

August 24, 2018

New York City's High Line can teach Australia how to get urban renewal right



Apartments designed by Zaha Hadid overlooking New York's High Line. Hufton and Crow

Soo Chan – architect, interior designer and, lately, property developer – is standing on the rooftop of his new Manhattan apartment building, rhapsodising about his serene Soori Bali hotel, which is tucked between rice paddies and a black sand beach in one of the Indonesian island’s last remaining quiet corners. As he talks, sirens wail and horns honk on the street below.

Chan’s latest endeavour, Soori High Line, may seem like an unlikely spiritual successor to his hushed Balinese retreat. But these two far-flung properties have the same ethos, Chan says. Putting a bit of Bali luxury into Manhattan means an abundance of light wood and stone, 5.5-metre ceilings and matching windows to maximise natural light. Each apartment has a fireplace and – in what is surely a first for tightly packed New York – roughly half have private, indoor salt-water swimming pools.

“At both Soori High Line and Soori Bali, there is a water element and a fire element,” Chan says. “At Soori Bali we have cauldrons of fire near the ocean and at Soori High Line we have the swimming pools and the fireplaces opposite the pools.”

Chan’s venture has been so well received that he has another building under construction on the other side of the street, directly overlooking the High Line. That building, Five One

Five, features a curved-glass facade and two more sides decked out with floor-to-ceiling windows. It contains just 15 pricey apartments.

West Chelsea a hotspot

Hailing from Singapore, Chan is the only star architect to date to have designed two buildings near the High Line in hotly contested West Chelsea. When he speaks about his work in the area, he sounds genuinely inspired. “West Chelsea is turning into a place where architects can come to truly express themselves,” Chan says.

Such expression includes 520 West 28th Street, an 11-storey wonder by Zaha Hadid Architects that’s as notable for the curved metal fins that adorn its exterior as it is for its lavish residents’ amenities, which include an IMAX cinema and robotic parking. There’s also The Getty, designed by Peter Marino, who’s equally known for his opulent interiors and his all-leather wardrobe, and The Fitzroy, by Roman and Williams, whose intricate green terracotta facade recalls New York of the early 1900s.

At Soori High Line, the smallest apartments cost about \$US3 million (\$4 million), and the penthouse \$US22.5 million. In May, a penthouse at The Getty closed at \$US59 million, setting a record for the most expensive residential sale in downtown Manhattan.

Suddenly, the city’s celebrities seem to be clamouring for a piece of the action in West Chelsea. In April, *The New York Post* reported that rocker Sting and his wife Trudie Styler were renting one of the large upper-floor apartments in the Zaha Hadid building and, in June, word spread that pint-sized pop star Ariana Grande and her fiancé, *Saturday Night Live* comic Pete Davidson, had moved in as well. Set back just a few metres from the High Line, Hadid’s building isn’t the most discreet address for well-known New Yorkers, but the cachet of living in a newly buzzing neighbourhood seems to be drawing them in regardless.



Architect and interior designer Soo Chan in his Soori High Line development. His Five One Five project, featuring just 15 apartments, is under construction on the other side of the street, also overlooking the High Line.

Urban regeneration done well

This is a quintessential New York story, which means these new projects sit cheek by jowl with vestiges of West Chelsea's colourful past: public housing, beat-up parking lots and warehouses where downtown gallerists – long ago priced out of SoHo – display their wares.

“New York has always done urban regeneration particularly well,” says Marc Colella, the Australian structural engineer who worked on iconic projects such as the new One World Trade Centre building in Manhattan and The Shard in London. “New York has what’s called ‘As Of Right’ development, which basically means there are very simple planning restrictions, and if you comply with those restrictions, you can build what you want.”

In West Chelsea's case, the government's relatively hands-off approach, coupled with the abundance of rezoned industrial land, has given rise to a clutch of fantastical apartment buildings by the cream of the world's contemporary architects. For New York, it's an unparalleled meeting of opportunity and money, and it's putting the city, once again, firmly at the centre of the global architectural conversation. It's also a lesson in the transmogrifying effect of a particularly well-thought-out piece of urban development, in this case the High Line.



Inside the Zaha Hadid-designed 520 West 28th Street. Scott Frances

Some critics have complained that, visually and socio-economically, New York is becoming homogenous. But in this corner of Manhattan, the city feels thrillingly alive. Indeed, the change has been so dramatic that some locals fear the neighbourhood's evolution may have veered off course.

Bjarke Ingels, architect in residence

On a recent weekday morning on the High Line, New York's architect du jour, Bjarke Ingels, wends his way through the swelling crowds and talks with me about who has moved into the neighbourhood – architecturally speaking – and where West Chelsea might be headed.

