Immersed in city while floating above: A Valley geographer explores NYC's High Line

By RUTHERFORD H. PLATT
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NEW YORK — Manhattan on a busy weekday is not everyone's idea of where to go for a tranquil spring stroll, but that is exactly what I did recently. Conveyed seamlessly to the city on a charter bus from Amherst, I landed in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at 10:30 a.m. with eight hours of freedom.

Passing up the Met on this fine day, I wandered into and across Central Park — Frederick Law Olmsted's masterpiece that launched the American urban parks movement after the Civil War.

Today, the park continues to evolve to meet 21st century needs — as in closing a loop road, once an equestrian path for New York's 400, to serve bike-riders, roller bladers and joggers. At a slower pace, I shared the park's foot paths and grassy knolls splashed with forsythia and cherry blossoms with families, school groups, nannies and babies, dog walkers, artists, musicians, hipsters, eccentrics, and elderly people with walkers — all enjoying the beautiful day with thousands of congenial strangers.

At every turn, Olmsted's humane vision was alive and well.

As I wrote in "Reclaiming American Cities," the size and complexity of the great Olmsted parks can't be replicated today. But a new generation of much smaller, wildly popular outdoor facilities may claim to be "New-Age Central Parks."

This is not based on whether they look Olmstedian; most do not. Rather the resemblance lies in their audacity — how bold are they in concept and execution, and how inventively do they utilize available scraps of city space and serve the needs of diverse visitors?

My list of "New-Age Central Parks" begins with Chicago's Millennium Park and New York's High Line. Both reflect a bold vision, ingenious design, generous corporate and foundation funding, and a humane or democratic ethic — all welcome, free of charge and unnecessary restrictions. Millennium Park —perhaps the world's most exciting new downtown park — was the topic of an earlier column ("A Tale of Two Urban Parks," Daily Hampshire Gazette, March 12, 2014).

During this recent visit to New York, I walked the entire 1.45-mile length of the High Line for the first time since its completion last year. As a showcase of new-age park creation, the High Line is opportunistic, visionary, bold and humane. The opportunity was an abandoned elevated rail viaduct snaking among the industrial buildings and warehouses of the city's Lower West Side. The vision to repurpose the viaduct as a linear greenway park, modeled on

the Promenade Plantée in Paris, originated with two neighborhood residents, Robert Hammond and Joshua David.

In 1999, they boldly incorporated the Friends of the High Line, to promote and construct the greenway. In 2004, with $50 million from the city and much more from private sources, an international competition was held to solicit designs for a truly bold and humane project.

The winning proposal, chosen from 720 entries representing 38 countries, was submitted by Diller Scofido+Renfro and the Dutch landscape architect Piet Oudoif (who also designed Lurie Garden at Millennium Park). Over the past decade, their design guided the transformation of the rusty viaduct into an elevated ribbon of walkways, gardens, tree planters, casual seating, and public art — entirely removed from traffic (and hurtling bicycles) and bathed in glorious views of the city and the Hudson River.

I reveled in the extraordinary sense of place experienced by walking the High Line. One is at once immersed in the city while seeming to float just above it. The northern end of the walkway borders Penn Yards, a mega-development of glass towers rising on a 26-acre platform above the Penn Station rail tracks. This newest segment of the High Line is a narrow paved walkway shared with segments of rusting tracks, art installations and stalks of mullein and other self-seeding plants. One's attention shifts between the gargantuan construction project, the Hudson River, and the flow of humankind in all its wondrous diversity.

A few blocks south, the scene shifts to the Chelsea neighborhoods of old brick walkups, Art Deco office buildings, churches and parking facilities. The Empire State Building and midtown skyline loom in the background. This stretch of the High Line is an artful necklace of walkways, benches, micro-gardens and young flowering trees. Everyone takes everyone else's picture.

Approaching 14th Street, the High Line overlooks the derelict brick warehouses and loading docks of the former Meatpacking District, an Edward Hopper citiscape. But the High Line's gravity field intensifies the further downtown you walk — its earliest segment between Gansevoort Street and 20th Street that opened in 2009 is now virtually buried in a canyon of ultra-expensive condominiums, post-modern hotels and offices, and a new Whitney Art Museum.

The gritty streets lovingly explored in Woody Allen's movie "Manhattan" are now lined by high-end retailers and wine bars. Even the Friends of the High Line office has moved from an old firetrap where I first visited them in 2007 to the brand-new Diane Von Furstenberg Studio Headquarters at the lower end of the High Line.

Will the High Line be overwhelmed by its own success? Will this become Singapore on the Hudson? For now, savor the views, the plantings and the congenial strangers at your own pace in the best Olmsted tradition.

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