

# LINEAR PARK

THE CONVERSION OF AN ABANDONED ELEVATED RAILWAY TRACK IN MANHATTAN INTO THE NOW WORLD-FAMOUS **HIGH LINE** LINEAR PARK IS MUCH ADMIRERD AND COVETED BY CITIES AROUND THE WORLD. **HERBERT WRIGHT** TAKES A LOOK AT OTHER LINEAR PARKS TAKING SHAPE, FROM SEOUL TO ROTTERDAM, MADRID TO BIRMINGHAM

'Pretty astounding' is how Elizabeth Diller of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, co-designing practice of New York's High Line (Blueprint July 2011), describes its global impact when she passed through London in December (page 45). It is no understatement.

The transformation of what was once an elevated goods railway, snaking through the Edward Hopper-esque post-industrial haunts of Manhattan's far West Side, has seen cities from Santiago to Sydney wanting one of their own. The UK may have a history of channelling new urban rail down abandoned tracks (such as London's DLR or Manchester's Metrolink), but nowadays a linear park is sexier. The High Line Effect, like a new 'Bilbao Effect', promises to transform tired

cityscapes, bring a windfall of development and tourist spend, gain green credentials, and boost the city's self-esteem all in one fell blow. But is that a realistic prospect?

Paul Lincoln of London's Landscape Institute, observing that the High Line has 'led to this remarkable growth of development', questions whether it's 'a model that's likely to work anywhere else'. Certainly, previous urban linear parks on railway viaducts never unleashed such a real estate bonanza.

The 4.7km Promenade Plantée, near the Bastille in Paris, opened in 1990 and designed by Jacques Vergely and Philippe Mathieux, does not reference its past as the High Line does – the latter's linear paving evoking

rails and sleepers, and its plantings, rugged like the species that had overgrown the old tracks. Instead, the Promenade Plantée offers a high-level stroll on formal paths through traditional greenery, including flowers and manicured hedges. The surrounding cityscape dominated by comfortable apartments remains the same. The High Line team checked the Promenade Plantée out, though as Diller reports, 'it was only after we were engaged with the project that we realised there was a precedent'.

Six years before the Paris project London's surprisingly rural Parkland Walk opened, stretching 7.2km from Finsbury Park to Alexandra Palace. Only now is a new building set to emerge there – a zero-

*Below: A rendering of the third and final section of New York's High Line, which is due to open in 2014, and will extend the former goods railway to the Hudson River and around the new Hudson Yards development*

carbon school by Penoyre & Prasad.

In the USA, Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted is credited with the idea of the urban linear park. His best example is the Emerald Necklace, a scheme began in the 1870s to connect Boston parks with greenways, and Olmsted also designed Morningside and Riverside Parks, both on Manhattan's Upper West Side, though none of these were built on disused railway or infrastructural ruin.

Nowadays, brownfield sites, car parks, and even underground spaces can be platforms for linear parks. One other successful example, at least as transformational as the High Line, is Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, which »





involved restoring and landscaping 5.8km of urban river, previously buried first by concrete and then by a flyover. Since its opening in 2005, Seoul's soulless downtown has become an increasingly pedestrian-friendly realm orientated by this serene axis. Business and biodiversity are up and pollution and traffic levels are down.

The environmental benefits of a park increase with the ratio of green to hard surface, yet hardscape is a major element of the High Line, with its unique paving and platforms. Vegetation and soil absorb water, reduce storm run-off, and can diminish the urban heat island effect by five degrees C. 'Parks should be green,' insists Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' Sarah Gaventa, a previous director of CABE Space. 'Otherwise if they are all hard surfaces, they're just glamourised streets, like High Street Kensington but without the shops! I don't want the same experience in a park as I have on an urban street, no matter how smart the paving is.'

