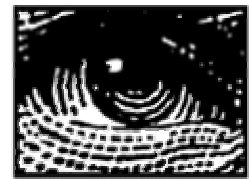


## Hanging Garden of Babble-On

by **Choire Sicha**

Poor baby High Line! For the last 23 years, the disused elevated railway that rusts through West Chelsea and the meatpacking district has, in full public view, been starved near to death by its psychotically strict vegan parents. But magically, it seems now that the weedy little media darling will be taken in by some fairy godparents, fed intravenously for a spell and then bundled off to Dalton. Look out, Hudson River Park: It looks as though the High Line will become Manhattan's grooviest, slenderest new outdoor space.



THE  
OBSERVATORY

**You could fit  
nearly 160  
High Lines in  
Central Park.**

And in revenge for her years of ill treatment, landlords and developers may be allowed to spend the next decade in a shock-and-awe campaign on the West Chelsea district.

The High Line, which runs largely along 10th Avenue from 34th Street to Gansevoort Street, will with care grow to be the pre-eminent leggy supermodel of West Chelsea. The pretty, pretty High Line Park evidently will, with one hand, wipe the Beuysian sweat from the brow of art superdealer Larry Gagosian and, with the other, dispense solar-power-made lattes to the poor. Who could gripe about such a fantastic new celebrity of the city—particularly given her horrific childhood?

The plot congeals. Before baby High Line can be officially adopted, the fight must occur between what dreamers scheme and what can actually be agreed upon and paid for. And with all the hoopla about that petite and high-heeled charmer of a \$65 million park-to-be, no one has yet interrogated the city's incredibly crafty (suspicious?) plan: a rezoning idea that may actually satisfy expansion-hungry 10th Avenue landlords, tight-ass West Chelsea art dealers and the open-space-loving idealists who have taken the High Line under their wing. The binding ingredient of this plan is simply this: the ability of owners of property beneath the High Line to sell their vertical-development rights to nearby avenue-bordering

properties.

Any sane New Yorker would rather face dinner for two *avec* NY1's gabbling "parenting expert," Shelley Goldberg, than hear a single dull word about zoning. As a result, citizens can only blame their jaded selves for facing neighborhood development unprepared. Is the shiny, enchanting High Line Park hypnotic enough to distract us from judging the city's plan to install 50 times the number of current dwelling units in 14 or so blocks of the small West Chelsea district? The High Line, after all, only stretches 1.45 miles. A survey describes it as 30 feet wide, which would make the total park-to-be a mere 5.27 acres. You could accommodate nearly 160 High Lines in Central Park. Even the East Village's little Tompkins Square Park is nearly double the area of the Heidi Klum-thin High Line. Landlords twirl the handlebars of their mustaches and cackle maniacally; perhaps we've all been tied to the rails of a tiny elevated delight. (I use "we" purposefully: It should be disclosed that I have owned a gallery operating in West Chelsea since 1997.)

At community-board meetings, Chelsea residents have fretted that rezoning-propagated high-rises would create a forbidding wall along 10th Avenue. You could say that it might be a physical manifestation of a wall that already exists. It's a matter of course that the "West Chelsea Arts District" will be segregated physically and economically from the public housing across 10th Avenue. The art dealers didn't move to West Chelsea because they were taken by the proximity to public housing—apart, of course, from NYCHA's naturally depressive role in keeping industrial rents cheap.

