

MAGAZINE

Friends in High Places

How a pair of self-proclaimed "neighborhood nobodies" saw an abandoned elevated railway and envisioned a new park.

By Karen E. Steen

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From the Friends of the High Line office rooftop, founders Joshua David (left) and Robert Hammond (right) survey the High Line terminus, at the intersection of Gansevoort and Washington Streets.

Portrait by Jake Chessum

Last month New York City's most inspired and unlikely public-works project broke ground. The High Line--a collective fantasy that the city has been dreaming of for six years--now begins its transformation from elevated out-of-use freight rail viaduct to innovative public open space, a green strip of park floating through West Chelsea. This represents an impressive coup in New York, where dreams of reinventing public infrastructure run up against the realities of public opinion, political opposition, impenetrable bureaucracy, and the general impracticality of getting anything done in the country's most crowded, built-up, and expensive city. (See the Second Avenue subway, Governors Island, Fresh Kills, and Moynihan Station.)

Until recently the city, the state, and the property holders underneath it favored demolishing the High Line. Who would have thought that two neighborhood activists with no experience in public works--a freelance writer named Joshua David and a business consultant and sometime painter named Robert Hammond--would take on all of them...and win? What's more, they also secured millions in funding, inspired the city's hottest economic-development plan, and engaged Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro to design the project. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* earlier this year, Ada Louise Huxtable remarked, "This imaginative and sensitive scheme is so well conceived and its design development is being so well orchestrated...that it serves as an object lesson for a preservation movement increasingly mired in sentimentality, amateurism, and political infighting." For the past six years the question on everyone's minds was, Could this project really happen? Now that the answer is a resounding "yes," we all want to know something else: who exactly are these guys, and how did they pull this off?

Before we go any further, let's be honest: two guys with a dream couldn't do this alone. "Every star in the universe--and a few of them outside the universe--had to align for this to happen," says photographer Joel Sternfeld, who documented the High Line in 2000. Without a change in mayoral administration and a few allies in the right places, David and Hammond's hard work would have been for naught. But clearly the conversion of the High Line could not have happened without them. To get built today, public projects need private organizations to champion them. Just ask Maura Moynihan: the train station named after her father, the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, seemed permanently stalled until she formed the Moynihan Station Citizens Group. Hammond and David didn't invent the form, but their nonprofit group, Friends of the High Line (FHL), is perhaps the most vivid example of the new advocacy--a potent force that combines old-fashioned grassroots activism with business savvy, inclusive operations, and a strong sense for the power of good design.

The origin story of FHL has been told enough times that it has begun to approach mythic status. David and Hammond famously met at a 1999 community board meeting about the potential demolition of the High Line, where they happened to sit next to each other. Drawn to the meeting out of a sense of alarm, each sought a preservation group to volunteer for. When it became clear there wasn't one, the two decided to form FHL together. Neither had a specific reuse in mind. "My first goal was just to create a public dialogue about what could happen up here," David says. "The idea that you could tear it



From the December 2005 Issue

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By Martin C. Pedersen

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By Susan S. Szenasy

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- [Crushed Funnel](#)

down without that happening seemed outrageous."

Hammond likes to refer to a 2004 *New York* magazine article in which, he says, Kurt Andersen called him and David "neighborhood nobodies." At the time of the group's founding he had consulted at various for-profit companies, including Ernst & Young and two start-ups--an HIV Web site and an in-flight catalog. Neither he nor David had any experience in government, planning, or activism. But the term *neighborhood nobodies* is at least a little bit of shtick. Hammond was a college classmate of Gifford Miller, speaker of the New York City Council, at Princeton. And David's partner, Stephen Hirsh, whom he met at the University of Pennsylvania, is a talent agent to actors, a link to the world of celebrities who bring glamour and headlines to the Friends' benefit parties. Andersen in fact called them a "pair of nobodies," but Hammond has added a flourish, made it a better story. It is a good story, and it has also turned out to be a brilliant, if unintended, strategy. "We came to it without an agenda," David says. "We had no preformed perspective on the way parks should be." They also had no political enemies, no competitors, no preexisting public identity--nothing to alienate potential supporters. As a neutral party the "nobodies" made the High Line into a blank slate for the projected dreams of all New Yorkers. And as low-key personalities, they have allowed it to speak for itself.