Ingels, whose projects have included everything from psychiatric hospitals to Google's corporate headquarters in California, has designed a large new building beside the High Line called The XI ("The Eleventh"). Since he moved his practice, BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), from Copenhagen to New York in 2012, the tanned and extroverted Dane with 450,000 Instagram followers has become arguably the city's highest-profile architect in residence. As we walk, an excited postgraduate student asks for a selfie.

"The Eleventh's surroundings are the home of contemporary work by some of the most significant architects of our time," Ingels says. "The tower's two immediate neighbours are buildings by Frank Gehry [the IAC Building] and Jean Nouvel [100 11th Avenue]. Norman Foster has designed a building a little bit further north [551 West 21st Street] and Renzo Piano has designed the Whitney a little bit further south."



Danish architect Bjarke Ingels designed The XI.

The XI, which occupies an entire city block between West 17th and West 18th streets, is the largest new residential project to rise along the High Line to date: its two twisting, travertine-clad towers will contain 236 apartments and a five-star Six Senses hotel. Unconstrained by the height restrictions that blanket much of the area, the taller of the two towers will rise 36 storeys.

“New York is a perpetual cosmopolitan city that makes everyone feel at home,” he continues, “and now, the High Line has rapidly catalysed a revolution in design and architecture. It’s an incredibly cool era to be contributing to this urban landscape.”

A new Tribeca

Ingels reckons his development, in combination with the High Line and the surrounding West Chelsea neighbourhood, will soon be attractive enough to lure prominent New Yorkers from downtown Manhattan’s current A-list locale, Tribeca, where the architect himself lived for several years. That neighbourhood, directly north of the World Trade Centre site, has lately found favour with New York’s rich and powerful thanks to its vast loft apartments in old industrial buildings and its relative privacy (there are no major tourist attractions in the neighbourhood itself). But West Chelsea, says Ingels, has more breathing room. “Eventually what drove me nuts in Tribeca is that it’s so mineral and so enclosed.”



Robert De Niro's son, Raphael, is Tribeca's top real estate agent. Michael McWeeney

Tribeca was itself transformed into one of the city's most exclusive residential locations by Robert De Niro, who first rented a loft there to practise for boxing film *Raging Bull* in the 1970s. The Oscar-winning actor has since become a property heavyweight, purchasing many neighbourhood buildings and launching local institutions including the Tribeca Grill, Nobu and the Tribeca Film Festival.

The De Niro family have long been canny property investors; Robert's mother, Virginia Admiral, long ago bought in nearby SoHo, where the actor was raised. Robert's son, Raphael, of Douglas Elliman Real Estate, took the No.1 spot on industry bible *The Real Deal's* 2017 ranking of Manhattan residential agents by sales value (\$US721 million) and is considered by many to be Tribeca's premier broker.

Now, Raphael, 42, is spreading his wings into West Chelsea, brokering sales at one of the High Line's most anticipated new apartment buildings, The Fitzroy. The development, one building removed from the High Line on West 24th Street, has been designed inside and out by Roman and Williams, aka Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch, a husband-and-wife duo known for their classic, textured interior-design commissions.

"It's a Roman and Williams calling card, almost," Raphael De Niro says. "It's not for someone who wants Zaha – it's the polar opposite of Zaha." Most notable is the building's facade, which is covered in green terracotta. The apartments range from about \$US5 million to \$US24 million.

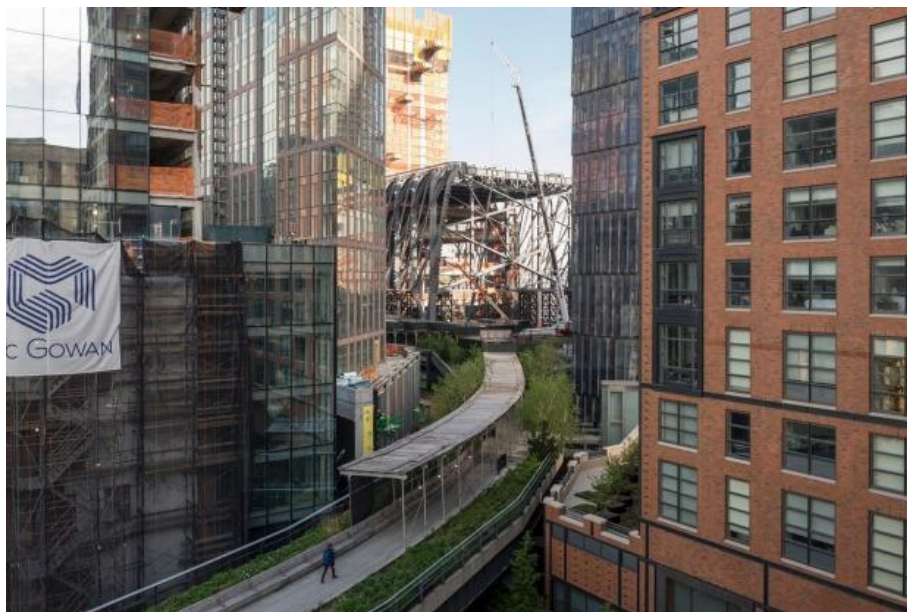
Like his father, Raphael does not mince words and is not overly fond of publicity, so it's fitting that he is brokering sales in one of West Chelsea's more discreet buildings. "It's not like any other recent project that I've seen in New York City," he says. "For one, we haven't seen green terracotta used for decades." It could even help draw privacy-conscious New

