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# The High Line

Photographs by Joel Sternfeld

The former New York Central Railroad elevated freight route that runs through the west side of lower Manhattan has the potential for being an unusual public amenity. Now owned by the city, the Chelsea High Line is a once-utilitarian structure that has become, although raised thirty feet in the air and neglected, a recreational walkway. It wanders through the city street grid with the same quirky assurance as Broadway, offering unusual vantage points from which to view and discover the surrounding city.

**11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Spring**



Photographer Joel Sternfeld has been documenting this mile-and-a-third long aerie for several years. He began when the Canadian Centre for Architecture, familiar with his work photographing the Campagna Romana, asked him to explore the area in conjunction with an urban design competition it was organizing for the West Side Rail Yards, around which the High Line loops.

Viewers of Sternfeld's pictures are often drawn to the layering and juxtapositions of urban form that being a few stories above street level reveals. But Sternfeld is just as apt to take pleasure in the unexpected layering and juxtaposition of time that one encounters in a place that has been largely left fallow in the midst of an ever-changing city. There is the cycling of seasons; the lethargy of a littered beer bottle that Sternfeld rediscovers, untouched, months after he first photographs it; the bushes blossoming in front of a sign for a defunct dot-com business painted on the wall of a building; a tended garden near a wild glade of ailianthus.

**11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Summer**





The question of what kind of public amenity this place might be does not have a simple answer. The owners of the property through which the viaduct passes would just as soon have it torn down. Some observers believe this industrial artifact can generate distinctive recreational and commercial life along its route. The success of such a project would depend upon a partnership between public and private organizations, perhaps in creating a non-profit entity to operate this uncommon resource. To that end, a growing number of civic leaders and design professionals have lent their support to a non-profit group, Friends of the High Line, which is advocating that the structure be retained, refurbished and returned to the people of the city as singular open space.

**11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Fall**





Sternfeld has a subtler, potentially bolder, vision. He would like to see the High Line remain as it is—less in the spirit of Paris’ Promenade Plantée, more in the spirit of a “railroad ruin” or a “time landscape,” as he puts it. It’s possible to find other time landscapes in a city such as New York, but none that offer the same quixotic combination of detachment and engagement—qualities that suffuse Sternfeld’s carefully studied, carefully controlled, views.

—*Todd W. Bressi and Hugh Hardy*

**11th Avenue and 30th Street looking east, Winter**