Sometimes their embrace of the "nobodies" role seems designed to downplay their social ties. Certainly Hammond's old college classmate was in a position to help the group out. The speaker of the city council has more power to award public money than even the mayor. Last year the Associated Press reported that Miller had directed more than \$50 million to organizations he had ties to, including \$35.7 million--the largest share--to FHL. Today the city has allocated a total of \$60.75 million to the project.

But connections alone don't guarantee results. "When I first called [Miller] he thought it was a stupid idea," Hammond says. "He told me to call my local city council person. It wasn't until he came up on the High Line that he was really passionate about it." Hammond admits that if they hadn't been friends, Miller probably wouldn't have agreed to take a walk on the viaduct, but in the end it was the High Line itself that won him over. "I don't underestimate the role that Gifford played," he adds, "but I think you have to have a good idea." He and David also emphasize that their most dedicated celebrity supporters--Edward Norton, Kevin Bacon, and Kyra Sedgwick--came to *them*.

The early days of the organization were largely consumed with calling everyone they could think of who might be of help. One of their first supporters was Amanda Burden, now director of New York's Department of City Planning, who was a planning commissioner at the time. ("I had zero power--zero," she says, taking a page from the "nobodies" playbook.) They took her up on the tracks too, and just as Miller had, she immediately caught High Line fever. "I made a list of everybody I knew who might be influential and I called Robert," she says. "He was very polite to me, but it was clearly evident that he'd already contacted all those people. In his quiet, charming, intelligent way--and both of them have this--he had managed to engage and persuade and convince everybody that I suggested." In this characterization you start to glimpse the Friends' real genius--and to understand that their approach is as important as their contacts.

As is knowing your strengths. Hammond and David found the bulk of their support for the project close to home, in the growing number of art dealers and artists who were setting up shop in West Chelsea. By tapping a nontraditional base of support, they engaged a new constituency that felt fresh and energetic. "Designers, art dealers, artists, art collectors, and architects are not a politically active group in general," Hammond says. "We lowered the median age of community board members by several decades." More local backing came from the gay community: "Josh and I are both gay, and there are a lot of gay people in the neighborhood," Hammond says. "So when we started a large number of the supporters were gay." One prominent member of that community was restaurateur Florent Morellet, whose eponymous restaurant has been the beating

heart of the Meatpacking District community for 20 years. Through him they met clothing designer Diane von Furstenberg, who became one of their biggest supporters, hosting benefits in her West 12th Street studio.

What David and Hammond learned by making all those contacts and calls was that influential people were willing to help a good idea along. This became a linchpin in the Friends' plan of attack: they surrounded themselves with smart advisors such as Burden, architect Gary Edward Handel, Andrea Woodner and Claire Weisz of Design Trust for Public Space, government-relations strategist James Capalino, and Philip Aarons, a founding member of the Millennium Partners development firm. Many of the smart moves the group has become known for were first suggested by these mentors: hiring lawyers to file a lawsuit challenging the demolition order, undertaking a feasibility study, and holding off on a proposed design.

To operate at this level, the Friends knew they had to function more like a business than a typical grassroots nonprofit. Hammond's experience with start-ups helped him to build an organization and set goals. Meanwhile, David--who wrote for publications like *Fortune*, *Travel + Leisure*, and *Gourmet*--knew how to write compelling documents and approach the media. As young cultural creatives--Hammond is 36 and David is 42--they also understood the power of the Web. Their earliest mailing list was a Yahoo! e-group, which allowed them to keep in touch with their growing constituency--currently more than 10,000 people--for free.

One of their most savvy decisions was to follow a piece of Aarons's advice and hire lawyers for their legal challenge instead of relying on pro bono help. "That's how developers get buildings built: good lawyers," Hammond says. FHL's legal team won their case--and spurred the first of the group's famed benefit parties. "The only reason we had it is because we had to hire a lawyer," Hammond says. The cash was crucial, of course, but they found that fund-raising solidified the group in other ways too. "Raising money is a great organization builder because it forces you to create a database," Hammond says. "When someone gives even ten dollars, they're much more committed to the project."

As FHL grew, fund-raising allowed Hammond and David eventually to take on the High Line as a part-time job, and then in 2002 as salaried full-time work--a step many nonprofits balk at. "Josh and I were very reluctant to take a salary because we were raising a lot of the money from our friends," Hammond recalls. "But now I look back and say that was an important thing because that's when it really started to take off." In addition to focusing their own attention on the High Line full time, they also hired architect Peter Mullan, now the group's director of planning. The team currently includes six full-time employees and one interim consultant. "It's not a real organization if it's all volunteers--it can't sustain itself," Hammond emphasizes. "Right now if Josh and I left, Friends of the High Line would keep going."