The changes may come fast. In the spring of 2004, public review of the special West Chelsea district will begin. In summer of 2004, there will emerge a proposed park design for the High Line, put forward by the community group Friends of the High Line. In fall of 2004, the city hopes to officially adopt the zoning. At that moment, the starting gun will fire and a million—O.K., a couple dozen—long-suffering landlords will begin to build the shit out of West Chelsea. Amanda Burden, chair of the City Planning Commission, will toss this gerrymandered bouquet of zoning to the assembled neglected bachelorettes of West Chelsea, the pretty ribbon of the High Line Park binding it all together in mid-air

### **Friends in High Places**

"THIS IS A HOT NEIGHBORHOOD ON THE UP AND UP. \$65 MILLION HIGH-LINE PARK COMING SOON; BEST GALLERY BLOCK IN MANHATTAN NEXT DOOR; CHELSEA PIERS SPORTS COMPLEX DOWN THE STREET; CLUBS NEARBY: IN SHORT, A DESTINATION," shouts a caps-lock-ignorant ad on Craigslist.org. The property advertised: a 1,300-square-foot store (with basement) with a rent of \$10,000 dollars a month. Located on 10th Avenue south of 23rd Street, the property was just listed (or, more likely, relisted) this weekend: Its broker refused to share information regarding the ad's response. And just up the road a bit—in the parlance of Craigslist, "this is in or around 27th

near 10th Ave."—there's a 5,000-square-foot space for rent at \$16,670 a month. "[T]his would be a great spot for a restaurant/nightclub/art gallery, retail, anything!" wrote broker Kathy Pappas in that ad.

Anything! Chelsea is ready for anything, and it's *so* going to get it.

The painter Patrick Mimran has terrorized the West Chelsea art community for the last three years with his anything. His misguided project has commandeered the billboards that hang from the High Line on West 24th, 25th and 26th streets. The reported total yearly cost of these advertisements is \$60,000, a high price to pay to prove the penultimate of Walter Benjamin's 13 theses for the critic: *The slogans of an inadequate criticism peddle ideas to fashion*. The text of these billboards is printed in big black letters on a white background; recently, his name has appeared printed below in red. "To express conceptual ideas write a book, don't paint," he instructs Chelsea desk girls and collectors alike. "Don't hate what you prefer," he chides. His attack on the meritocracy of the marketplace: "Bad art is still art."

But there is another young painter also working out of *métier* in Chelsea and on the High Line, one Robert Hammond. (Mr. Mimran would undoubtedly hate Mr. Hammond's paintings, and that can only be a good thing.) Mr. Hammond is the co-founder of Friends of the High Line, the group that has suddenly found itself at the very center of the redevelopment of West Chelsea.

The Friends maintain an office in the Hudson Guild on West 26th Street. They'll soon be moving down to the meatpacking district, to the Starpoint building that houses the rowdy bar Hogs and Heifers—but for now, the doll-size Friends of the High Line office resembles the newspaper room of any John Hughes-era high school. A fresh-faced team of five is cheerfully packed in the crowded space. There is a happy urgency: The previous Sunday, Kenneth T. Jackson, current president of the New-York Historical Society and highly regarded historian, had penned a massive editorial in favor of preservation of the High Line in *The New York Times* at the paper's invitation. (Perhaps one can presume that the editorial was Dr. Jackson's apology for omitting an entry on the High Line in his 1995 *Encyclopedia of New York City*.)

The monstrously charismatic Mr. Hammond couldn't be more suited for the role of the accidental advocate. He's conservatively yet sportily dressed in a gray sweater and a differently gray shirt over a white T-shirt. His fashionable glasses and trimmed hair mark him as a professional do-gooder. But wait! A not insubstantial hidden hole in his lovely sweater indicates that one shouldn't presume a lack of downtown spice in the man—nor should that prejudice the court in the adoption proceedings for baby High Line, either.

The story of Mr. Hammond and his partner in things High Line, the writer Joshua David, is by now oft told. Neither particularly wanted to lead a crusade to save the High Line, but at the time—1999—the Giuliani administration was ready to indulge the hungry property owners of 10th Avenue in the destruction of the High

Line. Although both Mr. Hammond and Mr. David were otherwise employed, before they knew it they found themselves filing suit against the city.

