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Cities See the Other Side of the Tracks

By KRISTINA SHEVORY

The High Line park, built on an elevated railway trestle in Manhattan, has become both a symbol and a catalyst for an explosion of growth in the meatpacking district and the Chelsea neighborhood.

Now cities around the country, including Chicago, Philadelphia and St. Louis, are working up plans to renovate their aging railroad trestles, tracks and railways for parkland. Cities with little public space are realizing they badly need more parks, and the High Line has taught that renovating an old railway can be the spark that helps improve a neighborhood and attract development.

The High Line's first and second sections cost \$153 million, but have generated an estimated \$2 billion in new developments. In the five years since construction started on the High Line, 29 new projects have been built or are under way in the neighborhood, according to the New York City Department of City Planning. More than 2,500 new residential units, 1,000 hotel rooms and over 500,000 square feet of office and art gallery space have gone up.

"Cities recognize parks are good for their economies. They're no longer a nice thing to have, but a must," said Will Rogers, president and chief executive of the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation group in San Francisco.

The area around the park, sprinkled with small offices under 200,000 square feet, has become a draw for start-ups and creative companies.

"I think the High Line is a big attraction. It's created a lot more buzz to the area," said Matthew Bergey, first vice president at the commercial brokerage firm CB Richard Ellis in New York. "Like with any destination, people will come if it's cool and has buzz."

Though plans in many cities have a long way to go before becoming reality, a point in favor of reuse is that it can be cheaper to renovate old rail structures than to tear them down. The Reading Viaduct, an old elevated railway line in Philadelphia, would cost \$50 million to demolish versus \$36 million to retrofit, according to the Center City District, a business improvement group.

In Chicago, where a 2.65-mile elevated rail line slices through four residential areas, tearing down the line would be prohibitively costly. With 37 bridges and large earthen embankments, the Bloomingdale Trail, as it is now called, snakes east to west across Chicago and is simply too big to go.

“If you’ve driven around Chicago, you’ll have seen it,” said Beth White, director of the Chicago office of the Trust for Public Land, which is helping to build the trail.

As with other, similar rail lines around the country, passenger and freight trains have not operated on the Chicago line in at least 10 years. The only traffic most of these lines see is an occasional runner or bike rider, even though trespassing is usually forbidden.

The impetus for redevelopment has mostly come from neighbors rather than developers, because the vision is so grand and stretches across entire neighborhoods. “It’s hard for private development to be visionary unless it’s a large-scale development where you can create a community,” said Mr. Rogers, a former Chicago developer. “Instead, you’re responding to a small site and not a larger community.”

After years of grass-roots work, the Bloomingdale Trail is moving forward after Rahm Emanuel, who made completing the trail one of his campaign promises, was elected mayor in February. Over the next year, design concepts and engineering work will get under way. The Bloomingdale Trail will allow bikes and dogs, interconnect with new and existing ground-level parks and cost \$40 million to \$75 million.

In St. Louis, plans are in the works to renovate a 2.1-mile elevated rail trestle and turn it into a park as part of a larger waterfront revitalization project. The Iron Horse Trestle, estimated to cost \$50 million, does not have a timeline. Organizers hope to have the first one-mile phase completed in five years.

“You have to be deliberate if you want this to last. It’ll reflect St. Louis and be unique to it,” said Susan Trautman, the executive director of Great Rivers Greenway District, a public group developing the Iron Horse Trestle.

Despite the High Line’s visibility and help in showing donors and residents nationwide what is possible with an abandoned trestle, most cities realize they cannot mimic it. The park runs through Manhattan, the most densely populated area in the country, and attracted large sums of money from celebrities.

“The High Line is not easily replicable in other cities,” said James Corner, principal of James Corner Field Operations, a New York architecture firm that designed the High Line with Diller Scofidio and Renfro. “It’s not just, ‘Build a cool park and they will come.’ It’s, ‘Build a cool park and connect it to a framework.’”

Developers are hesitant to rely on these potential parks as they assemble new projects. In October, Mike and Matt Pestronk pounced on a 10-story office tower next to the Philadelphia viaduct when it fell into foreclosure and bought it for \$5 million. The brothers, who had been watching the building for years and waiting for its price to drop, bought it because it was a good deal. The developers plan to renovate the vacant office tower for \$25 million and turn it into apartments.

“The rents we project are that it doesn’t happen,” said Mike Pestronk, principal of Post Brothers Apartments in Philadelphia, referring to the viaduct project. “If it does, it’ll help us get higher rents.”

Still, the brothers are trying to improve the area and have done some “guerrilla improvements” to the viaduct, such as weeding and putting down plywood to cover holes, and installing artwork and live video projections on two sides of their building.

Plans for the viaduct are slowly moving ahead after nearly 10 years of grass-roots work. By the end of the year, the City Council is expected to approve a neighborhood improvement district that, among other things, would help oversee construction and fund-raising. As a first step, a small section of the trestle owned by a regional transportation authority would be redeveloped for \$5.5 million.

“What we want to do is build the first phase, like New York, and have people say they love it and want to do the rest,” said Paul R. Levy, the president of the Center City District. “We do not need the Mercedes-Benz that they built in New York.”

The city is in talks with Reading International, a public company based in Commerce, Calif., that owns most of the viaduct.

James Corner’s firm is riding his New York success to other cities, even if their projects only marginally resemble the High Line. In Seattle, an old elevated highway that runs along the waterfront and is at risk of collapse during an earthquake will be torn down and replaced with a series of parks, open areas and new transit. Traffic will be routed away from the area. Final designs and a cost estimate will be ready by the middle of next year.

“We weren’t hiring them to come to Seattle to recreate the High Line,” said Steve Pearce, the project manager of Waterfront Seattle, a civic partnership. Our effort is to create a new front porch for the city, a social mixing chamber.”

Atlanta also hired Mr. Corner to help redevelop a 22-mile rail corridor encircling the city. In the next 25 years, Atlanta plans to add 1,300 acres of parks and green spaces, public transit and trails along the necklace, increasing Atlanta green space by nearly 40 percent. The project’s cost is put at \$2.8 billion.

“The High Line is a park, and they made a conscious decision not to interact with private development,” said Ethan Davidson, a spokesman for the Atlanta BeltLine, as the rail corridor is known. “Atlanta is the kind of city where one project can transform a city. This very much knits the city together.”