in 1941. The High Line is visible above.

grasses, wildflowers, even a grove of ailanthus trees. This is especially amazing when one considers that each seed and particle of soil arrived here airborne. In fact, it's said that some High Line plant species are not even indigenous to the area.

WHAT NEXT?

The future of the High Line, whether it will be demolition or refurbishment, revolves around the question of who will pay. In 1992, property owners came close to getting their wish of having it torn down. But a consistent sticking point has been the need to indemnify then Conrail, and now CSX, against any

demolition and liability costs that exceed a federally set limit of \$7 million.

Friends of the High Line have outlined a proposal for greenway conversion, based on a cost-per-square-foot analysis, with a projected price tag of about \$43 million. The property owners' group counters that the actual cost would probably be two or three times that amount. Robert Hammond of the

Friends acknowledges all estimates are speculative, and no specific funding has been identified. However, he stresses city and state support are essential for any preservation scenario to succeed.

For its part, CSX says it just wants to extricate itself from paying about \$400,000 a year in taxes and maintenance fees on a property it has no plans to use. The Surface Transportation Board has directed the railroad to negotiate with the underlying property owners for the line's demolition, while remaining receptive to a potential filing for a Certificate for Interim Trails Use. Said CSX's Debra Frank, "CSX will take its cues from the community, and attempt to do what's best for local interests, while honoring its obligation to shareholders."

Any final decision needs the approval of local government as well as the STB. Even Norfolk Southern, as co-purchaser of Conrail, is entitled to some say in the matter. Thus the High Line's fate is inexorably bound in a web of red tape and conflicting interests.

Nowadays, New Yorkers pay the price for a vastly depleted rail infrastructure, and each time city planners think about reconstituting some aspect of a rail network long gone, cost estimates seem to start at a billion dollars. One wonders if the ghost of Robert Moses isn't getting a good chuckle out of all this, especially since 30,000 big rigs a day cross the Hudson River on the Verrazano Narrows and George Washington bridges alone.

But New York is a dynamic, constantly evolving entity. Whose crystal ball can predict the future of this city's transportation needs? Perhaps West Side development will transform the old viaduct into a perfect corridor for light-rail transit or some other form of freight- or people-moving technology. Wouldn't railbanking be the ideal way for the city to hedge its bet?

Steeped in history, suspended in time and space, the High Line's fate now very much hangs in the balance. "I hope that somebody is creative with it," says Conrail's Jonathan Broder. The Friends of the High Line of course agree. **I**

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Eighty years later, 11th Avenue is "Death Avenue" no more. Can New York make peace with a relic of its industrial past?