



[Rana Florida](#)

CEO, *The Creative Class Group* & Author, *Upgrade*

Your Start-Up Life: How the High Line Came to Be (Photos)

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San Antonio-born, Princeton-educated business consultant, entrepreneur, and artist [Robert Hammond](#) has lived in Manhattan's West Village for several years. Near his apartment was a stretch of the old elevated New York Central Railroad tracks, which had been abandoned since the early 1980's. It reminded him, he told an [interviewer](#), of "an industrial version of a Roman aqueduct." When Hammond read that the Giuliani administration was going to tear it down, he went to a community board meeting to learn more. By a coincidence, he sat next to [Joshua David](#), another local resident who shared his appreciation of the untouched tracks. When a CSX representative, who organized the meeting, offered to take them up on the tracks, Hammond saw "a mile and half of wildflowers, and views of the Hudson River and Statue of Liberty. That's when I really fell in love with it."

As they recount in their book [High Line: The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky](#), the two went on to found the non-profit Friends of the High Line. Its goals at first were to save the elevated railway, then to transform it into a vibrant public space. In 2004, after a public ideas competition, selection of a design team with the City of New York, and fundraising \$153 million in private and public funds, their vision began to become a reality. With additional backing from [Diane von Furstenberg](#) and [Barry Diller](#), [Philip and Lisa Maria Falcone](#), and other key donors, construction began in 2006.

The first section of the High Line, from Gansevoort to 20th Street, opened to the public in 2009, the second, which reaches 30th Street, in 2011. The third and final stretch, which will terminate at 34th Street, is scheduled to open in 2014. The elevated park has been an enormous success with the public, attracting around 4.4 million visitors each year. The High Line has also spurred development along its path, both residential and retail, and catalyzed over \$2 billion in private investment in the area.

As a lover of green spaces myself, I was excited to interview Hammond to learn more about his leadership skills and how to rally a community and team around such an innovative vision. Over breakfast in New York recently, he said, "After 13 years as Executive Director I will step down

at the end of this year. I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and ready for my next project." The High Line will be a hard act to follow.

Q: What was your first job and what lessons did you learn?

A: It was actually difficult for me to find a job, even after graduating with honors from a good school. I did eventually work at Ernst & Young and did consulting. From that first experience, I learned where to find my direction. It took me six months to get a job and by then, I had amassed a large stack of rejection letters from my job applications. I kept them because I wanted to prove to myself and all these companies that one day they would be sorry that they did not hire me and that they had made a huge mistake.

What I did not understand then was that these companies were right and I was wrong. I might have been smart enough to do the job, but I would never be a good fit in the corporate world. These companies could sense that I needed to be doing something different. I was so driven to succeed that I didn't notice what these rejection letters were trying to tell me.

I remember I had this sinking feeling on the first day of orientation at my new job that I had wanted so badly. I knew that I was in the wrong place, and in the months to come, it proved to be true. I was so bored and I wanted to do something different. So, rather than spending a lot of money on graduate school, I decided to take a pay cut to find some work that inspired me and join a start-up.

Q: What traits do you need to be a good leader? What is your leadership style?

A: I lead through two things: enthusiasm and a big vision. Most people are bored with their day-to-day work and lives. People need to be working towards something, that they feel a part of something, toward a big vision.

Q: How do you cultivate your team?

A: Josh and I had no relevant experience in urban planning, architecture, and we had no plan. By not having the expertise, it forces you to look to others who are experts in the field. While Josh and I get a lot of credit for the High Line - the most important thing we did was to raise the flag. It allowed other people with the skills we did not have to rally around the project.

Q: What was your most challenging project and why?

A: A lot of people assume that saving the High Line from demolition was most challenging, but actually building an outdoor roller-skating rink and beer garden (The Lot at 30th Street, Summer of 2011) underneath the High Line was just as challenging and even more fun!

Q: What traits do you look for in collaborators?



A: Curiosity. One of the reasons we chose the Design Team ([James Corner Field Operations](#),

[Diller Scofidio + Renfro](#), and [Piet Oudolf](#)) was that in their interview they started arguing amongst themselves because they were working out their vision for the High Line.

Q: How do you get others to rally around a vision for the future?

A: Having a vision that is unlikely is in some ways is more inspiring than something that is obvious. People want to be a part of something that is a challenge; something that they can work towards and feel a part of the bigger picture.

Q: When do you know it's time to walk away from a project?

A: I'm not so good at that...

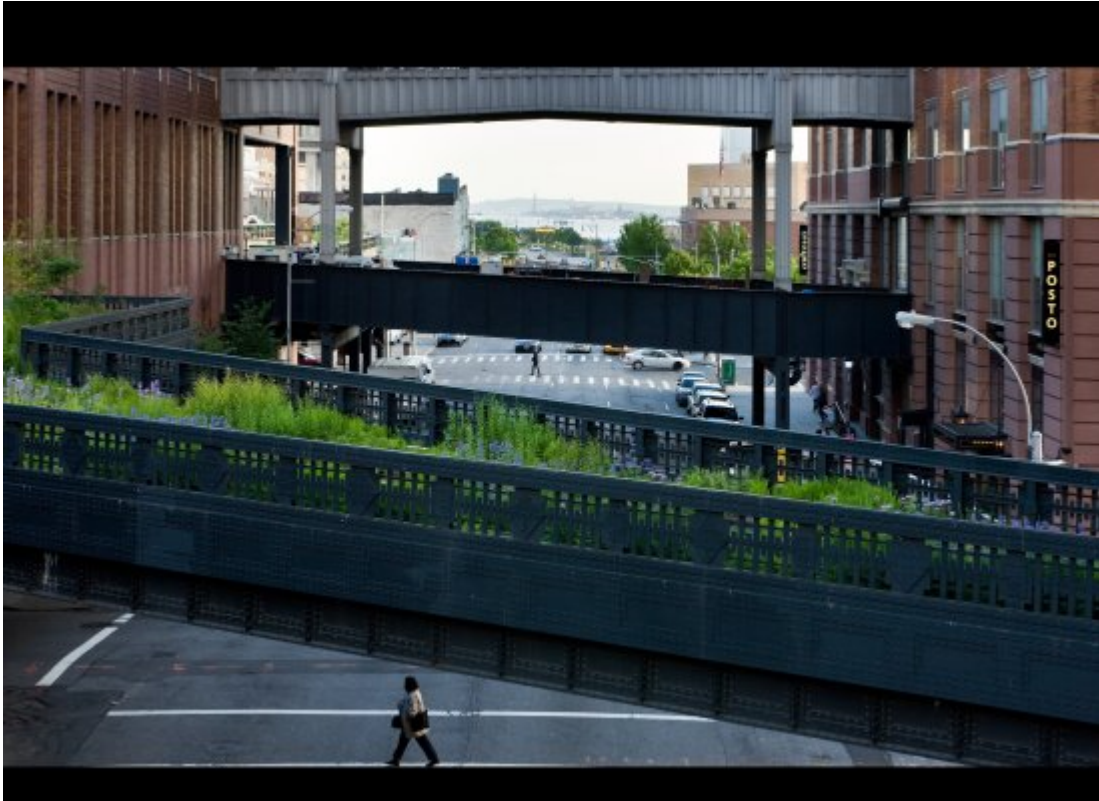
Q: What is the best advice you ever received?