Perhaps more impressive than their business savvy alone is the Friends' ability to mix that pragmatism with a natural sensitivity toward the equally important realm of art and design. Their first coup as a nonprofit, back when they were still working day jobs, was to enlist Pentagram's Paula Scher to design their logo. "Early on we made a commitment to using good design, one, as a way to make the project look more real than it was, and two, to communicate that we were going to follow through," Hammond says. "If you have a crappy brochure, people think you'll build a crappy product."

Their second stroke of brilliance was to engage fine-art photographer Sternfeld to document the High Line from above. In fall 1999 Hammond and David convinced CSX, the railroad company, to take them up on the High Line, an off-limits area that most New Yorkers have never seen. Experiencing it firsthand "was a real propellant to making us know we were doing the right thing," David says. "We both took pictures, but people said, 'That looks like a bunch of weeds.' We realized we had to find a photographer who could capture the magnitude of

the experience."

Sternfeld remembers his first visit, in March 2000: "We were walking around up there, and Robert sidled over to me and said, 'We need the money shot.'" It was an astute request. While all of Sternfeld's photographs of the High Line are stunning, there is a particular view--the Empire State Building on one side and a brick smokestack on the other, with a field of wildflowers in the foreground and a pink-and-blue sky above--that is arguably the "money shot." FHL seems to agree: the group has used it as a cover image on many of their public materials. Sternfeld's photographs represent the moment that the High Line became a park in the minds of New Yorkers. Until then all anyone had ever seen of it was the corroded underside. "That was absolutely brilliant," says Frank Sanchis, senior vice president of the Municipal Art Society, an early supporter. "In one fell swoop they turned a rusty old hulk of metal into a graceful river of green working its way through Chelsea. Nobody had ever seen it that way."

When asked what FHL's key to success might be, observers mention the networking and the photographs--and then they pause and add, "Obviously they're very smart." The ability to see opportunities and make good decisions is hard to replicate, but it has been a huge factor in the smoothness with which the Friends have moved their effort forward--and pushed it to be a world-class project. Their high aesthetic standards became evident in 2004, when FHL and the city held a competition to select a design team that would transform this industrial artifact into a model of contemporary landscape architecture. The meetings with the four finalists "were the most incredible interviews," Burden recalls, "because their vision of this project was so sophisticated and so nuanced. They didn't want any ordinary solutions."

Tough as they might have been in their questions, their style was relaxed and open, says Ric Scofidio, a principal of the winning team: "The questions were going back and forth. It wasn't being called into the principal's office so much as it was a conversation about the High Line." That openness has continued throughout the design process, making FHL one of Scofidio's favorite clients. "The word that we've used to describe them is *supple*. They're willing to bend their own rules and step back and reconsider."

Despite their heroics on behalf of the High Line, both men are more Clark Kent than Superman. "They're really gentle, thoughtful, intelligent people," Sternfeld says. "And they've never changed one bit, whether they were a two-bit organization or the hot organization with all the hot parties." Hammond is energetic and instantly forthcoming, often beginning a new thought before he has completed the last one. David speaks in measured sentences, fully formed paragraphs almost, a foil to Hammond's more unstudied charisma. "Our strengths and weaknesses were really good--how we paired," Hammond says. "I always want to start new things, and Josh wants to be more thorough on things we've already started."

This balance may be what has kept their pacing so effective, because the Friends have at various times needed to be both patient and impatient. One of the earliest steps FHL identified in the project was to obtain a Certificate of Interim Trail Use from the federal Surface Transportation Board. The certificate allows a railroad company to negotiate the transfer of old train tracks to a local government for recreational uses. It sounds simple, but the number of people who had to sign off on this transfer was daunting--not least because it included everyone who had initially favored demolition. In fact it wasn't until this past June that the certificate finally came through. "If you looked only at that one step, you would just say, 'Oh well, forget it,'" David says. "It was about inching your way to it and taking whatever ad-vantage you could get."

As they inched along toward the certificate, FHL kept chipping away at other goals--"always showing momentum," Hammond says. They published a planning study with the Design Trust for Public Space in 2002, opened a call for ideas to the general public in 2003, and held the official design-team competition in

2004. "The success of it is dependent on so many factors," Mullan says. "It's the design, the legal front, the zoning, the political front, the funding, the community support. All those different pieces have to be pushed simultaneously."