Eco gains apply to any urban park, but it's been long recognised that the shape of linear parks offer three further advantages. First, the ratio of edge to area is higher, increasing access possibilities – as Gaventa notes: 'They can have, by their design, more people living on their edges, and research shows that the public benefit most from green spaces that are 400m or less from their front door.' Second, they benefit from the effect of increased safety as more windows overlook a space, something first identified by American-Canadian urban activist Jane Jacobs. The



Above: Elizabeth Diller, whose practice Diller Scofidio + Renfro co-designed New York's High Line linear park. It has had 'astounding' global impact, she says

Below: In Seoul is Cheonggyecheon, a 5.8km stretch of urban river that has been restored and landscaped

third gain is connectivity, originally part of Olmsted's urban-spatial thinking, and now increasingly a practical boon to the expanding cycling community. A cycle super-highway, however, is no place for a stroll or safe play area for children. The High Line recognised the conflict and bans cycles – Diller notes, 'It's just an elevated vantage point for walking... We could never have imagined that people would want to voluntarily stroll in New York.'

Gaventa cites Mile End Park, which emerged in the Forties along the Regent's Canal in East London and was unified in 1999 with a green bridge over a main road, as an example that 'works in terms of connectivity, and as a resource for local people'. That includes under-18s, who Gaventa says are 'the largest users with the smallest voice. We should think about how young people use green spaces and build their needs into them.'

Even if development is not behind many urban linear park schemes, the rise of the pedestrian and the reclamation of the city from traffic would drive demand for them. Paul Lincoln notes that 'Victorian parks are big enough to offer escape from the city. In the linear park, you'll never get the sense of escaping the city.' He says we should ask 'What do you want the park to do for you? Be a refuge, like the countryside?'

Many do, but increasingly people want to reconnect to their urban environment. Ultimately, whether or not the High Line Effect delivers real-estate booms, it reinvents the city as an adventure for walkers.

**EVEN IF DEVELOPMENT IS NOT BEHIND MANY URBAN LINEAR PARK SCHEMES, THE RISE OF THE PEDESTRIAN AND THE RECLAMATION OF THE CITY FROM TRAFFIC WOULD DRIVE DEMAND FOR THEM**



SEOUL METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT



FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE

## HIGH LINE

When its second section up to 30th Street opened in 2011, the refashioned railway viaduct had already generated real estate investment then estimated at \$2bn, and two million visitors a year. Yet at the Serpentine Gallery Marathon in October 2011, Elizabeth Diller had talked about how to 'save the melancholia' the line had when abandoned.

What did she mean? 'You had a sense of loss and sadness for the New York that was disappearing,' she answers, back in London in December, referring to the West Side area around the Meatpacking District. 'That post-industrial feel. Reimagining the High Line for a public who come there for leisure, we wanted to preserve something about that, and it's very difficult, because it was a ruin.

'The soil or ballast was very toxic so we had to take everything out and clean it up and bring it back...letting it come back to its state of semi-wildness.' Diller admits that something of the melancholia has been lost, but 'that blindside of buildings, these empty spaces that are totally under-utilised – that's still present'.

Diller Scofidio + Renfro's High Line work with landscape architecture practice James Corner Field Operations has been 'in lockstep' since 2004 and she honours Dutch horticulturalist Piet Oudolf's contribution. 'He studied the issue of what takes root

Above: An interim walkway on the High Line's third section will enable visitors to see the old tracks and wilderness currently there

there, and he works with a palette and introduced more'.

The Friends of the High Line, founded in 1999 and still managing the facility, had argued that restoring the abandoned railway viaduct would be a catalyst for development, but Diller admits that 'we had no idea it would trigger all of this'. Nor did the locals. 'I don't think the community really understood that there would be big development', she adds. New projects include apartments by Jean Gang and a new Whitney Museum by Renzo Piano. When the Dia Art Foundation arrived in the Eighties, she says, the area with its chop shops and parking lots 'started to be valued in a different way. They attracted other galleries and art spaces'.