A: Acknowledging others. When I first started the High Line, I wasn't very good at remembering to thank people. I learned from Josh how important it is to acknowledge and thank people for all that they've done. In my twenties, I don't think I ever wrote a thank you card to anyone. Since then, I've learned that thanking our donors, volunteers, staff and many others who have helped along the way has been one of the keys of our success.

Q: How do you handle failure?

A: I used to be in sales. Instead of a daily sales goal, I reversed the normal rules of the game and developed a daily rejection goal. If I wasn't getting rejected - I wasn't trying hard enough. If I got a lot of rejections, I made my goal and learned not to be afraid. I've also learned that this same approach worked at starting other projects and quite well in bars.

Northern Spur Preserve



Northern Spur Preserve, between West 16th Street and West 17th Street, looking South towards the Statue of Liberty

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

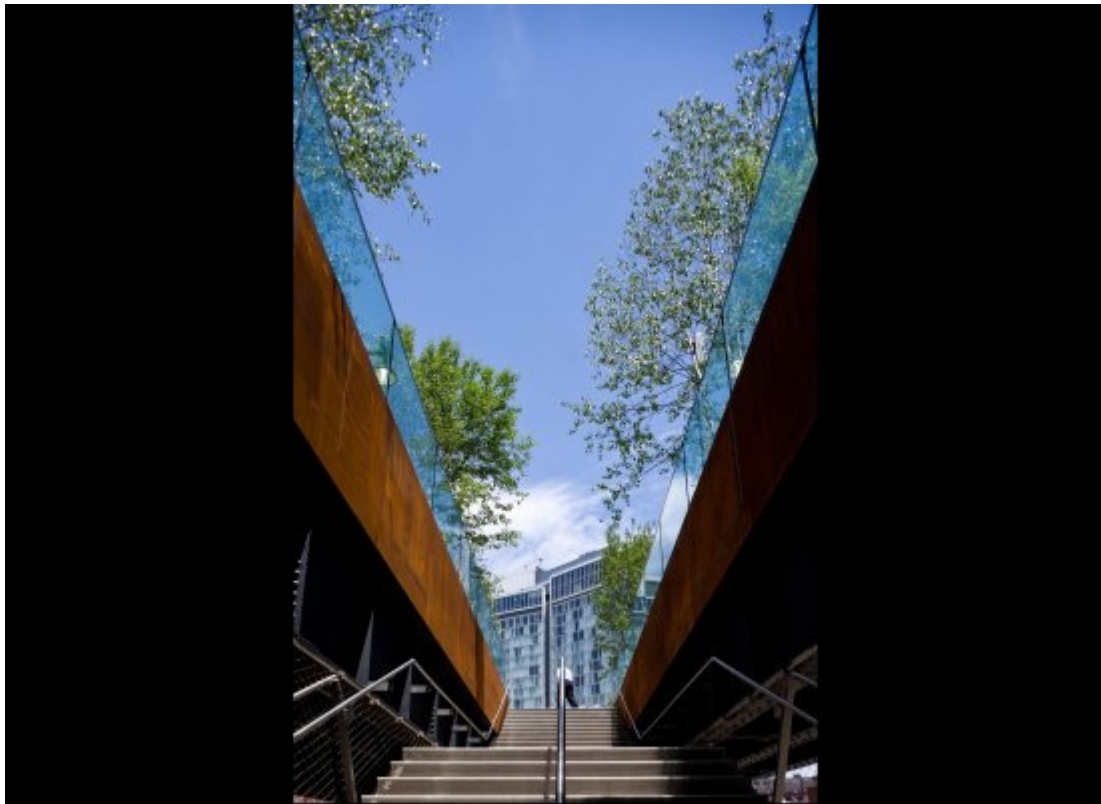
Typical Cross Street



Typical Cross Street, West 20th Street, looking East

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

Gansevoort Slow Stair



Gansevoort Slow Stair, corner of Gansevoort Street and Washington Street, looking North

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

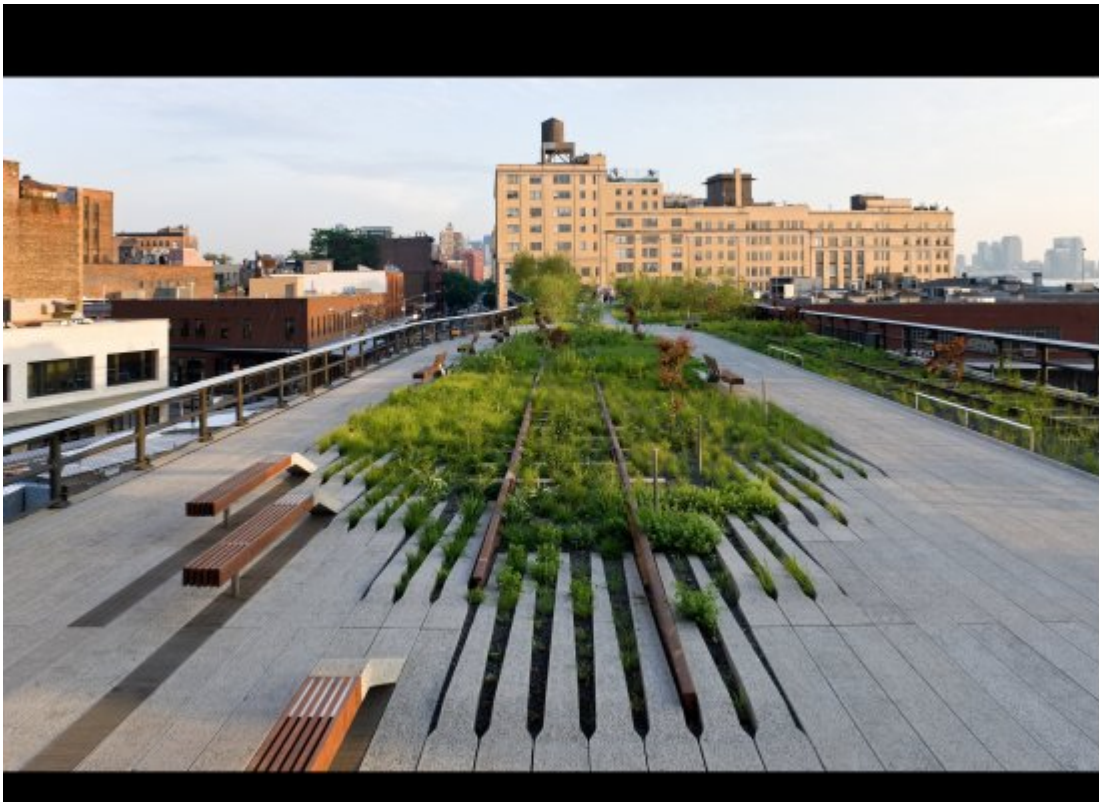
Gansevoort Plaza and Stair



Gansevoort Plaza and Stair, Gansevoort Street and Washington Street, looking North