The flip side of their diligence, of course, is their impatience with the typical bureaucratic timeline. Mullan suggests that this accounts for at least part of the reason the project has moved along so briskly. "Those of us who have worked on public projects expect things to move slowly, and these guys don't," he says. "They didn't know better than to push forward at a speed that the rest of us are pretty much amazed by."

Timing has been one of the biggest factors in the drama of the High Line's resurgence. In FHL's early years then mayor Rudolph Giuliani did not favor reuse of the High Line. In fact one of his last acts in office was to sign a demolition agreement. Many believed the structure was a blight, the one thing that had kept the booms of the 1980s and '90s from transforming West Chelsea. However, it had also kept real estate values low, spurring art galleries to move into the neighborhood's former manufacturing spaces. Developers and property owners were suddenly looking for ways to cash in on the area's edgy popularity. The loudest advocate of demolition was Chelsea Property Owners, an association of the various entities under the High Line--warehouses, parking lots, and taxi repair shops with the potential to be developed much more lucratively, if only the rusty old artifact could come down.

It was about the time Giuliani left office, in late 2001, that things started to shift. After the September 11 terrorist attack on New York, the Friends took time out to reconsider the relevance of their project. "New York City was going to face a new very challenging set of priorities, and one of them was financial," David says. "The economic rationale for any project was extremely, extremely important." David says it was about that time that he and Hammond started to rethink the High Line's potential as part of the city's future economic strength. What had started out as a preservation and parks project was about to become an economic-development strategy.

With the end of Giuliani's administration in sight, the Friends started focusing on the mayoral candidates. "It was a very carefully orchestrated strategy on our part," David says. Once they'd won support from all the candidates, FHL asked them to write letters to John Snow, then head of CSX, and planted questions about the High Line at meet-the-candidate events. Their plan paid off extremely well when it was coupled with a brilliant bit of luck: the election of Michael Bloomberg. "Of all the candidates who supported us during the election there's no question that Bloomberg was the most engaged and supportive," David says.

It also paid off that they brought both Miller and Burden up to the High Line--an experience that seems to border on religious, as it engenders a kind of evangelism. "We both said, 'If we are ever in a position of influence, this is going to be our number one priority,'" Burden recalls. And so it was: two more incredible stars of good fortune aligned when Bloomberg appointed Burden to the posts of planning director and chair of the city planning commission, and Miller's colleagues unanimously elected him speaker of the city council, the second most powerful position in New York City government.

In the new city planning director the Friends had an ally who could start turning the slow wheels of bureaucracy. "The mayor was for it, but I had to convince the entire administration--from the law department, which had reissued the demolition permit, to the parks department to the EDC," Burden says. She also asked her department to devise a plan for appeasing the Chelsea Property Owners. Vishaan Chakrabarti, head of the Manhattan planning office at that time, suggested an old planning tool, the transfer of development rights, to give value back to the property holders. In essence the properties under the High Line could sell their air rights--that is, the permission to build tall--to designated nearby properties. A 100-foot-wide corridor around the High Line would be protected to preserve light and air in the park, but selected properties outside the

corridor could buy up the transferred rights and build big.

Seen in this light, it was clear that redeveloping the High Line as a one-of-a-kind greenspace would not be a hindrance to development but an economic driver for an area that had previously lacked amenities. In the subsequent rezoning of West Chelsea, which was finalized in June, the High Line is the central jewel. For the public officials who have championed it, the appeal is clear: this is a legacy project, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to shape a piece of history.

Senator Hillary Clinton got this immediately, as did Congressman Jerrold Nadler, who fought to save the High Line from demolition in the 1980s. "The moment I heard it, I thought it was a fantastically good idea," he says. "No one would think of building it to make a park--really it's comparatively cheap to make a great thing there." Recently Clinton, Nadler, and Senator Charles Schumer secured \$18 million in federal transportation funding for construction of the High Line.

There is one piece of advice the Friends got early on that allowed the High Line to win so many supporters: don't get too specific too early. FHL built consensus by letting people dream their own dreams--be they of parks, economic development, cutting-edge architecture, or saving New York's disappearing industrial past. One of the steps the group is still proudest of is the call for ideas, which drew 720 entries including a linear swimming pool, a roller coaster, and a prison.

Though a preliminary design is now in place and media coverage of it has bordered on endless, the High Line has not lost its glow. "It's a project that's been hyped for six years, but it's still completely fresh, new, and exotic," Burden says. Part of that glow is the simple difference between the words *for* and *against*. "The model for community groups is stopping some kind of change," David says. "We became an organization about *creating* something."

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