Yorkers from Tribeca and perhaps from afar as the city's old-money districts on the Upper East and Upper West sides.

Standefer goes further: she says an increasing number of luxury buyers around the world are prioritising seclusion over sweeping views, and The Fitzroy's design reflects that shift. "Our buyer is someone who likes to look 'into' his or her home, not 'out'," she says. "Many modern projects seem to be outward facing – once inside, one always goes to the glass or the top and looks out, like you're on a ship's prow. But The Fitzroy is a home and a shelter. Its attraction is its embedded quality."

Embryonic High Line

I first walked the High Line on a clear but bitterly cold day in February 2010, while I was renting a small apartment in the West Village, just south of the park's starting point. Back then, only a small section of the walkway was open, and the surrounding streets still looked and felt like an industrial precinct. During my nine-block walk from Gansevoort Street up to West 20th Street I passed just a handful of people. Within 18 months, a second section would open and walkers from across the city and further afield would begin flocking to West Chelsea, quickly outnumbering neighbourhood residents. But on that bracing afternoon, the High Line's future life as a visitor magnet was hard to imagine.



A movable shell, expected to open in 2019, that fits over a new arts centre building on the High Line. The shell provides an additional performance or event space when rolled away. Thomas Schenck

At the time, many New Yorkers felt West Chelsea would be best left as light-industrial space. But population growth in the city soon focused the minds of policymakers. "To put it simply, New York was running out of room," says Marc Colella, the structural engineer. "Land was at a premium. Cities that are geographically constrained constantly need to look for the next urban-refill or regeneration opportunity."

Colella leads the building structures team in Australia and New Zealand for engineering giant AECOM, based in Melbourne. He previously spent nine years in New York City and, before that, three in London. Colella says the key to successful urban regeneration is to create a distinctive sense of place – likely built around a piece of public infrastructure such as a park – rather than a conformist concrete jungle. “That notion of ‘place’ can really uplift property prices and economic development,” he says, “and the High Line is a fantastic piece of place-making, there’s no question.”

He adds: “Getting the ‘place-making’ right in urban redevelopment – ‘How can we use the space?’ and ‘How can adjacent buildings interact with it?’ – is the most critical thing our cities are facing today.”

Sydney's Goods Line

Place-making has lately underpinned successful urban-regeneration projects around the world. Sydney has the Goods Line near the University of Technology Sydney, essentially a mini High Line complete with a Gehry of its own, the \$180 million Dr Chau Chak Wing Building. London, the £3 billion redevelopment of the abandoned Kings Cross precinct is taking advantage of the long-ignored Regents Canal, declaring it a unique piece of urban history (Google’s £1 billion London headquarters will overlook the canal). Luxury apartments now dot the precinct.

But unlike developments such as London’s Kings Cross, West Chelsea in Manhattan already had a significant population before the work began. Just one block each side of the High Line there are about 2500 people at the Chelsea-Elliot Houses and a similar number at the Robert Fulton Houses, what Australians would know as housing commissions.

Compared with some housing projects in New York’s outer boroughs, the Chelsea houses are safe and well maintained. Children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds attend the local public schools, which rank highly. Yet many public-housing residents here, particularly African-Americans, still struggle on a day-to-day basis. The housing projects have grown more incongruous as West Chelsea has evolved.

Public-housing tenants did not initially embrace the High Line the way private renters and buyers have. In 2016, researcher Alexander J. Reichl wrote in *Urban Geography* that almost everyone walking the High Line was Caucasian, completely out of whack with the demographics of Chelsea. In 2017, Robert Hammond, co-founder and executive director of Friends of the High Line, the non-profit group which administers the project, expressed sadness over Reichl’s findings. “We were from the community,” he told CityLab. “We wanted to [develop the High Line] for the neighbourhood. Ultimately, we failed.”