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

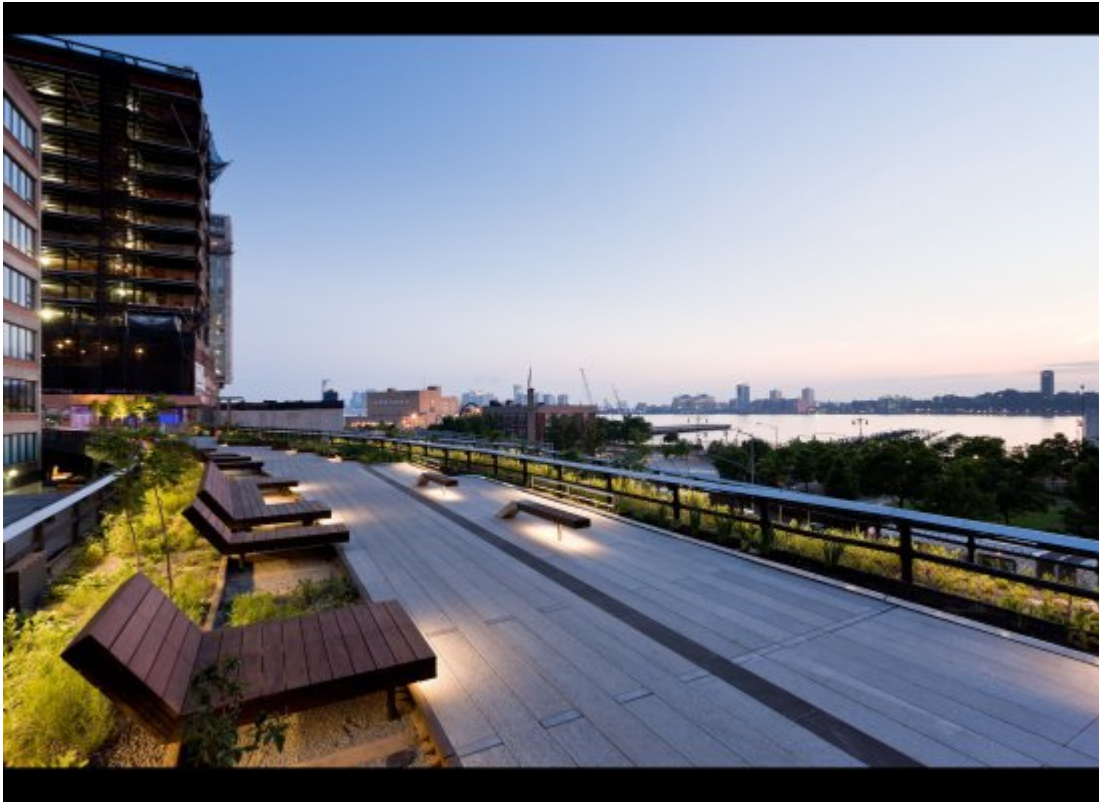
Washington Grasslands



Washington Grasslands, between Little West 12th Street and West 13th Street, looking South

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

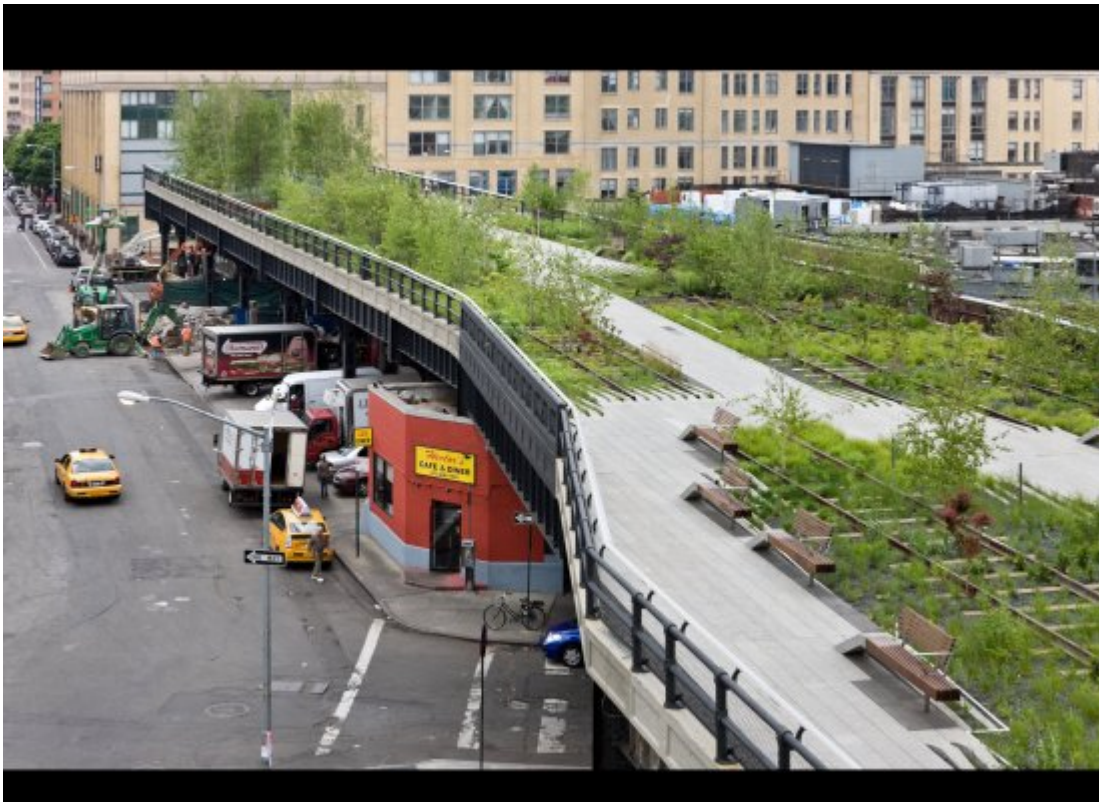
Sundeck Water Feature and Preserve



Sundeck Water Feature and Preserve, between West 14th Street and West 15th Street, looking South

