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Opinion

Opinion: What we learned about repurposing urban space on our trip to Detroit

By Alan Van Capelle and Scott Kratz



Credit: Nadir Ali

Attendees at the High Line Network's event at Michigan Central Station.

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When the High Line Network convened in October in Detroit for our biennial symposium, we knew that the Motor City would not only provide a vibrant backdrop for the largest gathering of professionals in the field of urban infrastructure reuse, but also serve as a teaching laboratory for our network, who represent 46 projects across the country and the people who are leading the

movement to transform underutilized infrastructure into public green spaces in their neighborhoods.



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Detroit did not disappoint.

This year's symposium, Rooted, was focused on exploring what it means to authentically and successfully center community in the creation of spaces, and on the Community First Toolkit, a best-practices resource the High Line Network developed to guide communities engaged in infrastructure reuse.

Over three perfect autumn days, our host partners — the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy and the Joe Louis Greenway Partnership — provided us with a literal roadmap to what community-powered investment looks like in action, and showed us a city shimmering with energy and optimism.

As colleagues in the field of public placemaking, we arrived in Detroit from very different coordinates.

One of us is the executive director of the High Line, a New York City public park built upon an elevated rail track that has been operating for 15 years, sees 7 million visitors a year, and runs the High Line Network; one of us is the director of the 11th Street Bridge Park in Washington, D.C., a Network project just beginning construction, that will transform a decommissioned bridge spanning the Anacostia River into an elevated community park.

Yet we found that the lessons offered by Detroit were so profoundly elemental and instructional, it didn't matter if you were a long-term park practitioner or a community activist at the beginning of your journey. The takeaways from Detroit were universal for any and all of us engaged in this work.

- **If You Build it, They Will Come;** If They Build it, They Will Stay. We adopted this mantra from Dreamtroit—Detroit's artist colony and community gathering and entertainment space. Everywhere we went, everyone we spoke with was excited about the investment happening in Detroit, and aware of the community organizing behind it. They felt a part of it, and saw their futures in the future of their city. Involving communities in public placemaking produces a positive cycle of pride, identity, belonging and ownership.
- **History matters.** Detroit has a remarkable history, steeped in the diverse cultures that have called the city home. The buildings and structures that contain this history hold deep meaning for

Detroiters. By not only repurposing or preserving these structures, but incorporating that history into the new uses, Detroit creates anchors for deep, multigenerational community connection.



Credit: Nadir Ali

Attendees of the High Line Network's Detroit event enjoy a Michigan tradition.

- **Use-based Inclusivity.** From hours of operation, to permitted activities, to programming, to unique accessibility needs, Detroit offered case studies in how public spaces must understand the community it intends to serve, and align with how that community thinks about, needs, and will use a public space.
- **Listening and language:** Detroit is leading an emerging conversation about the use of words like "resilience" or "revitalization" in talking about efforts to right the wrongs in communities that have been subject to systemic disinvestment, injustice and inequities. Listen to how residents talk about investment and development in their community, and let that be your guide.

What Detroit illuminates overall is that repurposing disused infrastructure is about more than bringing green space into urban neighborhoods. By reimagining neglected spaces into community assets across the city, Detroiters are transforming trauma into vehicles for connection and growth. At its roots, this is why the High Line Network exists, and we will be encouraging anyone who wants to observe these ideas in successful action to visit the extraordinary city of Detroit.

Alan Van Capelle is executive director of the New York-based Friends of the High Line, a nonprofit that operates the High Line park in Manhattan, and Scott Kratz is director of the 11th Street Bridge Park, a

Washington, D.C., project to repurpose an obsolete bridge into a park.

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