A consortium calling itself the Chelsea Property Owners had agreed to cover any costs greater than \$7 million for demolition of the High Line, and the railway company CSX, the actual current owner of the dormant railway, had always indicated that it was amenable to whatever legally kosher decision the West Chelsea community and the city would unanimously make. Just as Mr. Giuliani left office, he leap-frogged the process with a parting gift to the landowners in the form of an agreement for voluntary abandonment of the railway. Friends of the High Line was forced to prove that the intended demolition clearly ran counter to the city's land-use review policy.

Fortunately, even before his election, Mike Bloomberg had made his support for the renovation of the High Line explicit. Since then, the tables have turned, and the High Line is now the pretty floral centerpiece of the Chelsea dinner party to come.

The charming Mr. Hammond is, at least publicly, the most sincere of all idealists. He is also no idiot: The board of Friends includes such top-notch operators as Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, the first director of cultural affairs for New York City (and lucky owner of the funniest name ever), and Philip Aarons, the force behind the early-90's development of Lincoln Center.

Mr. Hammond's focus is appropriately on a concern for Chelsea as "mostly a low-middle-income neighborhood" where "90 percent of kids here are on a public lunch program." Behind a divider on the other side of the Hudson Guild room where we talked, an E.S.L. class chanted in confused unison. Mr. Hammond is also careful to distinguish himself and his Friends from the deal being struck all around the High Line. As he put it, "Zoning is not the High Line." He is also optimistic about the goodness of things: The "city's making a lot of efforts to build more affordable housing."

In the city's Aug. 15, 2003, environmental-assessment statement, "Special West Chelsea District Rezoning," the anticipated impact of the city's scheme is explored in tiresome detail. About affordable housing, that plan is strangely silent. (Duly noted: These are preliminary documents.) Residential development as per the city's Reasonable Worst-Case Development Scenario is estimated to be a total of 4,174 dwelling units in "elevator apartment buildings and lofts." The space for the number of low-to-moderate-income units is left blank.

Just back in 1999, the city approved massive rezoning throughout Chelsea, including a special mixed-use district in West Chelsea, resulting in the modest yet posh new residential units on West 22nd Street (reportedly home to Björk, among others: IN SHORT, A DESTINATION), and likewise the towering hideosities of Sixth Avenue. To translate the current rezoning proposal into English: If adopted as is, the art galleries mid-block will remain largely unchanged. (Amusingly, this zoning retention could be considered to make a de facto historical gallery district

out of a neighborhood only really occupied by the galleries since 1997.) Along and around West 30th Street and 17th and 18th streets will be high-density mixed use. Tenth and 11th avenues will have ground and low-floor commercial and higher-floor residential uses—quite higher, in some instances.

When the city first began preparing these reports, the residential population of the West Chelsea zone was all but invisible. Officially, there are 82 current dwelling units. The 2000 census claims approximately 1,061 residents, which means these two numbers must be from differently bordered areas (or realities—West Chelsea residents do not live 13 to an apartment). These residents, learning from the development of Soho, have formed local tenants' associations and have joined citywide tenants' groups. Timothy Smith, a resident of West 26th Street, has "lived illegally in these buildings for 10 years and lived in the immediate vicinity for 20. I've been around," he said cheerfully, "since there were drug dealers and hookers, and now there are art dealers and artists. Nothing has changed." His opinion is that "most tenants are in some sort of action with the owners of their buildings"—some on good terms (that is, paying rent), some not.

The smart and wry Mr. Smith, who is the managing director of the Armory Show Inc.—one of the most prestigious fairs of contemporary art in the world—described himself as optimistic for the future of the neighborhood. It is clear that he falls on the cynical side of optimism, however: "All you have to do is look at the city to see the real-estate people usually win," he said. He is decidedly pragmatic about the future of Chelsea. "Wherever there is waterfront, there are high-rise buildings for people to look out over it. Chicago, Rio: They're going to build high-rises anyway." And, of course, he has the gentle nostalgia of anyone who has seen a neighborhood explode into commerce: "This neighborhood wasn't attractive to anyone but people living on the fringe. The fringe is gone." One of Mr. Smith's neighbors, who asked that his name not be used, sounded almost wistful when he reported on the old fringe of Chelsea: "The pimps played games right outside my door in their pink fur coats. Seven or eight pimps—I'd go out Sunday morning, I'd literally have to walk through them."