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

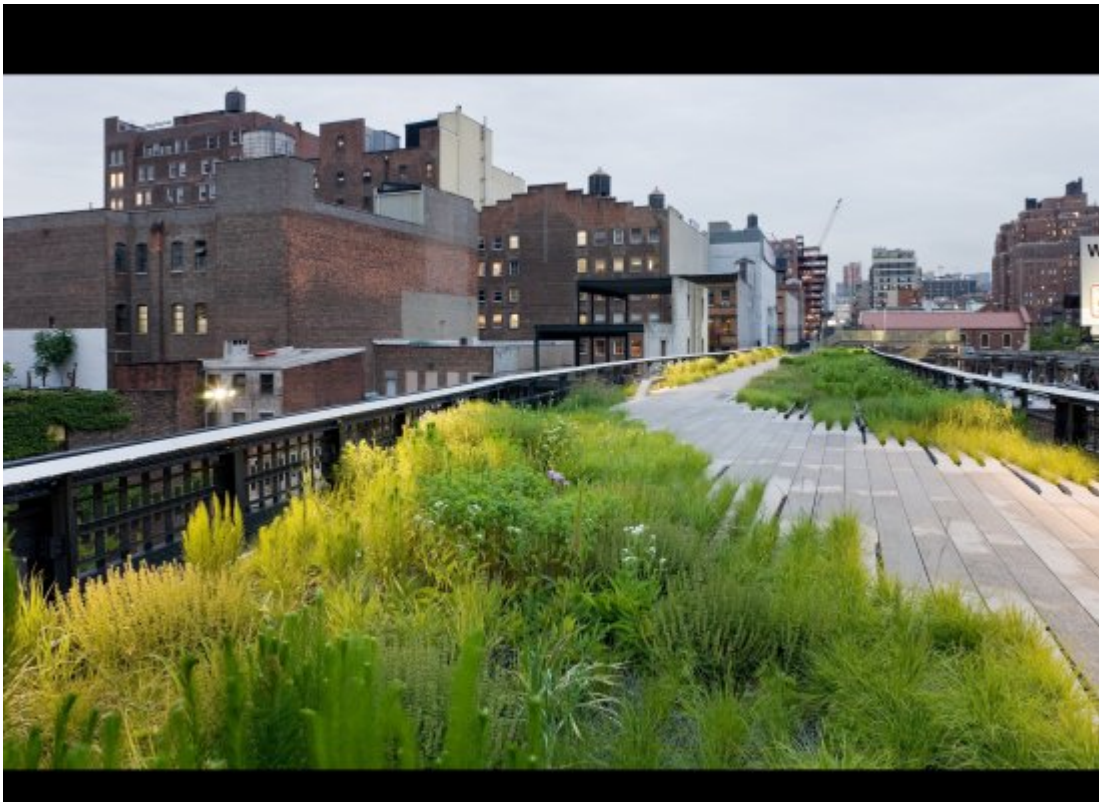
Gansevoort Woodland



Gansevoort Woodland, Gansevoort Street to Little West 12th Street, looking South

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

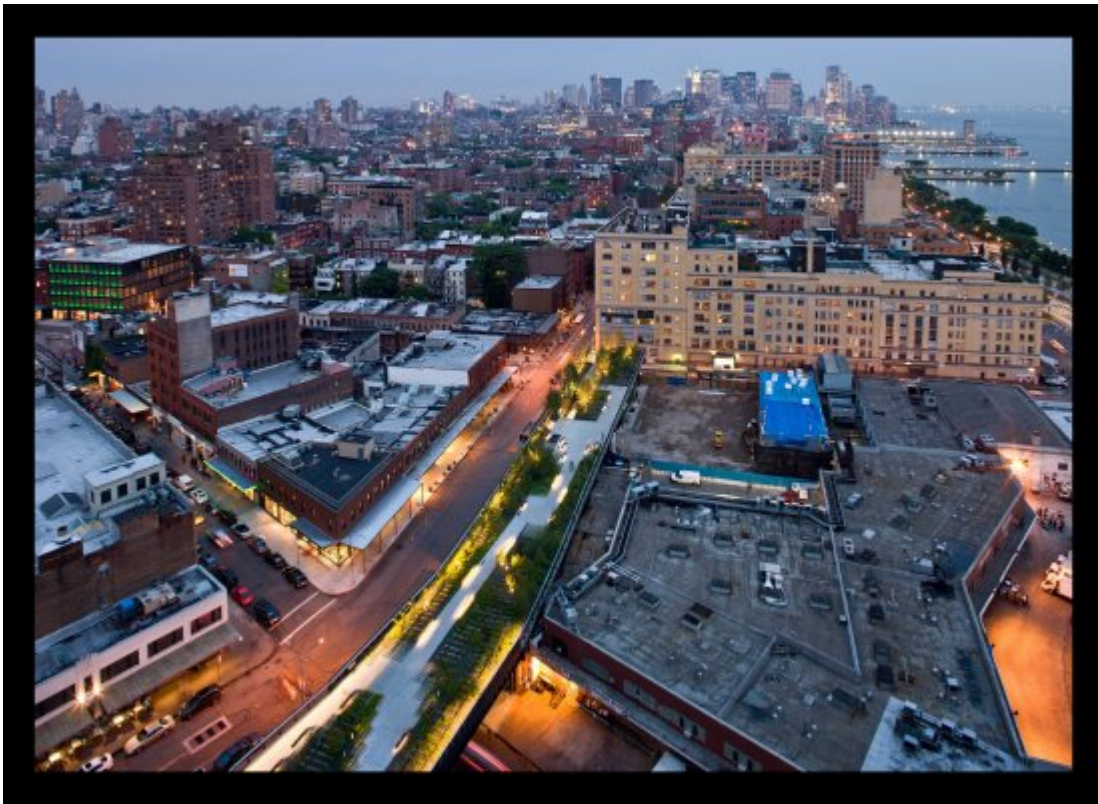
Chelsea Grasslands



Chelsea Grasslands, between West 19th Street and West 20th Street, looking North

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

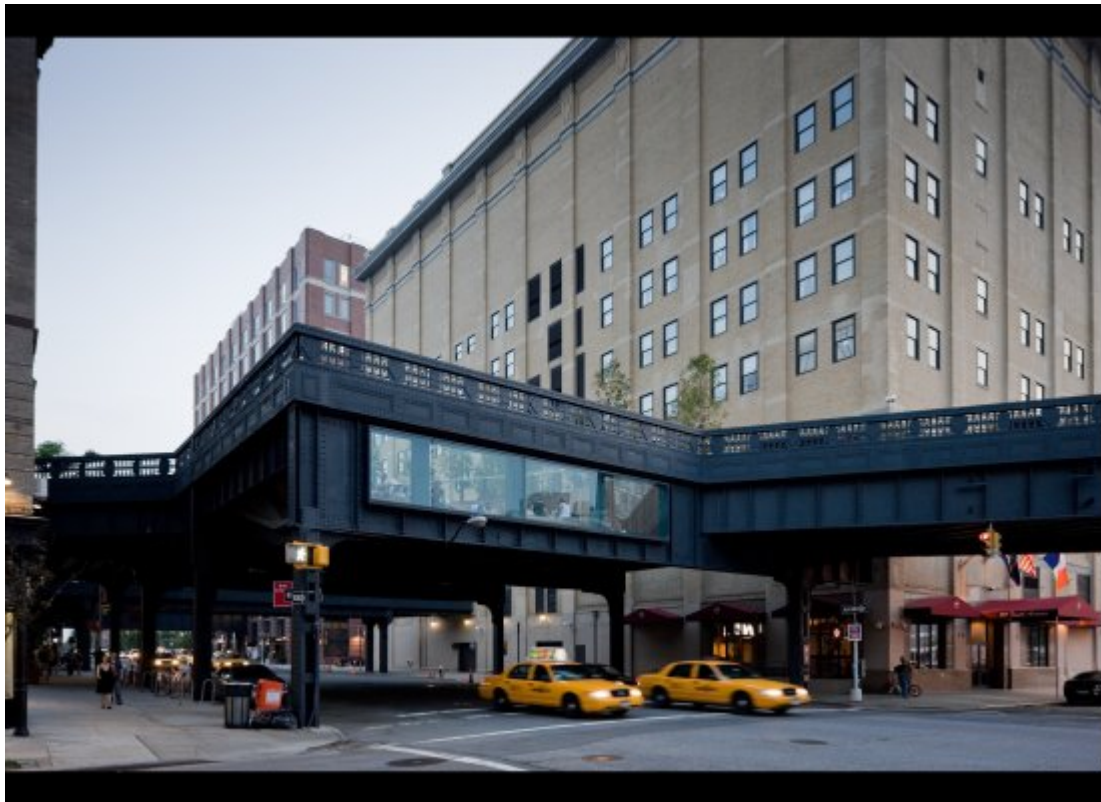
Gansevoort Woodland at Night



Gansevoort Woodland at Night, Aerial View from Gansevoort Street to West 13th Street, looking South

