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New York: The Next Level

VON MARK ELLWOOD | 08 OKT 2015

NEW YORK – Art aficionados visiting New York's West Side no longer need to limit themselves to looking straight ahead – to a blue-chip gallery's set of glass doors, say. They should also look up. The High Line, a former elevated railway repurposed into a stylish linear park that attracts some seven million visitors per year, holds plenty of art for them to see. There is, for instance, Rashid Johnson's *Blocks*, a frame of steel cubes that was deliberately installed to nestle, half-hidden, among the plants, so that greenery can grow through and around the sculpture, creating new perspectives on the piece as the seasons change. Nearby, Elmgreen & Dragset's *Panorama: A Greater Perspective* is also hiding in plain sight, awaiting visitors on which to play one of the artist duo's typical pranks: the replica of a conventional telescope pointed toward the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor is cast in bronze and entirely non-functional.

These are just two of the many artworks dotted around the 1.5-mile-long park, all of them commissioned by the nonprofit High Line Art, headed by the effervescent Milan-born curator Cecilia Alemani. "We present projects you wouldn't associate with the notion of public art," says Alemani, noting that these pieces are much smaller and subtler than the large-scale, attention-getting public art of old. And all are on view "free of charge, every day of the year, rain or shine," Alemani continues, so art buffs can plan their visit ahead of the crowds. The place can be truly magical then. "I don't know if the High Line could happen anywhere else," Alemani concludes, noting that "the city has really embraced it, from the food-cart guys to the mayor."



THE SOUTH END OF THE HIGH LINE, IN THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT, HOME TO THE RECENTLY OPENED WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART (FAR LEFT). FRANCK BOHBOT/INSTITUTE.

And indeed, rising above the designer boutiques and other trendy spots of the Meatpacking District, all the way up to the myriad windswept warehouses turned white boxes of North Chelsea, the High Line has come into its own as the dramatic backbone to a particularly ebullient nexus for art, culture and commerce. The arrival earlier this year of the Whitney Museum of American Art, with its new, Renzo Piano-designed building hugging the High Line's southern end, constituted perhaps the greatest cultural endorsement of this neighbourhood's turnaround. With this move – years in the making – the once-cramped former Upper East Side institution tripled its exhibition space to 200,000 square feet, making it better able to stage such benchmark exhibitions as the major Frank Stella retrospective opening 30 October.

In another sign of the area's vitality, new restaurants and bars are springing up. Among them, the Major Food Group, the trio of chefs behind downtown foodie hits Carbone, Parm and Dirty French, opened its latest project, Santina, last January. Located in a Piano-conceived glass box underneath the Gansevoort Street entrance to the High Line, Santina serves up Mediterranean food such as chickpea crêpes and branzino crudo in a beachy setting that includes a real orange tree and, as befits a Whitney neighbour, a blue-and-white Julian Schnabel installation of broken pottery representing the sea and rocks. Another important newcomer to the area, Manhattan restaurateur

Danny Meyer oversees Untitled, the Whitney's official eatery. Meyer also chose last winter to launch his first stand-alone cocktail bar, Porchlight, an establishment inspired by a Nashville dive bar, down to its rough-hewn rocking chairs and its signature drink, the Gun Metal Blue, a Day-Glo, curaçao-based riff on the margarita.



THE HIGH LINE'S SUNKEN STADIUM SEATING OVERLOOKING 10TH AVENUE. FRANCK BOHBOT/INSTITUTE.

If the High Line's environs already have much to offer, their influence is also radiating northward and into the future in a major way. Once a semi-industrial wasteland, the 28-acre Hudson Yards project (between West 30th and West 34th Streets and 10th and 12th Avenues) is in full swing. Old railway sidings there have been displaced in favour of a new real estate development that will include sixteen skyscrapers, abundant commercial property, 14.5 acres of open landscaped public zones and – most important for art lovers – a brand-new cultural space. That destination, Culture Shed, a nonprofit centre for artistic innovation housed in a six-storey building, is scheduled to open in spring 2018. It promises to present cutting-edge exhibitions and cross-disciplinary events for curious audiences from around the world. Rejoicing in the prospect, Alemani notes: “The High Line connects all the nonprofits in the neighbourhood. Everywhere, there is art!”