Thanks to their careful organizing, and also labors on their behalf by Chelsea Assemblyman Dick Gottfried, the tenants will most probably succeed in not only not being evicted, but in converting their housing to soon-to-be-parkside legal dwellings.

More secure amid the coming storm of development are the 200-plus art galleries of the skinny West Chelsea strip. Even during the city's 30 months of recession, many art dealers reported a fairly stable economy in Chelsea. Of course, the gallery district is IN SHORT, A DESTINATION, and the industry remains stable partly due to sheer mass and concentration. According to Glenn McMillan, the exuberant "G" of CRG Gallery on West 22nd Street, the current buoyancy in Chelsea's market can be also explained by collectors' "disincentive to put money in stocks." His particular concern about the development of Chelsea is traffic, congestion and transportation. He's not crazy, either: According to the city's draft

environmental-impact statement, there would be a projected "net increment of approximately 511, 739, and 694 vehicle trips" morning, noon and night, respectively.

### **‘Not about buildability’**

Apart from the cavernous galleries, consider the architectural queerities of West Chelsea, both extant and planned: The massive Starrett-Lehigh building squats on an entire block over at 26th and 11th, counting among its commercial space 75,000 square feet of pure Martha Stewart. Consider Barry Diller’s new headquarters for InterActiveCorp, to be a Frank Gehry wackosity on the West Side Highway between 18th and 19th streets, due for completion in 2006. (Wagers on the struggle between Mr. Gehry’s tardiness and Mr. Diller’s ferocity should be filed with one’s bookie immediately.)

Amongst all West Chelsea’s anomalies of commercial space—the preliminary drawing of the Gehry building is a lovely yet tortured Gehry "look what I can do!" sideshow, very only-child—any design at all placed upon the High Line will seem completely at home. That’s fortunate. More than 100 of the entries to the Friends of the High Line’s open design competition were exhibited in Grand Central Terminal this summer, and they were—to put it mildly—completely outlandish.

The competition was described by the Friends as "not being about buildability." That’s not a non-word you have to tempt an architect with twice. Designing without the constraints of humanity or finance or gravity, without the real-world presence of fur-clad pimps or the inevitable drag queen giving head to a john at the end of a darkened platform, this freedom is the nocturnal emission of architects everywhere. And when—O.K., if—it is executed, the day-to-day existence of the High Line Park will be a fight of the paper plans of the aesthetes and the body fluids of the sordid classes.

It’s safe to say a few things about the proposals in general. First, many underemployed architects are smoking what everyone’s favorite conceptual architect, Zaha Hadid, is smoking. (Remember: "Bad art is still art.") Most disturbing of any of the trends in these proposals, the 80’s postmodern pun is alive and well: retro-infrastructures. (Re)engaged infrastructure. Move(able) Feast. One chaos-theory glassy design is, hilariously, taglined "space without qualities."

Standing entirely apart from the other entries is Brooklyn residents Misha Sklar and Yevgeniya Plechkina’s proposal for a tri-level park, prison and pool. This fantastic piece of satire-*cum*-manifesto is a precise comment on outdoor space, on the leisure class and on how New Yorkers do not see themselves as Americans. Of course, there is already a prison in West Chelsea, the Bayview Correctional Facility, at the corner of 20th Street and 11th Avenue. But this proposal would make explicit in a lovely fashion the hidden subtleties of a Saturday afternoon, as collectors brush by prison visitors in the stiff Hudson winter wind.

