A WALK ON THE HIGH LINE

By Adam Gopnik
The view looking west on Thirteenth Street, photographed by Joe Serefield, who views it as "a piece of New York as it really is."
NEW YORK JOURNAL about an abandoned, elevated New York Central Railroad track on the lower West Side that activists are hoping to turn into a park... The archeology of Manhattan is reversed: the past is not buried in the ground but held up in the air, on the upper floors... The most peaceful high place in New York right now is a stretch of viaduct called the High Line. The High Line is a derelict elevated railroad track, about two stories high, running a mile and a third along the western edge of the city, from Thirty-fourth Street to Gansevoort Street. It encloses about eight acres... For the moment, the High Line has gone not to wrack and ruin but to seed: weeds and grasses and even small trees sprout from the track bed... The poet-keeper of the High Line is the photographer Joel Sternfeld. He has been taking pictures of it in all seasons for the past year, and he has a gift for seeing light and space and color-romantic possibility of every kind—where a less sensitive observer sees smudge and weed and ruin. The High Line does not offer a God’s-eye view of the city, exactly, but something rarer, the view of a lesser angel: of a cupid in a Renaissance painting, of the putti looking down on the Nativity manger. Writer tells about a garden maintained by a designer named Ken Robson, who accesses the track from a gangplank that leads into his apartment... Fortunately for the High Line’s friends, there exists an organization, called the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, that helps groups that want to take old railroad lines and turn them into "recreational" areas. There are already eleven thousand miles of such trails in the country, and the High Line would be eligible for conversion. Estimates—what are known among Chelsea Property Owners as "laughably conservative estimates"—put the cost of park conversion at around forty million dollars, which is not, by the standards of a city that spends a billion and a half dollars a year on
environmental protection, really all that much money. Writer interviews Robert Hammond… The Friends of the High Line often say that they would like to see it become a promenade plantée, a long snaking viaduct with flowers, like the one, in Paris, that runs from the Bastille out to the Bois de Vincennes. The difference, evident to anyone who has walked both, is that the promenade plantée is a piece of Paris that happens to be above Paris—an elegant flowered walkway looking down on elegant flowered streets—while the High Line is a place where the discordant encounters of its city are briefly resolved…

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