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

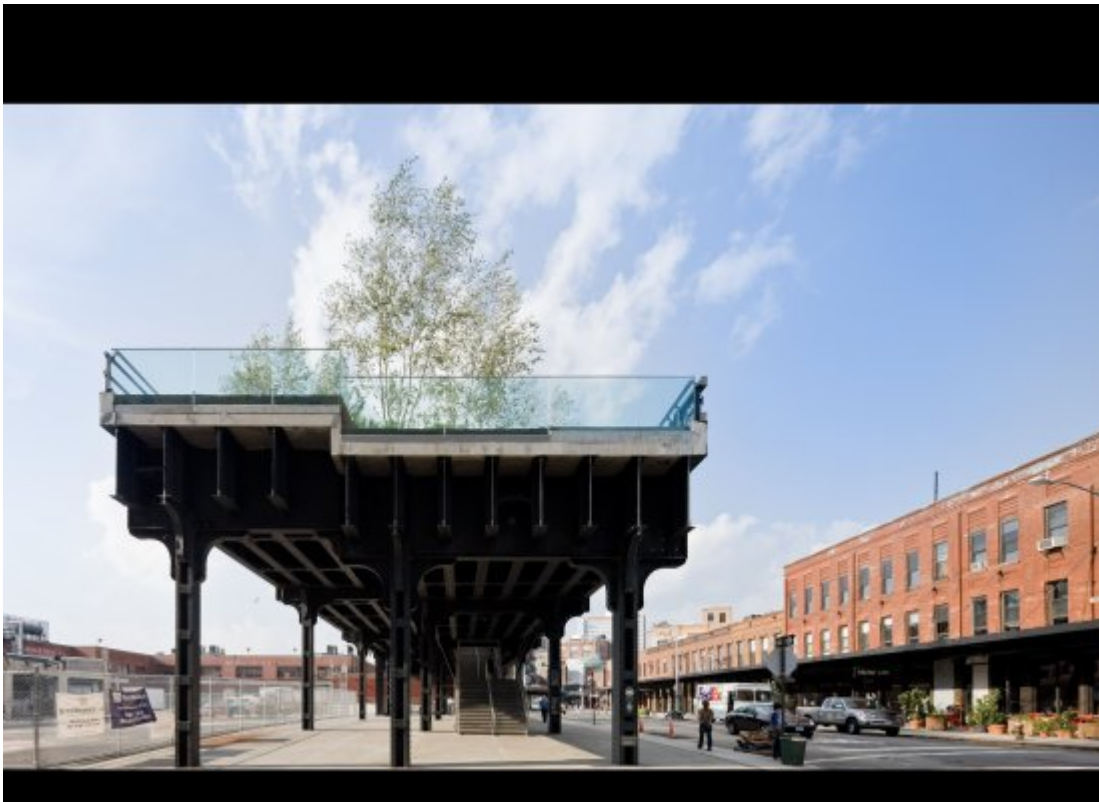
The Tenth Avenue Square



The Tenth Avenue Square, from street level, with windows onto Tenth Avenue

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

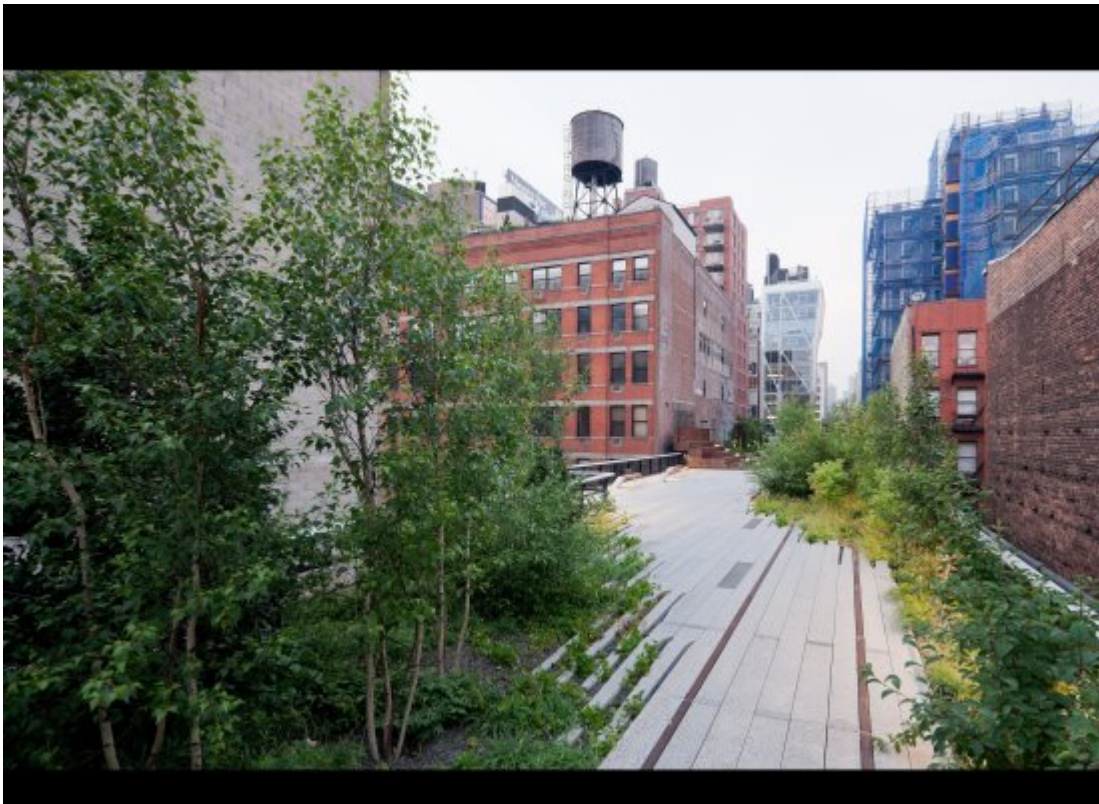
Gansevoort End



Gansevoort End, Plaza, and Stairs, Gansevoort and Washington Streets

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2009

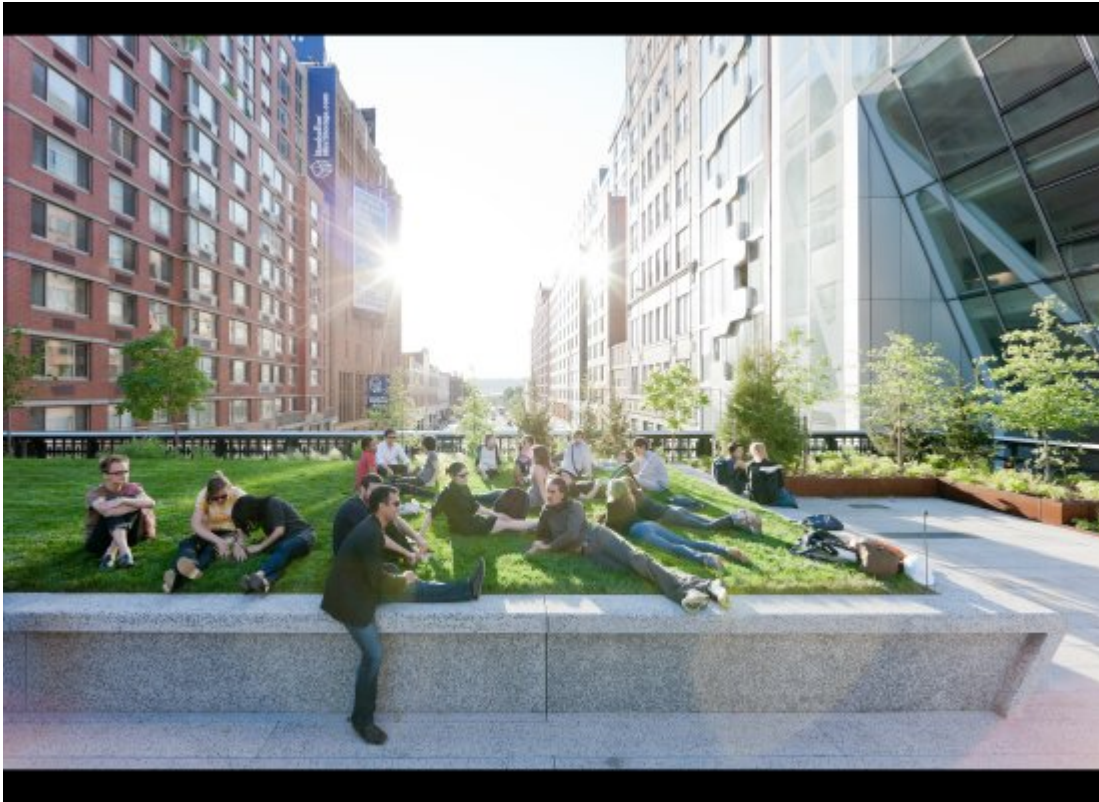
Chelsea Thicket



Chelsea Thicket, a densely-planted area of trees and shrubs between West 20th and West 22nd Streets, looking North.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

