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Building Bridges



TIES TO THE PAST: Students from Penn and Drexel have gotten together with Callowhill residents to make plans for the Reading Viaduct. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Finding new uses for an old viaduct.

by W. Kyle Gradinger

In the world's most progressive cities, it's fashionable to take the high road.

To that end, planners in New York City and Paris are turning abandoned viaducts which once carried railroads above the busy streets below into beautiful downtown oases. Part of an abandoned viaduct's appeal is that it provides a large, available tract of land in a city center. As urban living gains in popularity, cities need to create public spaces that are geared for 21st-century lifestyles.

Philadelphia also has a long-forgotten viaduct at Reading Terminal, one that's prime for a new park, affordable housing or even office space. Meanwhile, Paris and New York have already leveraged aging industrial infrastructure to create vibrant new neighborhoods.

The Promenade Plantee in Paris is a former railroad viaduct turned city park running several kilometers from the Bastille to the Bois de Vincennes Park on the city's eastern edge. The structure is supported by beautiful brick arches and is now occupied by chic retail stores. Atop the viaduct, a beautiful garden has replaced rusty rails and provided the nearby arrondissements (districts) with a unique and enjoyable public open space offering expansive vistas in the heart of Paris. Since the construction of the Plantee in the early 1990s, the surrounding neighborhood has seen the construction of more than 1,040 new residences, 75,000 square feet of commercial space and 200,000 square feet of office space.

The Plantee has been a model for the preservation movement in Manhattan, where activists have worked to turn the High Line, a 1.5-mile-long railroad viaduct that runs above the neighborhood of Chelsea, into usable public space. Formerly used to haul three-car trains of frozen turkeys in the 1960s, the High Line had been forgotten for three decades. Recently, a grass-roots effort to preserve the High Line as a linear park has taken hold and temporarily prevented the demolition of the structure.

After hosting a design competition with several hundred entries from dozens of countries, preservation group Friends of the High Line has narrowed the selection to four teams. They're working with the city and state to begin construction of a new park next year.

In Philadelphia, the Reading Viaduct used to be the last thing passengers crossed before entering the grand train shed at Reading Terminal. Since SEPTA abandoned the viaduct in 1984, the remaining structure has been reclaimed by verdant nature.

For those lucky enough to have explored the structure before it was fenced off last year, the viaduct — which slices through the Callowhill Loft District and North Chinatown — provides both stunning skyline vistas and a rare, peaceful oasis in the heart of Center City. Rather than acting as a barrier between the two neighborhoods, a revamped viaduct could bridge them with public spaces and amenities for both. Some Callowhill Loft District residents say they would like to see the viaduct converted into a linear park, like those in Paris and New York. Still others would like to see it as a Rails to Trails bicycle route that would connect North Philadelphia neighborhoods with Center City. On the other hand, some in Chinatown consider the decaying structure a blight on their neighborhood and an impediment to much-needed housing development.

While the viaduct debate began heating up during the past year, three separate groups with similar goals began tackling the issue on their own. Beginning last fall, Drexel University architecture students undertook a yearlong exploration of the viaduct neighborhood. Graduate students in the University of Pennsylvania School of Design participated in an intense, four-day-long charrette to develop concepts for the reuse of the structure. Finally, Callowhill residents formed a grass-roots organization called the Reading Viaduct Project to explore the possibility of preserving the structure with Rails to Trails assistance.

The RVP collaborated with Penn and Drexel to showcase the students' work through the end of this month at Cafe Lift, 428 N. 13th St. The students' ideas demonstrate that a reinvented viaduct could be beneficial to all of the concerned



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teams considered turning the viaduct into a monument to honor the railroads across America. Another showed how incremental, easily the viaduct into a multicultural festival ground. A Drexel student explored alternative housing for artists and Chinatown residents.

Philadelphia needs to pursue the reuse of the Reading Viaduct not just because it's the fashionable thing to do, but because it can help two neighborhoods grow together over a common cause.

Kyle Gradinger is a recent graduate of the city and regional planning program at Penn. He conceived and organized the Reading Viaduct student charrette with Penn Praxis.



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