

JOSHUA DAVID & ROBERT HAMMOND

CO-FOUNDERS FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE

by **Matthew Wexler**



L to R: Joshua David and Robert Hammond

Photo By Barry Munger (Courtesy Friends of the High Line)

They were the most unlikely of pairs. Joshua David was a freelance writer, editor, and part-time cater waiter. Robert Hammond (a history major in college) had consulted during the dot-com boom and dabbled in painting on the side. They had never met, but a community board meeting and perhaps a bit of gay joie de vivre brought them together on a fateful night back in 1999.

“I sat next to Robert because I thought he was cute,” says Joshua in their memoir *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky*. “Community board meetings are not necessarily filled with cute guys, so I said to myself, ‘Well, there’s one, why don’t I sit next to him?’” And the rest, they say, is elevated history.

Both were vaguely interested in what might happen to a 1.45-mile stretch of abandoned railway that ran above ground from Gansevoort Street in New York City’s West Village to 34th Street. The line was in full operation from 1931 until 1980—transporting food, manufactured products, and raw materials directly to factories and warehouses. It had been out of service ever since, overgrown with naturally seeded wildflowers and indigenous grasses and shrubs.

Today, the High Line is one of the city’s most iconic public spaces—a seamless integration of form, function, and nature. Running through the now-trendy Meatpacking District, the elevated walkway offers picture-perfect views of the Hudson River, the Empire State Building, and countless apartment windows old and new that reflect the multicultural and economic fabric of a vertical city.



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Once home to a bevy of pre-AIDS hot spots like Zone DK and the Spike, the neighborhood is also an important part of New York's gay history. The abandoned tracks and rail cars below played host to rave parties and illicit activities as well as rent-free living for squatters and homeless people: it was the real sex and the city before Sarah Jessica Parker and her entourage arrived. "People would pretend that they discovered the High Line when they were going to art galleries," says Robert, "but it was really when they were going to gay dance parties at Twilo, the Tunnel, or the Roxy."

Like the West Village, followed by Chelsea, and the current gay mecca of Hell's Kitchen, the High Line's triumphant rebirth has been reliant on the initially scrappy actions of its gay co-founders. "Neither of us had any experience in this sort of thing," says Joshua. "Not only did most people not care—but most people wanted to tear it down. We were just trying to save it from being demolished."

"Robert came to the project as a natural entrepreneur and strong verbal communicator,

he had a great way of selling the project in a room," says Joshua. "I was a very strong writer. So in the beginning, he did all the talking, and I did all the writing." The two established Friends of the High Line, a nonprofit organization that would advocate for the railway's preservation and reuse as public open space. Their secret weapon was getting other people involved—particularly those with money and legal and/or political expertise. There were moments when the pair thought the project would tank because of the interminable uphill battle with the Giuliani administration, as well as property owners and developers, but they had an arsenal of secret weapons, many of which were bedazzled in style and panache.

"Josh and I are gay and a lot of our friends are gay, so a disproportionate number of our early supporters were gay men," says Robert. This tightly networked community served them well. Their relationship with flamboyant restaurateur Florent Morellet (of the now closed Florent) helped them forge alliances that transcended sexual orientation, including the princely

Alexandre von Furstenberg and his mother, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg. They have been two of the High Line's most significant supporters and donors, with Alex currently on the Board of Directors. Other A-listers have included Edward Norton, Sandra Bernhard, Kyra Sedgwick, and Kevin Bacon, but it has been the sustainable grassroots efforts of everyday New Yorkers that have enabled the High Line to become what it is today.

The High Line was officially preserved in 2005 through a policy called railbanking, which according to the National Trails System Act "is a voluntary agreement between a railroad company and a trail agency to use an out-of-service rail corridor as a trail." Since being adopted in 1983, more than 4,400 miles of rail corridors in 33 states have been preserved.

Simultaneous to the legal battles a design competition ensued, but not everyone was enthusiastic about its impact. Some felt that unrealistic ideas might undermine the feasibility of the project ever being completed. But it was important, particularly to Robert, that the High Line embody the best architectural design and urban planning. "The first entry to arrive for the ideas competition was drawn as a cartoon," says Robert. "It turned the High Line into a Mother Hubbard theme park. No other entries came in for a while after that. We were worried." The competition eventually yielded submissions from 720 teams representing 36 countries.

