

# New York City

It used to take freight off the roads, now it helps pedestrians escape from the traffic. **Rosie Niven** visits the latest addition to Manhattan's green spaces

This spring, New York's newest city park will open. Spanning 22 blocks in the Meatpacking District, Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen neighbourhoods, it promises views of the Manhattan skyline, the Hudson river and New Jersey.

But as with so many of Manhattan's iconic structures, planners have had to look above street level to find space for 'this century's Central Park'. A disused elevated railway that rises to ten metres above street level will house the High Line, a public promenade providing almost 3ha of green space.

The first section of the High Line, from Gansevoort Street to 20th Street, is now in the final phase of construction. A second section, between 20th and 30th Streets, is expected to open later in the year.



Above: a section of the disused railway that will become the High Line when planted, top right

The story could have been very different. Built in the 1930s as a means of getting freight off the congested New York streets, the High Line fell out of use in the 1980s. By 2002 it was widely viewed as a derelict eyesore and a candidate for demolition. Outgoing New York mayor Rudy Giuliani even signed a demolition order in one of his last acts in office.

However, a growing number of individuals disagreed with this assessment and could see the potential for the High Line's reuse as a public space. The campaign group, Friends of the High Line, was formed in 1999 to lobby on the issue. The group eventually won support from elected leaders, including city council speakers Gifford Miller and Christine Quinn and Mr Giuliani's successor as mayor, Michael Bloomberg.

According to the group's co-founder, Joshua David, the turning point came when the Friends successfully sued the City of New York to reverse the order. 'It took a bit longer for the city to form a policy supporting the High Line,' he recalls. 'But when a city council bill passed in 2002 supporting funding for the project, we knew we were on our way.'

Following the successful challenge to demolition, the new mayor invited the Friends to put forward proposals for its future. Since then, the city's support for the project has grown to the extent that it took ownership of the property from the railway company, which donated it as part of the federal rails-to-trails programme. The initiative ensures that it can revert back to use for transportation if the need ever arises.

A key influence for the High Line's rebirth was the Promenade Plantée, a disused viaduct in Paris which was turned into a park during the 1990s. The promenade soon became one of the city's most popular green spaces. It also helped to rejuvenate the surrounding areas, inspiring new residents and businesses to move there. Backers of the High Line project are hoping the same will happen in midtown Manhattan.

There has been a building boom in the area surrounding the High Line in the past few years, with the regeneration of Chelsea and the Meatpacking District. But many who live and work there feel it lacks a proper park. The prospect of a new park is also proving attractive to developers.

'Many developers feel that having a park nearby, and specifically such an unusual and anticipated park, adds significantly to their property values and to the neighbourhood at large,' explains Mr David. 'It's ironic, because when we began this project property owners were our largest detractors – they thought that the High Line was a blight and an eyesore and that it detracted from their property values.'

The final design, by Field Operations and Diller Scofidio

# high

& Renfro, keeps about a third of the original rail features, including rail tracks, incorporating them into the planting beds. The structure, including all the original steel beams, rivets and art deco-style railings, also remains. The design retains many of the same plants that grew as weeds on the High Line once the trains stopped running.

'For us, the winning design team best proposed an elegant solution to the fundamental problem of the High Line,' says Mr David. 'How do you take a wild, untouched



#### FIND OUT MORE

The High Line, [www.thehighline.org](http://www.thehighline.org)

urban space like this, which is so rare, and open it up to the public without it getting ruined? The basic premise of their design proposal was a mixture of hard surfaces and planting beds, which we thought worked really well for the requirements of the site.'

While the design seeks to preserve the High Line's character, it has been adapted for pedestrian use and to bring it up to health and safety requirements. Staircases and lifts have been added, along with seating and lighting so that it can be open at night. There will also be gathering places and a water feature.

For Joshua David, the project's completion is a tribute to its supporters who range from historians, planners and rail buffs to actor Edward Norton and US secretary of state Hillary Clinton. 'We definitely couldn't do this without our network of public supporters,' he says. 'So in a way, public opinion deserves the credit for the High Line coming this far.'

## Enjoying the high life on foot

### THE ISLAND LINE, BURLINGTON, VERMONT

The Rutland-Canadian Railroad's Island Line was once considered one of America's most scenic railways. Running across a narrow causeway over Lake Champlain, it was part of the railway that linked the New England coast with the Great Lakes from 1899.

The last passenger and freight trains ran in 1955 and 1961 respectively, but cyclists can still experience the views once enjoyed by train passengers on the Island Line. The 12-mile trail skirts Burlington's waterfront before following the causeway three miles into the middle of the lake.

The idea of turning the railway into a trail originated in the mid-sixties when the state governor commissioned a study looking into its future use. The study did not generate sufficient enthusiasm and sections of the railbed were sold off. It was not until the early 1980s that citizens began to rally around the idea of a trail on the abandoned line and the Island Line cycle path became a reality.

The Island Line, [www.localmotion.org](http://www.localmotion.org)



### THE ROSE KENNEDY GREENWAY, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Boston's congested roads had been causing headaches for decades when city planners proposed a radical solution – getting rid of the elevated six-lane highway that ran through the city centre.

The Central Artery was replaced by an eight to ten lane underground expressway directly beneath the existing road. When the 15 year-long 'Big Dig' ended in 2006 substantial amounts of vacant land were left behind.

A series of parks that mark the path of the old elevated road are now known as the Rose Kennedy Greenway, after the mother of former US president John F Kennedy. More than 10ha of parks and green space can be accessed from a boulevard, including North End Park, Chinatown Park and Wharf District Park. These opened in the autumn of 2007 and spring 2008. The creation of the Greenway has been a joint effort of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the City of Boston and citizens' groups.

Rose Kennedy Greenway, [www.rosekennedygreenway.org](http://www.rosekennedygreenway.org)