23rd Street Lawn



23rd Street Lawn, the northern end of the 4,900-square-foot lawn peels up over West 23rd Street, looking West, toward the Hudson River.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

Falcone Flyover



PLAY

FULLSCREEN

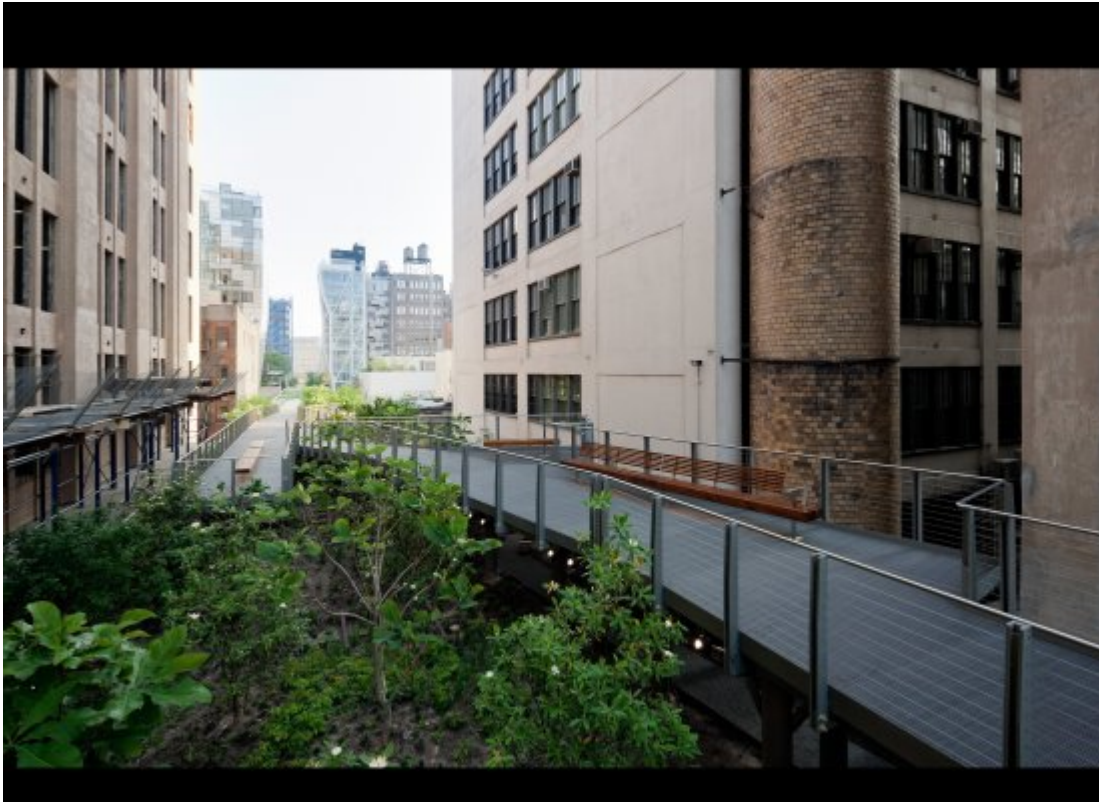
ZOOM

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Falcone Flyover, an elevated pathway passes between historic warehouse buildings, between West 25th and West 27th Streets, looking North.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