Diller confesses that 'there is something that weighs on me heavily... is the site better off for having the High Line?' The city has certainly benefited, but from effects that for her were 'residual'. Ultimately, she concludes that 'it was definitely worth doing, and it still gives a lot of people a lot of pleasure'.

She notes that visitors have become 'self-regulating now. New Yorkers won't go there on the weekend. It's just too much, but during the week it's fine, and in the evening'. Even so, if she could do things differently it may be in the promenade and access, for that 'tidal wave' of people. She

points out the new zoning regulations that anticipated growth. 'If you're next to the High Line, you have to step back, you can't really touch it. If you're going to have any kind of access, you have to provide a public amenity, like an elevator. It was actually pretty good that that came about'. Even so, the regulations don't apply at its southern tip below 14th Street, allowing the Standard Hotel to bridge the tracks. Without naming any particular new building, she rues that 'some of them are not good'.

The final 700m of High Line opens in 2014. 'The remediation has actually started', reports Diller, 'but we're still working on the design.' It takes the linear park right up 34th Street, into the glassy towers of the mixed-use million sq m Hudson Yards development that broke ground this winter. There, developer Related Companies has commissioned from Diller Scofidio + Renfro a 9,000 sq m Culture Shed and, collaborating with Rockwell Group, a 257m-tall residential tower.

The 2.3km path back to the High Line's Gansevoort Street start seems a long way, but not as long as the journey back from this emerging crystal citadel to what originally prompted the project, which Diller describes as 'the quality of that part of the city, which tends to have a voidness about it'. »



## EASTSIDE CITY PARK

Birmingham's new 3.4ha Eastside City Park, opened last December, slopes away from the city centre between a cliff-face of recent buildings dominated by Grimshaw's bulky Millennium Point (2002) and wastelands earmarked for the High Speed 2 train terminal, which will be even bigger.

Challenged with creating a pleasant respite to humanise an outsize future cityscape already arriving in chunks, it's no wonder that Andrew Taylor of Patel Taylor says that 'strong lines and forms' were the basis of their design. And, despite isolating the area's rail heritage, including Philip Hardwick's proud columned Curzon Street Station (1838) adjacent, Taylor denies any easy claim of High Line influence.

The £11.7m park has three zones. Below Millennium Point runs a 188m-long water channel with 21 waterjet runs and five different park bench typologies, including a chaise longue, from which to enjoy it, all parallel to a long rectilinear garden with granite walkways through frame arches that host aromatic plants. The rectiliniarity continues in the trim of individual hedges, and not least in

monolithic Corten steel lighting fins, up to 7m tall and perforated by an organic pattern.

These impressive structures dominate the central area, where events can be staged. The hardscape here steps down to a timber frame which, when roofed with green creepers, will make a shaded entrance canopy, beside a listed red-brick Victorian pub and, across a plaza, Hardwick's Curzon Street. 'The frame is like a room in the city,' says Taylor, although the western zone annexes the grass of the old Park Street churchyard, and the park's grid dissolves.

Eastside is about 55 per cent green in area. Taylor Patel has drawn on the lessons of Thames Barrier Park (2000), which it worked on with Alain Provost, of Groupe Signes. There's an echo of it in the plantings as well as the geometry. At Eastside, things like diverting traffic and remediating ex-industrial land was not so landscape architecture, 'it was heavy engineering', quips Taylor. But the crisp and contemporary park that has resulted already feels refreshing. As a green spine for the area's big-grained future, it is a master stroke. »

*Below: Birmingham's Eastside City Park features strong lines and forms on a site aimed at humanising an outsize future cityscape that is already taking shape*

**IMPRESSIVE STRUCTURES DOMINATE THE CENTRAL AREA, WHERE EVENTS CAN BE STAGED. THE HARDSCAPE HERE STEPS DOWN TO A TIMBER FRAME WHICH, WHEN ROOFED WITH GREEN CREEPERS, WILL MAKE A SHADED ENTRY CANOPY**







## MADRID RIO

Since Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, no other urban river park project has had the scope and transformative impact of Madrid Río. The Spanish capital had long ignored its river, along which 6km of the M-30 ring road was built in the Seventies. As work started in 2007 to bury this section the city organised a competition for ideas of how to deal with the liberated land. The winners, Burgos & Garrido, Porras & La Casta, and Rubio & Álvarez-Sala, working together as MRIOS arquitectos alongside Rotterdam-base landscapers West 8, proposed an urban park.

