



Rail Park (Phase 1)

Overview

The Rail Park is an innovative linear park that transformed a long-vacant railroad viaduct into vibrant public green space. The Rail Park connects diverse neighborhoods, honors the city's industrial heritage, and provides critical open space in an area that previously had limited park access. The park represents a compelling example of adaptive reuse, turning obsolete transportation infrastructure into community assets.

Phase 1 Length: Quarter-mile (approximately 1,320 feet)

Phase 1 Location: North Broad Street and Noble Street to Callowhill Street between 11th and 12th Streets

Completed: June 14, 2018

Ultimate Vision: Three-mile greenway connecting 10 or more neighborhoods

Historical Background

"Workshop of the World"

From the mid-19th century through the 1920s, Philadelphia earned its reputation as the "Workshop of the World," producing an extraordinary range of manufactured goods. Factories in the Callowhill neighborhood, where the Rail Park is situated, produced textiles, clothing, shoes, hats, metal tools, machine parts, and locomotives. These goods were transported via the Reading Railroad to supply markets throughout the country and abroad.

The Reading Railroad Era

The origins of the Rail Park site date back to the late 1700s, when the Delaware and Schuylkill Navigation Company attempted to construct a canal connecting Philadelphia's two rivers. The canal was never completed but the right-of-way was transformed for rail use in the early 1800s, becoming the City Branch line.

The Philadelphia and Reading Terminal Railroad was incorporated in 1888 and leased by the Philadelphia and Reading Railway in 1891. The Reading Terminal opened in Center City in 1893, consolidating the Reading Railroad's services in a central location. Freight and passenger trains traveled on elevated tracks and below-grade sections; at its peak, it was one of the largest passenger train terminals in the world.

Decline & Abandonment

As automobile transportation grew in the 1920s through 1950s and interstate highways expanded, rail service declined. Construction of the Vine Street Expressway and Pennsylvania Convention Center resulted in portions of the viaduct being demolished in the 1980s and early 1990s. The Reading Viaduct was officially abandoned in 1984 after the Center City Commuter Tunnel opened, providing more modern underground transit alternatives.

For nearly two decades, the entire three-mile stretch of abandoned viaduct sat derelict and overrun with weeds and trash.

From Liability to Asset

In the early 2000s, community members began reimagining the abandoned infrastructure as a potential asset rather than a liability. In 2003, artists Sarah McEaney and John Struble formed the Reading Viaduct Project, inspired by Paris' Promenade Plantée. The success of New York's High Line, which opened in 2009, provided a compelling model for similar conversions.

In 2010, the City of Philadelphia commissioned a feasibility study that revealed a powerful finding: converting the viaduct to a park would cost an estimated \$10.8 million, compared to more than \$50 million for demolition. This economic reality, combined with the viaduct's designation in 2010 as a contributing structure to the Callowhill National Industrial Historic District, secured the project's future.

The Modern Park (2018-Present)

Phase 1 Development

Center City District, in partnership with Friends of the Rail Park and the City of Philadelphia's Department of Commerce, led the planning and construction of Phase 1. After community engagement processes from 2010 to 2016, design work by Studio Bryan Hanes and Urban Engineers produced plans that honored the site's industrial character while creating accessible, welcoming public space.

Construction Timeline:

- **2010:** CCD commissioned feasibility study with support from William Penn Foundation and Poor Richard's Charitable Trust
- **2012:** Community design presentations generated enthusiastic response
- **2013-2015:** Construction documents and funding development
- **September 2016:** Governor Tom Wolf announced \$3.5 million state grant, enabling construction to proceed
- **October 31, 2016:** Groundbreaking

- **June 14, 2018:** Phase 1 opened to the public

Project Cost: \$10.3 million (Phase 1)

Key Elements

Design Concept

Phase 1 transformed the SEPTA-owned spur of the viaduct, creating a neighborhood park that maintains local character and industrial authenticity while adding much-needed neighborhood green space. The design weaves paths through native plantings, incorporates flexible-use areas, provides varied seating, and preserves historical features alongside adaptive reuse of historic structures.

