

Ghost Train

INTRO

The city's disused infrastructures provide far more than a set of spaces merely available to be re-incorporated into the regular urban life; in the absence of an instrumental present use, they provide a quiet contact with wild nature and nurture a rich evocative experience, where memory and imagination come together and invite to interpret and explore them in an open way.

As time appears to be virtually over layered, these 'ruins' and the traces of former use and activity, evoke a transient past interweaved with an open future, while remaining distinctively apart from the city's present pace.

The need to integrate places such as the Rockaway Beach Branch back into the active urban environment comes along with the challenge of preserving the intrinsic qualities they hold in their state of abandonment; addressing the memory of a place becomes then an instrument in a process of materialising their future potentialities. Rather than re-using the existing infrastructure with the sole aim of creating a new public landscape, our project aims to regenerate the rich experience of the site, by retaining, further enhancing and recreating its evocative qualities.

In a similar way, our mode of representation corresponds to an impression, an atmosphere of what the site is and how the project intervenes within it allowing for new evolving connections and activities, rather than proposing a fixed visual image - a frozen moment. Through that we explore the experience and memory of site and project, as the connection we are trying to produce - or at least to suggest - is not only vertical between two levels, but also between the different times of the place.

APPROACH

A key issue in the Ozone Parks Station is the access to the rail track level from the level of the street. In our proposal, the transition between the street and the tracks becomes the spine of the project, which articulates in it the memory of place, the continuity of public space, and the programme of uses and activities that will bring together a community of locals and visitors alike.

The imagery of *trains passing* constitutes perhaps the most immediate and natural recall of an abandoned railway. In our project we reinterpret this memory as a series of *ghost railcars*: parts and traces of a *Ghost Train* suspended in time within the infrastructural space of the station. These ghost railcars constitute the key elements through which the street and the rail track connect to each other.

Their materiality is both translucent and reflective; they perpetually dissolve into the landscape of the railway; through their perpetual alteration along the station they create a multitude of appearances, images, and visual frames. Not situated at the same place where the trains used to run but slightly offset, corresponding to the structure underneath, they are thus able to construct a longitudinal transition that gradually connects both levels while opening-up the ground level to the natural light.

In this way, as the ghost coaches cut through the existing rail track slab, a re-imagined element of past is materialised as a device that establishes a relation between the street and a natural environment that had developed apart from the city throughout years of disuse and abandonment. A device that further evokes the site's different states in time, rendering them visible and tangible to the visitor.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

Privileging the existing open space qualities at the rail track level, most of the programme is concentrated underneath the structure, generating different relations with the street. It consists mainly of commercial and community oriented activities alongside the street. Equally, most physical interventions, such as the ramps and the stairs going up, are situated below, leaving more open space at level of the rail tracks.

The main connection between the two levels, functions at the same time as a great staircase for going up and down, a place for sitting down watching city life go by, and as an informal open-air theatre. Here the *ghost railcars* are suggested as the traces of incision on the rail track slab.

The overall linearity of the elements of the project intends to reinforce a perception of traces of former elements and activities in a similar way that all fragments of rails and machinery left over the wilderness that grew around the tracks recall that absent time.

The structure once conceived to support the immense weight of the trains is no longer facing the same requirements; some portions of transversal beams can be removed in order to insert the sequence of rigid frames that constitute the *ghost railcars*. The series of frames hold the structure together at the same time they allow a gradual access to the railway level.

The main stair connections between the two levels are positioned at each end of the station, at the points of key street intersections of the site. In this way, the project aims to improve the poor spatial quality of these underpasses, as well as enhance the connection of the site to the greater urban grid. The existing intersections become thus pivotal points that function in terms of the immediate site and the greater urban territory; they constitute the main urban gateways to the railway park.

The stairs at the crossings lead to the park above, but they also allow a more direct connection to the translucent structures built directly over each one. They enclose a communal space thought for more special or formal purposes that could range from ritual or religious practices to celebrations, ceremonies, exhibitions and activities that can be extended into the public space of the park.

The openings above the stairs follow the idea of the ghost railcars, but now displaced as if a train passing has left the traces for a later incision on the rail track slab, creating the voids for the stairs to connect the two levels.

The ghost coaches over the crossings function as landmarks that visually re-signify the space over the railway –they could even be thought as a series that develops along the railway, at key points of connection to the greater urban structure. They

concentrate the built density keeping most of the upper space of the station as an open semi-natural landscape away from the city's noise.