Completed in 2011, the £339m park covers 120 ha with new pedestrian realm, parkland, cycle routes, sports facilities including skatepark and rockclimbing, new iconic bridges and restored ancient ones, water features and even an urban beach. Jaime Álvarez, of Burgos & Garrido, says that 'life by the water is new in Madrid', and this linear park offers a surplus of it.

One river bank has become the Salón de Pinos, a 6km promenade of pine trees, while the other includes a restored and extended Arganzuela Park, which had been virtually obliterated by the highway, and the Matadero, a 1911 brick slaughterhouse restored as contemporary arts centre. The third part, closest to the city centre, connects to the royal palace and hunting park, either side of the Puente del Rey.

'We used to say that Madrid Río is a kind of horizontal building, due to the technical boxes and facilities that we had to deal with,' comments Álvarez, describing its challenges. »



*Above and left: Landlocked Madrid has embraced living with water through the multimillion euro redevelopment along the city's river*





*Left: London will get its own linear park in land through the new Embassy Gardens development in Vauxhall, where the new American Embassy is to be located*

## EMBASSY GARDENS

London's Vauxhall-Nine Elms-Battersea corridor is seeing a frenzy of development, and in 2014 a new linear park on what is now brownfield should span it. Developer Ballymore commissioned landscape architecture practice Camlins to design the park through its red-brick-clad Embassy Gardens residential development, adjacent to where the American Embassy will relocate.

It will offer a 1km walk and include a hard-surfaced square under a tree canopy, and a grassy square intended as a communal hub and social space. Inspired by New York's High Line, Huw Morgan, director at Camlins, has concluded that 'long and thin can be exceptional. It's the nature of how you programme and use space that is critical.'

The experience of landscaping projects, including Ancoats, Manchester and Liverpool city centres, has brought Camlins an understanding of movement. Roads cross on bridges so the park's east-west pedestrian passage is unbroken. Clear cycle paths on adjacent roads will divert fast cycle traffic.

He notes that 'it's interesting what happens at the edge', of which the linear park has 2.5km. Here, the frame of railings and gates of traditional parks is dispensed with so that, as Morgan explains, 'buildings are immersed in the green volume of the park and create the edge. Green may pass into buildings at ground floor and roll up and on to courtyards'.

## DE HOFBOGEN

Rotterdam's unused 1.9km Hofplein rail viaduct could be a potential High Line, but plans for it are very different, and no-one can say when they will be realised. The structure is owned by housing corporations that together decided to develop it as de Hofbogen (the Yard Arches), exploiting the old downtown Hofplein station and the viaduct's arches, and ultimately increasing property values in the low-income housing areas it passes through.

Local architectural historian Crimson commissioned Paris-based Atelier Seraji to come up with a vision. Its proposal, called Snaking City, was for a ribbon development of architectural experimentation, strung along a raised linear park, with diverse attractions such as a long, open-air pool.

Atelier Seraji has been asked by Hofbogen to continue to think about the filling in of the viaduct, but so far the only element realised is a mini mall by local architecture practice Peña, opened in 2011. Here, a cluster of creative shops and a jazz restaurant occupies seven restored arches. Other spaces have been waterproofed, and the next stage would be renovating the top, but at the end of 2012, no funding had been committed. The transformation, says de Hofbogen, is 'step-by-step'. ■



*The Hofplein rail viaduct is envisaged as a raised park, but so far only a mini mall has been completed to occupy some of the restored arches*