Features

Elevated Steel Structure: The park sits atop multiple steel bridges dating to the 1890s. Though rusted and corroded from decades of neglect, the structures were found to be sound. They were cleaned, waterproofed, sealed, repaired, sandblasted, rustproofed, and repainted. Additional safety rails were added along the viaduct edges.

Pathways: Accessible walking paths curve along the entire quarter-mile stretch, offering changing perspectives of the surrounding neighborhood and Philadelphia skyline.

Native Plantings: The park features 1,100 plants including wide varieties of trees and perennials. Plantings include native species adapted to the challenging rooftop environment and incorporate some of the wild plants that colonized the abandoned viaduct.

Seating Areas: Varied seating includes large porch-style swinging benches constructed of wood and steel; wooden benches along the walking path, railings and nestled within planting beds; and wooden platforms providing flexible space for group activities.

Public Art & Historical Elements

Story Wall (2018): An 80-foot-long laser-cut steel wall designed by Cloud Gehshan encapsulates the key timelines and manufacturers in the Callowhill neighborhood's industrial history.

Dawn Chorus (2018): A two-part site-specific installation by Brent Wahl and Laynie Browne features poetry-engraved paver stones and a sculpture made from a repurposed utility pole and colorful aluminum birds.

Stamp of Incarceration (2015): A large mural across from the park designed by Shepard Fairey honors James Anderson, co-founder of the Los Angeles based Anti-Recidivism Coalition, which helps formerly incarcerated men and women reshape their lives.

Sendero Verde (Green Trail) (2022): Philadelphia-based artist Dora Cuenca created this mural in recognition of the wild green spaces that can be found throughout Philadelphia.

Recognition & Impact

The Rail Park has been recognized as part of the High Line Network, a national coalition of infrastructure reuse projects, and has made a positive impact in a variety of ways, including:

Green Space Access: Creates access to public green space within a 10-minute walk for more than 9,000 neighborhood residents who previously had none.

Stormwater Management: Native and adapted plantings reduce stormwater runoff.

Neighborhood Connectivity: The park serves as a connector and gathering space for diverse adjacent neighborhoods including Callowhill, Chinatown, Northern Liberties, and areas near Center City.

Funders

- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources
- City of Philadelphia
- City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce
- William Penn Foundation
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (in partnership with Reimagining the Civic Commons)
- Poor Richard's Charitable Trust
- The McLean Contributionship
- Forman Family Foundation
- Center City District
- Central Philadelphia Development Corporation
- SEPTA
- Anonymous donors and numerous private and corporate contributors

Ownership & Operations

Ownership: SEPTA

Management, Programming & Maintenance: Center City District in partnership with the Philadelphia Department of Parks & Recreation and Friends of the Rail Park

Visitor Information

Address: 1300 Noble Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123

Hours: Open daily, dawn to dusk.

Public Transit:

- SEPTA Broad Street (B) Line: Race-Vine Station (walk east to park)
- SEPTA Bus Route 45: 12th and Callowhill
- Multiple SEPTA routes serve nearby areas

Entrances:

- North Broad Street at Noble Street (ramp)
- 13th Street at Noble Street (stairs)
- Callowhill Street between 11th & 12th streets (stairs)

Accessibility: ADA-accessible entrance/exit via Noble Street ramp

The Three-Mile Vision

Phase 1 represents the beginning of an ambitious plan to create a three-mile greenway connecting at least 10 neighborhoods from Northern Liberties to Brewerytown. The complete three-mile vision for the Rail Park would encompass elevated spans, below street-level portions and underground sections including a tunnel.

Phase 2 plans focus on extending the park from Vine Street north across Spring Garden Street to Fairmount Avenue, converting 6.8 acres of brownfield viaduct into elevated parkland.

In 2025, the federal Surface Transportation Board ruled that the viaduct was abandoned, resolving longstanding ownership questions and clearing pathways for the city to acquire remaining sections.

Center City District has committed to raising funds for Phase 2 and has received initial support from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, William Penn Foundation, Poor Richard's Charitable Trust, Connelly Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and PECO Green Region.

For information about events, programming, and volunteer opportunities with Friends of the Rail Park, visit therailpark.org. For information about Phase 2 development and CCD's role, visit centercityphila.org.