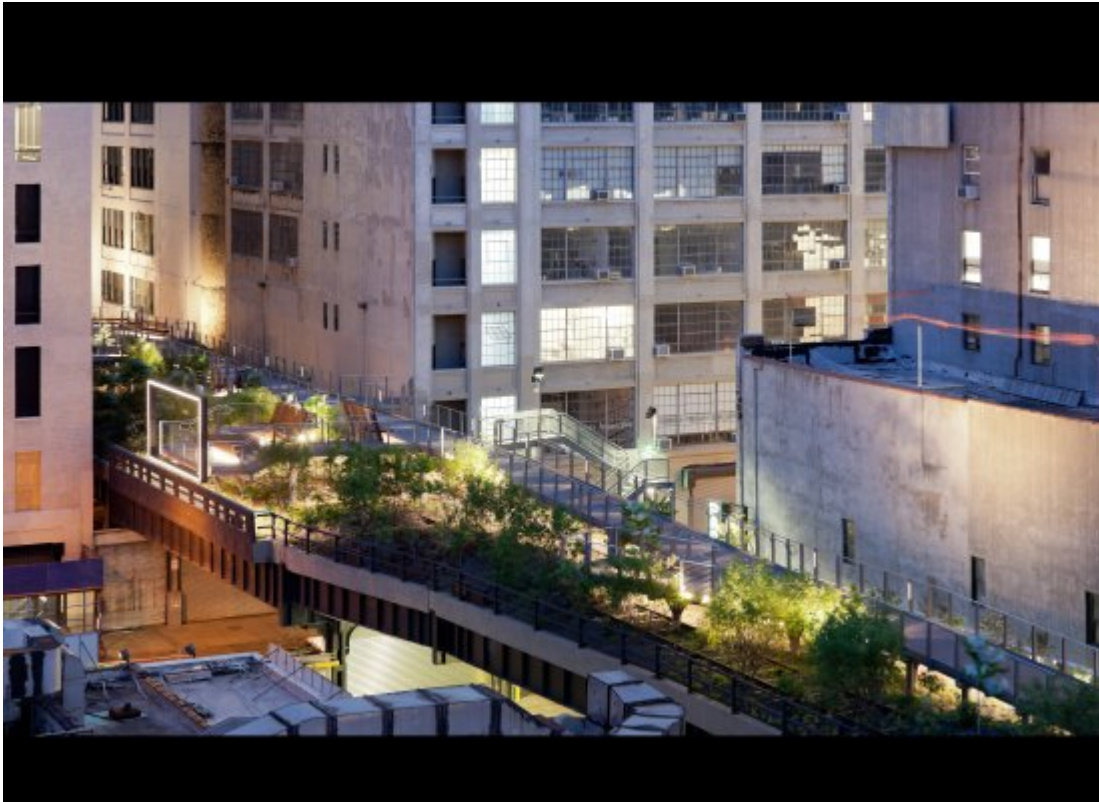
Falcone Flyover



Falcone Flyover, an intimate overlook branches off the elevated pathway, looking South at West 25th Street.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

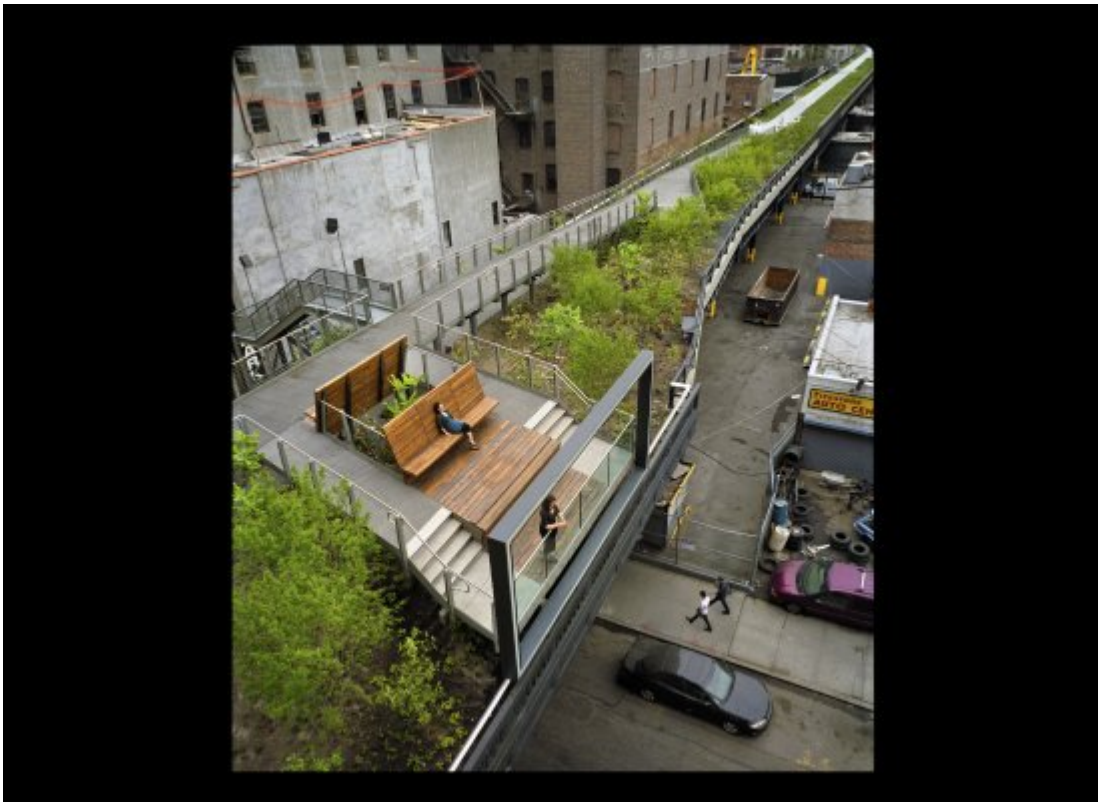
26th Street Viewing Spur



26th Street Viewing Spur, at West 26th Street, looking East.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

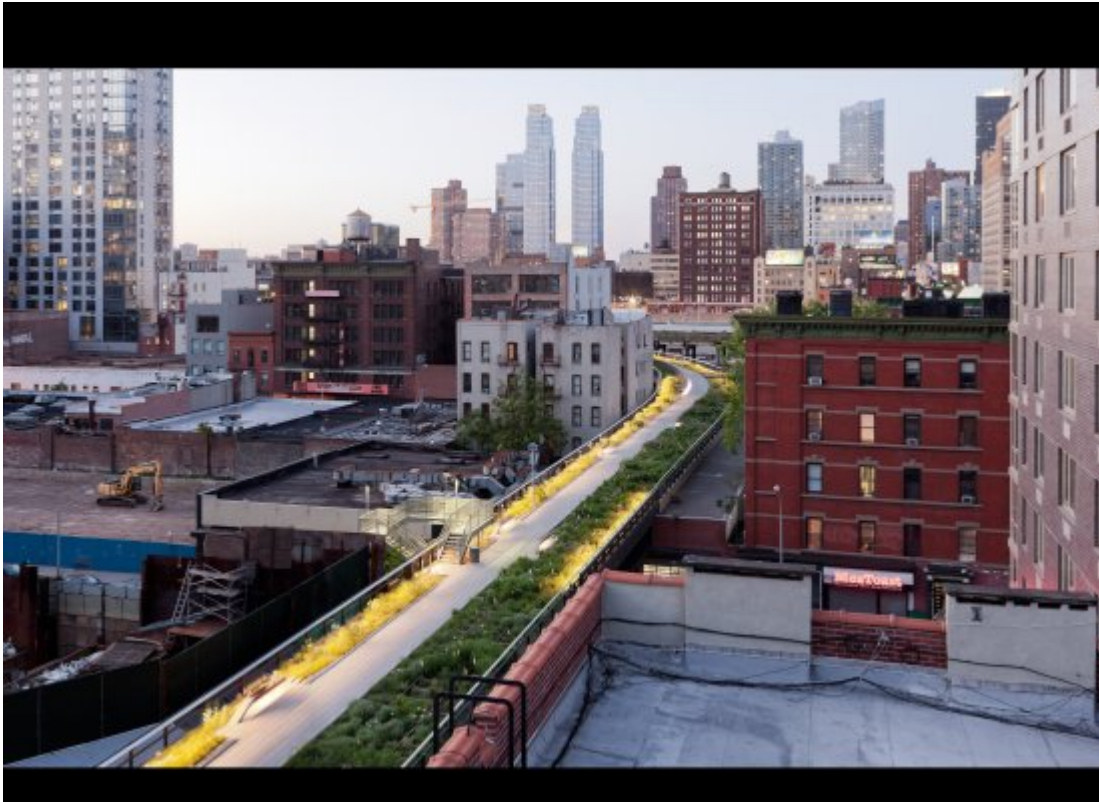
26th Street Viewing Spur



26th Street Viewing Spur, recalling the billboards that were once attached to the High Line, a frame now enhances, rather than blocks views of the city, at West 26th Street.

