Want to join New York's High Line crowd? Don't listen to Joanna Lumley *The Guardian*

Watch out: your High Line could become a ‘tourist-clogged catwalk’.

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Every city wants a High Line. When Joshua David and Robert Hammond first dreamed of turning a long-disused elevated railway track overgrown with weeds into a linear park for Manhattan, they could scarcely have imagined the day – about 10 years and more than $180m later – when fellow urbanists in Miami, Seoul, Toronto, London and Sydney would strive to replicate their project’s phenomenal success.

“Part of the High Line’s allure lies in its seeming impossibility,” says Adam Ganser, vice president of planning and design at Friends of the High Line. “It was so unlikely that this project would happen that I think it provides some optimism around similar crazy concepts in other cities around the world.” The fact that it attracts five million visitors per year and an estimated $980m (£756m) in tax revenue might also have something to do with it.

But as major cities fall over each other to adapt the relics of their industrial past into engines of tourism and property booms, the chorus of detractors is growing. The charges against the mini-High Lines of the world are numerous: racial segregation, gentrification, cost, ugliness and outright idiocy. London’s Garden Bridge project has just collapsed amid widespread opposition from the very population it hoped to titillate. Even Hammond – whose penitence included setting up the High Line Network, a coalition of designers and planners meant to help other High Line-like “adaptive reuse” projects avoid his mistakes – acknowledges the problems. “We were from the community. We wanted to do it for the neighbourhood,” he said in a recent interview. “Ultimately, we failed.”

So, how do you do it right?

Do: think of the locals first

While many people see the High Line as the high watermark of urban design – “It’s perfect,” pronounced the New Yorker’s not easily pleased Peter Schjeldahl – its critics accuse it of social failure. “The High Line crowd is overwhelmingly white, to a degree that is far out of line with the racial/ethnic demographics of the borough and city,” political scientist Alexander J Reichl reported in a paper last year. His observations that “the level of racial homogeneity significantly exceeds that of other comparable parks, and that the lack of diversity cannot be explained by neighbourhood composition” led him to the conclusion that “the High Line is failing as a democratic public space”.

Among its unintended negative consequences is “gentrification of many kinds, from some of the most expensive residential real estate, to the disappearance of taxi garages and gas stations, to the displacement of art galleries that made Chelsea appealing in the first place”, says architecture critic Alexandra Lange. The condos along the High Line are disproportionately pricier than their neighbours, with Bjarke Ingels and Zaha Hadid among the architects who have cashed in.

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Worse, is the “lack of appeal of the High Line for long-time neighbourhood residents – a destination park without being a neighbourhood amenity”, says Lange. In the New York Times, author Jeremiah Moss has deplored it as a “tourist-clogged catwalk” and “just another chapter in the story of New York City’s transformation into Disney World”.

**Don’t: just do it anywhere**
The High Line’s “mistakes are artfully multiplied and layered”, says urbanist James Howard Kunstler. “For instance, the assumption that New York City doesn’t need railroad tracks anymore. Or the notion that buildings don’t have to relate to the street-and-block grid. Instead of repairing the discontinuities of recent decades we just celebrate them and make them worse.”

But a good part of the High Line’s success, in the view of **architecture professor Witold Rybczynski**, “is due to its architectural setting, which, like the 12th arrondissement, is crowded with interesting old and new buildings”. Other than New York, “very few American cities can offer the same combination of history and density”.

In other words, there is a danger that what works in a specific place might fail in other less interesting landscapes. Done wrong, High Lines could become the latest in a long list of urban design failures, such as downtown shopping malls, underground passages, skyways – and monorails.

Sydney’s unloved monorail, which opened in 1988 only to close just 15 years later, inspired one architecture firm to propose converting it into a garden path called – wait for it – **the High Lane**. The plan never got enough traction to stop the monorail’s demolition, but in 2015 the city got its own elevated linear park anyway: the **Goods Line**. It’s a much closer imitation of the High Line, built upon disused industrial railway track and outfitted with greenery, wifi, performance spaces and even an outdoor gym.

The architectural texture of Sydney, a city developed mostly in the postwar car-centric era, can’t compete with that of New York and Paris – or even that of Melbourne, where a historic railway bridge comes up every so often as a **candidate for High-Lineification**. But the Goods Line at least offers a striking view of Frank Gehry’s characteristically unconventional **Dr Chau Chak Wing Building** at the University of Technology Sydney. It’s a decent start.

**Don’t: build it from scratch**
Seattle hired High Line landscape architect James Corner to design a 26-block promenade, linear but not elevated, that would replace an unsightly freeway, which was to be relocated underground. But the project came face to face with Kate Martin, another designer who was intent on preserving a section of the condemned road for conversion into an unusually high High Line.

After unsuccessful school board and mayoral campaigns, Martin made the “Park My Viaduct” project her political hill on which to die. Even after her seismic engineer ruled out the possibility of retrofitting the existing freeway, she proposed rebuilding some of it after the demolition. The project won just 19% in a local referendum, not least because Corner himself described Park My Viaduct as a “dumb idea”. “The High Line doesn’t stand out alone, apart from the city,” he said.

