

# FRAME

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Ins

Exploring

and

Spaces

Outs

in Between

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The Great Indoors

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# High

Diller Scofidio + Renfro et al.

Park

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# The



# Section 2 of the High Line transforms New York's former elevated railway into an intimate experience.

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# Life

Words **Shonquis Moreno**  
Photos **Iwan Baan**



Section 2 of the High Line runs north to south through Manhattan.



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Modular concrete planks form a path that combs through the landscaped High Line.

## Triple Jump The High Line's 3 sections

If Section 1 of the High Line often conveys airiness and monumentality, in Section 2 the proximity of buildings underscores the city's age and character, cultivating moments of intimacy and a broader range of microclimates for both plants and people. Some spots, Corner suggests, even feel like 'social rooms'. The Chelsea Thicket – a tiny forest of dogwood, holly, bottlebrush and roses – grafts the second section of the line to the first, momentarily obscuring city views. Scofidio calls it 'a green urban palate cleanser', adding that even though it opens out onto the widest part of the path, 'you realize that you are now in another place'. When Section 3 opens a few years from now, promising to provide another unique experience, the five blocks north of 30<sup>th</sup> Street will encompass the old 10.5-hectare rail yards. Whereas Sections 1 and 2 run north to south, the still heroically tangled and untamed Section 3 turns its face expansively west to the river, rails reaching to the sky.

Once sold for US\$10 – comparable to the price of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Manhattan itself – the High Line elevated freight railway is no longer known merely as a place that's been going to seed for half a century. In two stages, starting in 2009, it has been transformed into New York City's only aerial greenway and is now, arguably, the most imaginative and optimism-inducing example of public-space design and grassroots urban planning in recent memory. At only 9 to 18 m wide and (when Section 3 opens) 2.5 km long, such a claim may seem unlikely, but Sections 1 and 2, which opened in June 2009 and June 2011, prove otherwise.

As the word 'greenway' suggests, this park is a hybrid of industry and agriculture, the city and the sown – water, land and landfill. A literal and figurative elevation of interstitial space, the High Line alternately transports visitors out of the city and delivers them the best it has to offer. Built in 1931, the line ran directly through the third storey of any building in its path, carrying agricultural products to refrigerated waterfront warehouses, from Spring Street to West 34<sup>th</sup>, and eliminating dangerous street-level crossings that gave the route its first moniker, 'Death Avenue'.

When it opened to traffic in 1934, it was dubbed 'one of the greatest improvements in the history of New York' and the city's 'lifeline'. But by 1960 the truck had become the new freight train: the last three railway vans of frozen turkeys ran down the tracks in 1980, and by the 1990s Mayor Giuliani's administration was calling the High Line 'the Vietnam War of old railroad structures'.

One of the more popular arguments against its preservation would become

pigeon droppings, which rained on pedestrians from its girder-lined underbelly. But in 1999 two urban-planning innocents – start-up entrepreneur Robert Hammond and journalist Joshua David – established the Friends of the High Line in a last bid to save it: 'You walked out and you were on train tracks covered in wildflowers,' writes Hammond in *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky*. 'I don't know what I had expected. Maybe I thought it would be full of homeless people. I just didn't expect wildflowers. This was not a few blades of grass growing up through gravel; we had to wade through Queen Anne's lace. It was another world, right in the middle of Manhattan.'

Even before the project was approved, David and Hammond invited multidisciplinary teams to compete for the job of repurposing the line. Zaha Hadid's swooshing, elastic, monolithically white plan featured few plants and no trees. Imagining the opposite was the winning team, which had formed around landscape architect James Corner's Field Operations, known for turning the Fresh Kills dump into parkland, and included Dutch horticulturalist Piet Oudolf, as well as Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Despite being chosen to renovate Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and to build the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, at that time DS+R had realized little more than the city's most expensive restaurant interior. Elizabeth Diller described the High Line site as 'illicit' – you had to trespass to reach it – and saw it, forsaken and feral as it was, as an exquisite relic of a man-Mother Nature synthesis that could be ruined easily by rash intervention.

To avoid the heavy-handedness of so many rehab projects, the team had presented a path of tapering modular concrete planks assembled from a diverse kit of parts intended to comb through the landscape. This produced a gradient of soft and hard that makes a single tapestry of plants, paving, furnishings and ...



Long but narrow, the site called for made-to-measure multitasking furniture.

Diller Scofidio + Renfro et al



... structure. The long, narrow site also called for made-to-measure, multitasking furniture so that, as Scofidio says, 'planking bends up to become seating, seating becomes lighting, lighting becomes handrails and handrails become signage and wayfinding'.

'It's almost like nature trying to claw back the man-made structure and reclaim it,' says Hammond of the path. 'I remember Ric Scofidio saying in a presentation, "My job as an architect is to save the High Line from architecture." They focused on exposing the High Line's original steel structure, instead of adding architectural elements to it, and on using the planting to evoke the self-seeded landscape of the High Line that we had all come to love.' In the end, the solution seems to obscure our knowledge of what came first: wilderness or walkway.

To build, everything was removed, down to the original concrete slab. Gravel ballast and soil were added. A new drainage system was installed and lead-based paint scraped away and replaced. Some original rails were reincorporated and stairwells drawn up through the steel girders. Oudolf and Field Ops planted 210 species of grass, wildflowers, shrubs and trees, many native and drought-tolerant, with an emphasis on seasonal, textural and chromatic variation. They created an evocative fabric by juxtaposing the close-up with the remote. As Corner describes it: 'The experience is at once intimate and tactile . . . yet removed, distant and large-scale . . . both near and far, small and big, enclosed and open.' If Section 1 of the High Line often conveys airiness and monumentality, in Section 2 the proximity of buildings underscores the city's age and character, cultivating

moments of intimacy and a broader range of microclimates for both plants and people. Some spots, Corners suggests, even feel like 'social rooms'. The Chelsea Thicket – a tiny forest of dogwood, holly, bottlebrush and roses – grafts the second section of the line to the first, momentarily obscuring city views. Scofidio calls it 'a green urban palate cleanser', adding that even though it opens out onto the widest part of the path, 'you realize that you are now in another place'.

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## High Line

**Location** New York City, NY, USA  
**Design team** James Corner Field Operations ([fieldoperations.net](http://fieldoperations.net)), Piet Oudolf ([oudolf.com](http://oudolf.com)), Diller Scofidio + Renfro ([dsrny.com](http://dsrny.com))  
**Cost of original construction** €67 million  
**Cost of reconstruction** €120 million  
**Height** 9 m  
**Width** 9-18 m  
**Length** 2.4 km  
**Biggest cost** Removal of lead-based paint and repainting (€12.6 million)  
**New paint colour** #SW6994 Greenblack (Sherwin-Williams)  
**Visitors in 2009** 2 million  
**Visitors in 2011** 3 million

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According to landscape architect James Corner, some spots feel like 'social rooms'.





Section 2 uses existing buildings to add architectural interest and create walls that transform many areas into intimate, interior-like spaces.

Diller Scofidio + Renner

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