Absolutely everyone loves the idea of Nathalie Rinne's entry: a mile-and-a-half-long swimming pool. (Anticipate, however, the *New York Post* headline: "High Line Pool: You're-in Trouble!") What's more poetic? Water in the sky, a memorial marker to the death of a dusty life of industry belonging to a Manhattan that no one remembers. The borough is well on its way to becoming a "space without qualities," indeed. People's deep attraction to the High Line must, I think, be partly a reaction to the stock sameness of the new constructions, the neighborhoods unfringed, the forlorn empty hype of movie-set Manhattan. The High Line is distinguished as refugee and oddity: something special in the air, to coin a phrase.

Strong yet cryptic among the High Line's entries was a proposal by Robert Huebser and Benjamin Haupt of the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee (roughly: University for Organization). Their "Black Market Crawler" is a lovely if much too postmodern idea for a randomly rail-traveling thing-place, but, in a phrase that continues to haunt, they mark the High Line to be used for activities such as "leisure, pleasure, sex and crime": the four communal activities that bind us all across the rails of class.

### **Future Shock**

Sex and crime: key elements of the West Chelsea that once was and is no more—unless of course you count the recent sales-tax-evasion gallery scandals. As Robert Hammond and his merry Friends prepare what he says will be "a realizable plan in the next 12 months," he will remain energized by a community-input forum that took place the week before we met, attended by 400 largely enthusiastic people. One hopes these perky people have not suffered the vision of what may be an omen of the development to come. Built most recently near the High Line is an eight-story residential building outwardly so ugly that it defies comprehension. (According to residents of the building, the interior is quite amenable—two bedroom, two-bath, "under \$3,000.") Located on the corner of 10th Avenue and 20th Street, it has retail windows that sit sadly unrented; they absently reflect the High Line.

Speaking of ugly, Sixth Avenue's recent development offers another cautionary tale: How pleasant will the experience of 14 or so city blocks under constant construction be throughout the next decade? Despite all this, the charming Rachaele Raynoff, press secretary for the department of city planning, is absolutely amped about West Chelsea rezoning. From her description—and that of Robert Hammond and others—the Oct. 2 West Chelsea community meeting was a lovefest of developers and residents and High Line enthusiasts. She explained the air-rights-transfer invention, the secret to the happiness of landlords who were so recently willing to spend millions of dollars to destroy the High Line. Ms. Raynoff later even e-mailed me a cute city-produced graphic to explain this idea. Like moisture in a feminine-hygiene-product commercial, airspace is wicked away from the High-Line-occluded properties to the tall buildings on the avenues. Everybody, it seems, wins. Those with property directly abutting the High Line would even be encouraged to install adorable space-age cafés opening directly onto the High Line

Park itself.


At this point, it seems almost safe to say that the rusty lonely baby High Line will in fact grow up to become big High Line Park. CSX, the railroad's owners, should certainly be eager to stop paying to maintain the High Line, and as soon as a consensus is reached that thoroughly meets legal requirements, CSX will withdraw—without even a penny for their expensive troubles. The residents themselves seem cautiously on board: Everyone reports himself to be an optimist now. Surely, like all New York projects, the High Line will reflect compromise. With any luck at least, any rollerbladers on the High Line Park will be executed—perhaps as part of a revenue-producing High Line reality television show!

The high-speed nightmare of the nearby Hudson River Park will hopefully be a cautionary tale, not an inspiration. Fortunately, people are "asking for quieter space," according to Mr. Hammond, and "They don't want it to be a normal park." The Park may indeed turn out to be an amazing oddity of slow uses, and a great labor of love for some, and undoubtedly a large expense in years of dubious financial security for New York City. Maybe the fringe will be back.

Later yet the High Line might well become another minor disdained luxury of Manhattan: Many of us will walk under it begrudgingly after a late night at our newly built and overcrowded offices. The young Chelsea dealer Derek Eller put it like this: "Sounds like a nice idea, but when I'm finished working, I like to get the hell out of Chelsea." But perhaps when the workers go home the residents—mostly new members of the community, a few old—will remain to stay and play together.

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*This column ran on page 1 in the 11/17/2003 edition of The New York Observer.*

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