Until recently, London looked as though its own High Line would take the form of a park spanning the Thames. The Garden Bridge was originally envisioned in 1998 by **Absolutely Fabulous** actor Joanna Lumley as a tribute to Princess Diana. It was different from the New York High Line, in that it would have to be built from scratch. But as costs passed £200m – with the city likely to be liable for ongoing maintenance – and Londoners grew displeased with the proposals to limit public gatherings on the bridge, **mayor Sadiq Khan withdraw financial guarantees**, effectively killing it.

**Do: crowdfund for extra legitimacy**
As Khan taketh away, so he giveth: the **Camden Highline** aims, like its inspiration in New York, to make a park out of an existing train track – in this case a 2,800ft stretch between Camden Town and Kings Cross, originally part of the North London Railway, which ceased operations in 1922.

“(It’s) a great example of a local community taking an idea and garnering support in order to make it a reality,” says Khan, referring to the fact that the Camden Highline **raised the first phase of its budget, £63,976**, on the crowdfunding platform Spacehive. (The mayor himself pitched in £2,500.) Spacehive
previously crowdfunded feasibility assessments for a potential Peckham Coal Line, an elevated urban park in south London made from old coal sidings.

Don’t: think crowdfunding is enough, however
This kind of “Kickstarter” urbanism, however innovative, has its limitations. “You wouldn’t Kickstart a replacement bus line for Brooklyn, but you might Kickstart an app to tell you when the bus on another, less convenient line might come,” Lange has argued.

Take the Lowline, an abandoned trolley terminal in New York that was billed as “the world’s first underground park”. The crowdfunding campaign grew considerable attention – but in reality the park was a wildly overambitious proposition, with the funding only able to cover a test run of the skylights that would filter daylight underground.

Do: design it well
Lange also criticises the Lowline’s vision of “a high-tech eco-tainment crossed with a multi-purpose community centre”, seeing “something undeniably dystopian about the idea that a neighbourhood starved for open space might find its solution in a tunnel”. Indeed, the High Line has greatly raised public expectations for design.

Chicago’s Bloomingdale Trail, another railway-turned-park that acts as the backbone of a larger network called the 606 (taken from the city’s zip codes), opened in 2015 to a collective shrug from a city that boasts such famously well-executed public spaces as Millennium Park. “The fact that the 606 is an elevated trail on an abandoned rail line creates an almost inevitable comparison to New York’s High Line,” wrote urbanist Aaron Renn. “The 606 is not even remotely another High Line.”

He argued that it doesn’t have any citywide significance, either for local residents or for tourists. “It’s a neighbourhood-serving rail trail that is elevated above the streets with some nicer features like lighting that you don’t see often” – but it’s afflicted with a utilitarian awkwardness owing to its low budget ($95m – just over half the cost of the High Line) and the various demands of the regulatory bodies involved.

Do: look in unexpected places
Toronto’s Bentway, slated to open at the end of this year, is one of the stronger pretenders to the High Line throne. In Toronto’s case, private philanthropists employed urban consultants to judge what Toronto actually needed in the way of parks – and where. The undervalued land they identified lies beneath the regrettable Gardiner Expressway, a mid-century freeway that cuts off the city’s waterfront.

The Bentway’s continuous, road-shaded path will have 55 “outdoor rooms” demarcated by the Gardiner’s concrete support structures (or “bents”), variously suitable for gardens, art shows, playgrounds, farmers’ markets, performance spaces, and much else besides – ideally upending the longstanding North American perception of the land under freeways as being useless, dirty or outright dangerous.

Similarly, Miami’s Underline aims to make a 10-mile “linear park, urban trail and canvas for art” out of the land beneath its rail system’s elevated track, currently used for either parking or nothing at all.

Do: be patient, young Jedi
In search of a High Line of its own, Seoul chose a freeway overpass that had become unsuitable for cars. Rather than tear it down, the city reinforced it – and, with a design by Dutch landscape architect Winy Maas, turned it into an artfully lit elevated park lined with plants and attractions, connected directly to the towers around it, and open 24 hours a day. What differentiates Seoullo 7017, as Rowan Moore wrote for Guardian Cities on its opening in May, is the “ambition to grow out of the character and needs of contemporary Seoul”, and as such it “promises to be among the more convincing of all the many High Line wannabes in the world”.

Related: A garden bridge that works: how Seoul succeeded where London failed
While it still retains a bit of the stark, concrete look of midcentury Seoul, the park’s designers are urging the public to give its organic features a chance to emerge – as have those of the Cheonggyecheon, the celebrated downtown stream that replaced another 1970s freeway flyover in 2005.

It’s a fair point: these projects are about deep-rooted change, a shift in priorities from pure economic capacity to aesthetics, comfort and public amenity. “Making sure that potential is leveraged to benefit the existing communities that live near these projects, and benefit the park as well, will be key to their long-term success,” says Ganser.

And as glorious a view as they can provide, Lange advises their creators not to forget about the foreground. “Think about the park in the context of the city and the neighbourhood, of different age groups and use groups. Don’t allow it to drive away the people it could most benefit. Each opportunity is a chance to make the idea of an infrastructure park more complete – which goes down way deeper than design.”