The Fitzroy architects Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch.

Since then, Hammond has been working hard to make the High Line more inclusive. As one of the people who first dreamt the park into existence, he feels deeply invested in its success. The Texan native first met co-founder Joshua David at a local-government meeting in 1999, and the pair bonded over a shared affection for the elevated tracks, which at the time faced demolition. Revitalising the High Line soon became a full-time job which involved significant public and private fundraising. Almost 20 years later, Hammond still speaks about the High Line with unmistakable zeal. “It doesn’t matter how many people come, or how popular it becomes as a tourist attraction, it’s not truly successful or reaching its full potential if everyone doesn’t feel welcome,” he says.

Hence his organisation’s focus on youth programs. “We have the equivalent of 10,000 kids per year coming on field trips, mostly from Title 1 schools, which are schools where the majority of students are receiving some kind of aid,” he says. For the adults there’s a program of free events ranging from salsa dancing to stargazing. The latest High Line visitor statistics indicate that progress is being made. Of the New Yorkers who visited the elevated park in early 2018, 45 per cent were people of colour, as were 66 per cent of those who attended Friends of the High Line public programs. “We do need to be careful with how we gentrify,” adds Colella. “But the notion of a variety of income ranges co-existing in the same neighbourhood is something that New York is very familiar with. There is a way of society working that out.”

Development gathers pace

As more housing inventory comes onto the West Chelsea market, talk in real estate circles is focusing on supply and demand. To the north, the Hudson Yards redevelopment project, essentially a brand-new neighbourhood comprised of high-rise offices and apartment

blocks, is surging ahead, bringing thousands more residences to this part of the city; and, in June, the City Council green-lit a 1200-apartment development straddling the border of West Chelsea and Hudson Yards.

“The High Line has been a surprisingly strong anchor for development,” says Jonathan Miller, chief executive of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. “The pace of new development has been one step ahead of demand because of the easy access to low-cost capital combined with plenty of development opportunities [in West Chelsea]. The challenge now is whether the market can continue to absorb a high volume of product skewed to the luxury and super luxury markets in such a small window of time.”

There is some cause for concern. In the second quarter of 2018, Manhattan’s residential sales volume fell to its lowest level since 2009, according to Douglas Elliman Real Estate, and the median sale price fell 7.5 per cent year-on-year to \$US1.1 million.

But Colella likes West Chelsea’s chances. He says a great strength of New York planning is how the city considers the broader district, not just the specific area. In this case, infrastructure being put in place for Hudson Yards could bring residents to West Chelsea. “The city is currently incentivising big corporations to move their operations to Hudson Yards, and it has extended subway service to the area, which is an extremely important driver for economic development,” he says. “Chelsea now has the highest commercial office rents in New York, which is quite interesting.”

It’s a lesson that Australia could do well to learn from, especially as construction continues on key underground railway stations in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. “Australia’s major cities are actually growing at a greater rate than large international cities such as New York,” Colella points out. “Densifying is critical.”

From low to high

Driving the remarkable development that's making West Chelsea one of the world's most significant precincts for modern architecture is the High Line, a stretch of elevated railway track that has been reborn as a landscaped walkway.

Trains first ran along the tracks in 1933, shunting goods between warehouses and factories up and down the lower western side of Manhattan. But by the early 1960s, much of New York's industry had moved off the island and trucks began to replace trains for freight across the US. The southernmost portion of the line was demolished and the rest fell into disuse.

When plans to repurpose the High Line were announced in 2006 – the result of a campaign by area residents – the broader reaction was muted. Chelsea was, after all, still a fairly scruffy neighbourhood, dominated by the remnants of 20th-century industry (some of the old warehouses at the time were used for illegal raves, while others sat empty). The area held little appeal for tourists or for Manhattan's wealthiest residents.

Few predicted that the 2.3 kilometre walkway would become a tourist attraction, much less one that would receive millions of visitors each year. Yet the High Line, which stretches the length of Chelsea from just below 12th Street up to 30th Street, then curves westwards to the Hudson River, received 7.4 million visitors in 2017. That's more than the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim combined.

Today, activity at either end of the High Line is boosting its profile even more. To the north, a dense new neighbourhood dubbed Hudson Yards is taking shape; to the south, the enclave known as the Meatpacking District is abuzz with fashionable New Yorkers and tourists visiting the newly built Whitney Museum of American Art. The High Line forms the backbone of what has arguably become Manhattan's most engaging locale.