The landscape architecture firm James Corner Field Operations, architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and planting designer Piet Oudolf were chosen and the High Line's reality began to take shape. While the intricate details of preservation, renovation, and landscaping were left to the professionals, Joshua and Robert feel that their gay aesthetic had an impact on the final outcome. "Gays have always played a role in preservation and change," says Robert. "Gays recognize the potential in things that other people can't see."

Josh adds: "We share a stereotypically gay fixation on certain things, like lighting...and dimmers! We *insisted* that the lighting system on the High Line have dimmer switches." The High Line's energy-efficient LED lighting elements are embedded in railings and other fixtures below eye level to illuminate walking paths while still allowing the city's skyline to take center stage. Even the green-black color of the art deco steel structure itself was meticulously chosen, a color so ingrained in Robert's mind that he used it as an accent in his own kitchen

Since its official opening in June 2009, the High Line has quickly become a go-to destination for visitors from around the

world. Yet its founders have always wanted to make sure that it remains an integral part of the community and a place accessible and welcoming for locals, too. Two initiatives, High Line Art and High Line Food contribute to this idea.

“Public art enhances the experience of walking the High Line,” says Friends of the High Line Director of Communications & Marketing Kate Lindquist. “We commission artists from around the world to create works that respond to the park’s landscape, the surrounding architecture, and the High Line’s history. All installations are on view for one year, which means there are always new artworks on view.”

This summer’s major commission is *Busted*, a collaborative effort of nine international artists exploring the themes of dedicatory sculpture and monuments with both gravitas and humor. On display are works from New Yorker George Condo, London-based artist Goshka Macuga, and conceptual artist Amalia Pica, among others. In an effort to further engage visitors, the public is participating in an open poll and online voting for an individual they believe should be commemorated in a monument to be installed on the High Line to join the commissioned works for the second half of the exhibition.

The High Line has also established a robust food program that draws from the multicultural influences of New York City. You won’t find a hot dog cart in sight. Instead, a highly vetted collection of food kiosks offers visitors delicacies ranging from organic Blue Bottle Coffee to authentic Mexican street food courtesy of The Taco Truck.

While blatant cruising may be a thing of the past on the High Line, the creators of *Hearth* (a longtime favorite restaurant of the East Village) and *Terroir* (a collection of wine bars scattered throughout the city) offer the perfect setting for people-watching at *Terroir on the Porch*, an open-air wine bar and café that highlights wineries and breweries from New York State along with edibles from local farmers and producers.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that the High Line has lost its edge. Photographer Kevin McDermott snuck onto the railway in 2006 just as groundbreaking was about to get underway. He photographed three different male models in the nude, juxtaposing the High Line of days gone by with the raw, natural beauty of the cityscape. “I first met Robert and Joshua after they saw a print of one of my High Line images hanging in a little interior design store in Chelsea,” says Kevin. “They were interested in running a slight censored version on their new Friends of the High Line blog. I love and greatly appreciate their support. And it’s amazing how grounded they have been through this



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incredibly fast-paced change that has occurred surrounding the park and the neighborhood around it.”

Sometimes harrowing and at other times triumphant, the two have won more battles than they care to count, but the most moving day for Joshua was opening the High Line in June of 2009. “The moment the public set foot in the finished park for the first time, the High Line became a living, breathing thing, animated by the people who’d come to the park and brought it to life,” he reflects. “It was an astonishing and wonderful moment. It was great to be able to share that with Robert, almost ten years to the day after we first met at a community board meeting where the High Line’s fate was being discussed.”

From the onset, Robert had three major goals: “that the High Line becomes a well-loved place; that it inspires other people to start their own projects; and that it gets even better after Josh and I leave.” After 14 years of dedicated

work, he has chosen to move on to other ventures at the end of the year. Joshua will assume the role of president and continue his fundraising and development efforts as the High Line prepares to open its third and final section.

“Robert has left such a lasting mark on the High Line and this organization that he will still very much be with us even as he moves onto other things,” says Joshua. “His way of thinking and his perspective on the world are baked into the DNA of this place.”

In an open letter on the Friend of the High Line blog, Robert writes: “To me, the High Line was never just about the plants and the design; it has always been about the people. A diverse community of people saved the High Line from demolition, and transformed it into public space. Josh and I frequently get all the credit for the project’s success, but the most important thing we did was raise the flag, and then other people rallied around us to help get it done.”

To learn more about the High Line, visit www.thehighline.org. ■