She's right. Just a short stroll east, another district has used art as the foundation for its revival. Until relatively recently, the district known as NoMad (North of Madison Square Park), between East 25th and East 29th Streets and 6th and Madison Avenues, was nameless. Its office blocks were full of dusty toy showrooms and furriers reached by tiny elevators, and the six-acre park at its centre was anything but green. Recalling her first glimpse of that park, Keats Myer, executive director of the Madison Square Park Conservancy, pauses. “Fifteen years ago, you couldn't walk safely through it,” she says. “It was horrible-looking – just dirt.” Now all spruced up and home to the original location of popular burger chain Shake Shack, Madison Square Park is a haven for children and adults, tourists looking for a spot to rest and office workers on their lunch breaks. It's also the place where Myer's nonprofit stages year-round site-specific arts programming, bringing more than 50,000 people every weekday to the one-time no-go zone. Among recent projects are Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Park*, an interactive work that

turned the heartbeats of passers-by into pulses of light that ricocheted through the greenery, and Teresita Fernández's current installation, *Fata Morgana*, for which the artist hung horizontal shimmering mirrors among the trees to create dreamy sun-dappled walkways (on view through early 2016).



MADISON SQUARE PARK, WITH TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ'S INSTALLATION *FATA MORGANA*. FRANCK BOHBOT/INSTITUTE.

With the park set as NoMad's art-friendly green heart, several buzzy establishments have helped boost its profile in recent years. The Ace Hotel, for one, has become an unofficial clubhouse for dot-commers working in nearby tech offices: Thanks to its onsite Stumptown café and to the Breslin, April Bloomfield's gastropub that serves fat British-style chips, its lobby is crammed with laptop-toting, flirty singletons. Next door, anchored by a sleek cocktail lounge, the NoMad hotel is definitely glitzier, with the vampy touches typical of interior designer Jacques Garcia. Even more fabulous, overlooking the park, is legendary hotelier Ian Schrager's contribution to the area's increasingly chic character. Located inside the landmarked Metropolitan Life tower, a 1909 Renaissance Revival skyscraper, Schrager's New York Edition offers rooms with a turn-of-the-20th-century private-club vibe, along with the first stateside restaurant by London's Jason Atherton, the latest swaggering bad boy of cooking. Honouring the past as well as helping define the neighbourhood's future, its interior is festooned with artwork – in this case, more than 500 photographs of Manhattan through various eras, from the glittering Gilded Age to the punkish 1970s.

And finally, speaking of punkish, Comme des Garçons svengali Rei Kawakubo picked a six-storey Beaux Arts building on NoMad's eastern fringe a couple of years ago as the Manhattan site for Dover Street Market, her category-defying multi-brand concept store from London – more proof that NoMad's arts-and-commerce vibrancy is here to stay.



THE BILLIARD ROOM IN THE NEW YORK EDITION HOTEL'S RESTAURANT.

FRANCK BOHBOT/INSTITUTE.

Kawakubo's original store was in SoHo, the first of New York's historic districts to be revived by an influx of culture, when artists commandeered low-rent spaces in cast-iron buildings as their studios in the 1970s. Though much has changed since then – SoHo's cobbled streets are now crammed with tourists and lined with luxury and big-brand flagships – several remnants from its artist-driven revival remain. Painstakingly restored, Donald Judd's home and studio on the corner of Spring and Mercer Streets has become a pilgrimage site for art connoisseurs; his pieces are exactly where the artist installed them. Perhaps less easily found, Walter De Maria's permanent installations are nevertheless worth seeking. His *Broken Kilometer*, a cavernous, meditative piece, sits unobtrusively among boutiques at 393 West Broadway. His *Earth Room*, on the second floor of a nearby Wooster Street office building, consists of a huge white room filled nearly two feet deep with moist soil that is raked and watered weekly to keep it damp; the air inside smells warm and springlike year-round. For all its transformations since the 1970s, then, SoHo remains a destination for art. So concludes , the ceramicist and furniture designer who opened his first retail outlet in the area two decades ago. "SoHo has a magical fairy dust that doesn't exist elsewhere," he says. "When I got my start, it was an alternate universe where any creative dream could become a reality." Given the neighbourhood's boundless energy, this may hold true today.