Photo credit: Barry Munger © 2011

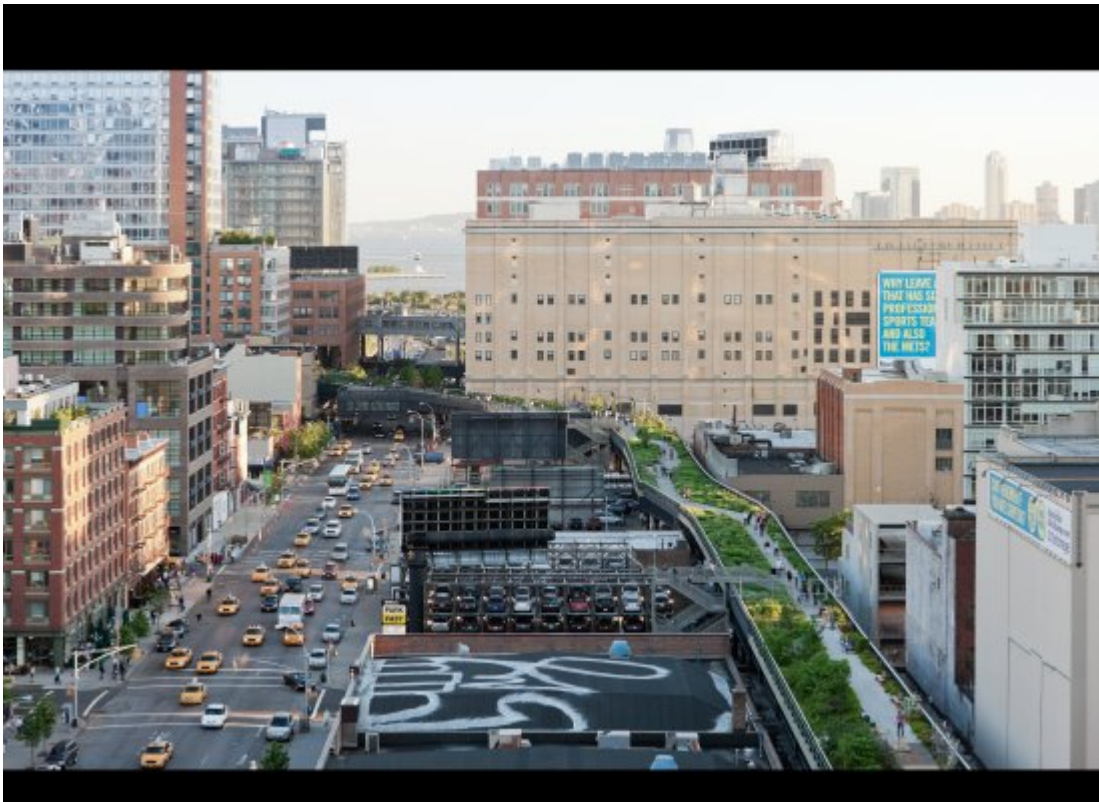
Wildflower Field



Wildflower Field, looking North toward West 29th Street, where the High Line begins a long, gentle curve toward the Hudson River.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

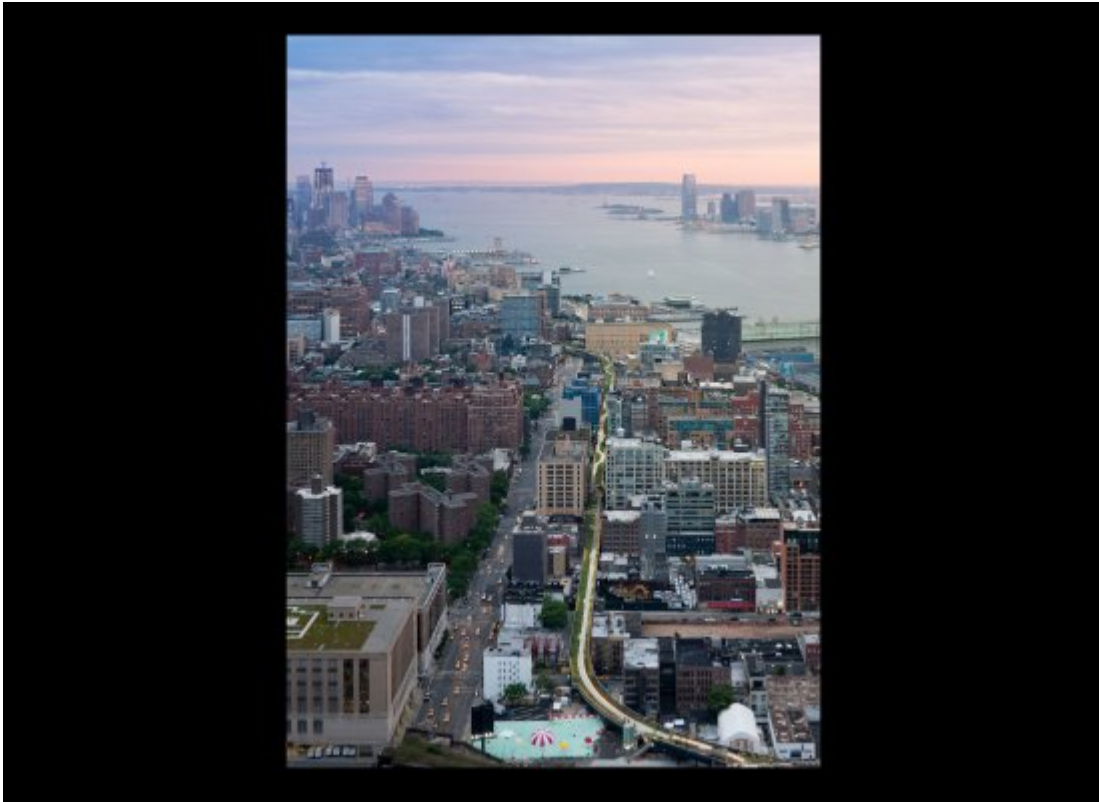
Aerial View



Aerial View, from West 21st Street, looking South along 10th Avenue toward the Hudson River.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011

Aerial View



Aerial View, from West 30th Street, looking South toward the Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center site.

Photo credit: Iwan Baan © 2011