

Comments by the AIA New York Chapter
Surface Transportation Board
Public Hearing in regard to the High Line
24 July 2003
Federal Conference Center
26 Federal Plaza
Rick Bell, FAIA, Executive Director

I am speaking today on behalf of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and its 3,400 members, including architects and urban designers who have studied the issue at hand and formally and repeatedly expressed support for preservation of the High Line. The AIA, founded in New York in 1857, now has 70,000 members nationwide, and is arguably the architectural vocation's leading professional organization. We maintain a strong and ongoing interest in the quality of the urban environment, expressed in planning, building design and historic preservation.

The AIA New York Chapter has previously given its strong endorsement in support of use of the High Line as public open space for Manhattan's Far West Side. I am honored to be invited to speak today to reiterate that the architectural community in New York City strongly supports the proposal of the Friends of the High Line to save this historic elevated railway for interim trail use, as a greenway surmounting an important relic of New York's industrial heritage.

The area in which the High Line is situated is an urban district that is not adequately graced by parks and recreational open space. By "rail-banking" the High Line, we could quickly add open space of nearly seven acres in a linear configuration more than a mile and a half in length. It has been estimated that purchasing an equivalent amount of open space in the real estate market might cost over a quarter of a billion dollars. That kind of money is not likely to be in the municipal budget despite the need for parkland in the area.

Preserving the High Line and reusing it as public open space will provide an important pedestrian link between the communities on Manhattan's West Side. It will add value to surrounding properties, contributing to the long-term economic health of the City. The High Line will most certainly become a well-loved public environment, treasured by residents, workers and visitors to the community for generations to come. It has already catalyzed rethinking of open space possibilities in adjacent neighborhoods. For example published plans for the proposed Olympic Stadium or New York Jets green football stadium immediately to the north benefit from the High Line as elevated pedestrian pathway and connector. Imagine the Olympic Torch finding its way in the year 2012, carried aloft along the High Line to the opening ceremonies of the summer games in what has been called the world's second home, the eyes of the world focused on the torch bearer but also on the path of movement.

It is almost axiomatic that reusing the High Line as public open space is feasible. There are no impediments. Ample access can be demonstrated. A safe and secure environment can be created below its protective canopy as well as atop its elevated platform.

The High Line itself is unique, still futuristic in its concept of passing elevated rail service through the buildings being served. In Paris a similar elevated rail structure was converted into a beautiful linear park. Its use and acceptance has demonstrated that such environments are safe, utilized by a wide cross section of people and popular as important social centers for their communities.

Speaking personally for a moment, I still recall, some twenty-four years after, the opportunity I had as a New Yorker to bicycle and occasionally stroll to work atop the now-demolished stretch of the West Side or Miller Highway. Knowing that the daily journey to my first architectural job was not imperiled by rushing taxicabs, looming trucks or frustrated motorists made the separation from the morning rush hour street frenzy almost indescribably pleasurable, a chance to greet others not encumbered by on-grade grubbing and an opportunity to breathe in the relatively fresh air a story above the mean streets below. Perhaps you can't go home again, at least not by bicycle. But I would like to think that with the solidity of the air-borne High Line linear structure in place, that a new generation of New Yorkers, visitors, commuters, strollers and railroad buffs will have a chance to experience our City's special resource first hand, not through photographs of a moment lost in vague memories related decades later but experienced viscerally, through what could be called voting with ones' feet.

The AIA New York Chapter hopes and requests that the Surface Transportation Board ratify and assist the efforts of the Friends of the High Line, the many professional and civic organizations allied in its efforts and the elected leaders of the City of New York to create a spectacular new public space on the far West Side by allowing for interim trail use of this extraordinary historic structure.

We honor those who created the transportation infrastructure of our City to preserve this significant urban archeological treasure.

We reward and respect our neighbors today and all others who can currently chance upon this special structure, to create a path and a place that transcends the street grid. And lastly,

We owe it to those who will come after us to take advantage of this unparalleled opportunity and, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of enabling legislation that created Central Park, to in turn today create a linear park that will inspire festivities and appreciation for generations to come. Thank you for your consideration.