When experienced from the railway level, the Ozone station can be considered as a space with a sort of interior quality; the platforms at each side of the station, are slightly raised at a higher level, producing a sense of enclosure as they separate it from its immediate context. All accesses from the street to the railway level lead directly to this space. Further, the treatment of the platforms' edges with the addition of relatively opaque handrails, not only enhances the sense of enclosure – impeding the direct view over the city– but equally creates a longitudinal walk from which the visual relation to the surrounding city can be regained.

In addition to the ghost railcars, the cycling lane as well as surfaces and steps created for pedestrian movement constitute a network of spaces where light-occupancy activities can be developed. Our idea is to leave the existing vegetation as found, as much as possible, this taking the form of longitudinal wild gardens –with no species introduced other than what has been naturally growing on the site– stretching in-between the walkways and the ghost railcars. Further, as the main walkways in the railway space are constituted on a steel grid, vegetation stretches its growth on those less trodden parts extending beyond the actual limits of the gardens.

Whereas much of the programmatic and spatial interventions focus on the upper level, the space defined by the structure that lifts it off the ground, at street level, is as much re-integrated into city life. Partially functioning for private uses related to repair and storage services, the space underneath the railway appeared previously concealed in itself, with little relation to public space. The project transforms this 'sealed' space into a complex ground that generates a multitude of programmes for commercial and community-oriented activities.

Stretching between 99th and 100th Street, the ground level operates as a market and communal complex (see detailed programme proposal below). It complements the more recreational nature of the open space at the upper level, itself offering an extension for some of the ground level activities: while a visitor can buy a sandwich and a drink from a shop at the ground level, the open space directly above it offers that quite spot to enjoy the meal.

Changing levels in this complex ground produce a gain in height at certain points and at the same time smooth out the access to the upper level. They also create extra space underneath them; space is densified with two interrelated levels of activity.

An opportunity is created for current tenants to rehouse their activity within this new space, and further develop it taking advantage of the added value of the site. Change of use of sub-renting may appear as alternatives depending on each situation. In any case their current areas would be reduced in order to allow space for public use.

The project addresses the different nature of the streets alongside the structure and develops for each a different strategy of urban relations. Considering the 99th Street is significantly wider, the proposal envisages its transformation into a pedestrian street with a slight slope connecting it with the lower level, where cafes and similar kind of activities can expand onto the street, where an informal marketplace can also be allocated. The intermediate level turns itself into an urban balcony contemplating an active urban realm.

The 100th Street is retained as a secondary street, which serves the new programmes proposed, extending the space of the sidewalk on the side of the railway and eliminating the adjacent parking space. Other shops or businesses can be established on that side, while the relationship to the lower level may still remain more visual than physically connected.

Considering the street level having less light and already harbouring the growth of some trees and bushes, we propose to allocate some small wild gardens underneath the openings, in a way to visually connect both levels. These work as projections of the wilderness above, constituting another form of connection between the railway and public space.

PROGRAMME

The overall programmatic strategy of our proposal aims to create a mixture of uses and activities that, using the newly-created spatial qualities of the site, can act at the same time as local centre servicing the immediate neighbors, as well as an attractor for visitors coming outside it. In this way our proposals aims to provide space for fostering the local community to develop through an enhanced connection with the wider city and its population.

Regarding the spaces at street level, these are prioritised for private commercial activities such as small-scale retail, food and drink shops, and convenience stores. The upper level would focus more on public and community-oriented activities, taking full advantage of the open space qualities of the regenerated site.

In particular concerning the upper level, the typology of ghost railcars, interwoven within public walkways and access points, provides for the following key programmes:

- A farmers market during the weekends would support the direct trade between farmers and the local community and create a pole of activity for the locals.
- An arts and crafts market besides the farmer's market, run and managed by the local community, would not only complement the weekend activity of the former but equally create opportunities for the locals to develop and grow their activities benefiting from the site's attraction to visitors.
- A daily exchange of second-hand goods. This would not animate the site but equally support inter-community contacts and relations.
- An Ozone community-run events programme. Newly created spaces would be managed by the locals providing thus a forum for all kinds of events, talks, festivities, and fairs directly grown from within the community. Further, the site can function as a public showcase for raising awareness on various issues concerning the locals, and encourage public participation and engagement.
- Cultural and educational facilities can be housed in the enclosed spaces created. These could include a public library, space for workshops and seminars.
- Art exhibitions could be housed at multipurpose pavilions above the intersection points of the site.