

From industrial relic to brave new world: The High Line gets a second chance

Exhibitions

Designing the High Line.

Exhibition designed by LOT/EK Architecture, Gary Handel, and Paula Scher, at Grand Central Terminal, New York City, July 10–26, 2003. Web site designed by Robert Greenhood (www.thehighline.org).

Saving the High Line—the abandoned railroad just south of Manhattan's Jacob K. Javits Convention Center—has gone from lost cause to almost-sure-thing. New York City recently allocated \$15 million to the project, and its new zoning plan for Chelsea treats the line as a permanent feature.

Victorious in politics, the High Line's advocates have turned to architecture. Their problem: converting a rusting railroad that sweeps past fourth-floor windows, without so much as a stairway or an elevator, into a usable public amenity. Last spring's "ideas competition" garnered 720 entries from 36 countries; in May, a jury that included Steven Holl, Marilyn Jordan Taylor, and Bernard Tschumi settled on half a dozen winners. Many of the entries were lighthearted, with swimming pools, roller coasters, and windmills installed on the elevated platform. But several competitors had darker visions; one proposed installing jail cells between the line's massive steel beams. As for the access problem, solutions ranged from crystalline elevators to a giant

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seesaw (proposed by Michael Rock, of the hot graphic design firm 2x4).

In July, dozens of schemes went on display in Grand Central Terminal's former waiting room, Vanderbilt Hall, around a tentlike movie theater in which a film of the High Line's celebrity supporters played continuously. The exhibition was itself a model of how to make something useful from an obsolete, but stirring, public space.

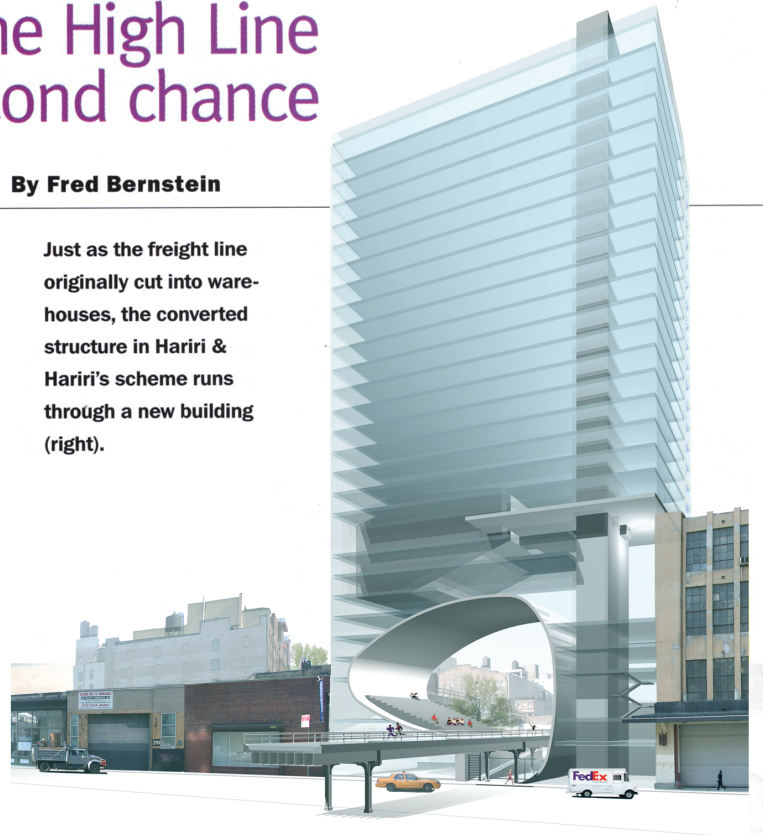
The winners attracted most of the attention, with visitors imagining swimming Nathalie Rinne's mile-long High Line Pool and wondering if the rusty railroad could really be made watertight. But the most interesting entry turned the line into a sieve, by subtracting pieces of the structure to create a kind of gritty jigsaw puzzle. That entry, by Ernesto Mark Faunlagui of Hoboken, was a tantalizing homage to the late conceptual artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who used a buzzsaw to turn buildings into sculptures, but never had a "canvas" as long as the 1.5 mile-long High Line.

Before the show came down, all 720 entries were posted on a Web site (www.thehighline.org), possibly the first time so many solutions to a design problem have been gathered on the Web. The site provides a look at work by dozens of established designers (among the "losers" are Winka Dubbeldam and Richard Gluckman; the best-known winner is Hariri & Hariri).

Perusing the winning (and losing) entries suggests two rules for entering architecture competitions: First, give your project a name—

By Fred Bernstein

Just as the freight line originally cut into warehouses, the converted structure in Hariri & Hariri's scheme runs through a new building (right).



Proposal for Renovating the High Line on the West Side of Manhattan won't cut it. Best to have something catchy—like *Veldt Way* (from Jurgen Riehm of 1100 Architect) and *El-Topia* (Alex Gorlin). But portentous names also grabbed the jury: the Matta-Clark homage was titled *The Brutality of Disappearing*. Then: think, alas, in two dimensions. "This isn't an architecture competition; it's a poster competition," quipped one magazine editor who observed the bleary-eyed jurors at work. Weak graphics didn't stand a chance.

Indeed, it's possible that wide-open competitions, which require jurors to look at hundreds of entries per day, will spell the end of subtlety in architecture. A sketch by Wright, or a squiggle by Gehry, would have been lost in the computer-aided din.

Compounding the problem: On the Internet, each entry—60 by 40

inches in real life—is reduced to a tiny JPG image. Robert Greenhood, who designed the competition Web site, said that he wanted to make sure that each submission could be viewed on a single screen—that is, without scrolling. But that makes most of the text unreadably small, and enlarging it doesn't help—as the letters grow, they pixelate into oblivion (the real brutality of disappearing!). Future competitions might ask contestants to submit their text by e-mail; the e-mails could then be made available separately on the Web.

Of course, the real show will begin when an architect is hired and plans for the line's reconstruction are made public, probably next year. Friends of the High Line will have to manage the transition from seesaws and roller coasters to reality. The competition Web site will be an important point of reference. ■