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Living Near Train Tracks

Thanks to new window technology, there's no such thing as the wrong side of the tracks.



Stefano Ukmar for The New York Times

By Jane Margolies

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After Yue Yu and her husband first moved into their one-bedroom condo in [Long Island City](#) last summer, she spent a blissful afternoon out on her new balcony.

She basked in the sun, which washes her living room and bedroom with light from the southeast. She tilted her head up to the blue sky. And she looked out at the view.

Of train tracks.

Her building, [Galerie](#), backs up to an inactive rail spur. Beyond is track after track serving the New York City Transit Authority, the Long Island Rail Road and Amtrak. Ms. Yu and her husband, who paid \$875,000 for their home, see the No. 7 subway rolling by as they get ready for work in the morning.

And these days the Yus are not the only New Yorkers with train tracks as front yards.



Yue Yu, a resident of the Galerie condominium in Long Island City, on the balcony of the one-bedroom apartment she shares with her husband. Credit...Stefano Ukmar for The New York Times

As developers scramble for construction sites, parcels near train tracks and elevated lines have been snapped up for new residential development. Many of the sites — previously occupied by tenement buildings, industrial warehouses or other low-rise structures — are being used for condo and rental projects that are substantially taller than what was there before and, in some cases, decidedly high-end. (Many of these projects are on temporary hold as the city and country battle the coronavirus.)

Permits for projects near train tracks have more than doubled in the city in recent years, going from 45 in 2016 to 230 so far this year; the number of units in such projects has skyrocketed from 2,074 to 16,018.

Homes Near the Tracks in New York City

Construction permit data from 2020 shows that as building sites become scarcer, residential development planned or underway within 164 feet of aboveground train tracks has boomed. No such permits have been issued on Staten Island this year.

Borough	Projects	Share of New Projects	Proposed Units	Share of New Units
Queens	85	15%	5,712	21%
Bronx	41	8	5,146	20
Brooklyn	97	5	4,197	9
Manhattan	7	2	963	4

Source: [Localize.city](https://www.localize.city)
By The New York Times

Queens and the Bronx, in particular, are getting their share of track-side projects as development continues to spread out from Manhattan.

Such projects may call for the addition of rubber pads on building support columns to absorb vibration; they most definitely require windows designed to buffer noise.

“It’s not like in an old tenement building where you had the windows open and had to stop talking while the train went by and wait until it’s gone and then carry on,” said John Longman, president of [Longman Lindsey](https://www.longmanlindsey.com), an acoustical consultancy that advises developers on how to mitigate sound in their buildings.

Of course, New Yorkers have long lived in apartments where they might hear or even feel a distant rumbling of the subway underground. But the fact that so many New Yorkers are living close to aboveground trains is a recent phenomenon.

One out of five new units under development in Queens and the Bronx is next to aboveground tracks, according to an analysis done by [Localize.city](https://www.localize.city), the listing platform. The analysis, which used building permit data, found that such units are in the majority in some neighborhoods. In the Bronx neighborhood of Wakefield, 74 percent of new units being developed are by aboveground tracks, said Tal Rubin, vice president of research at the listing platform.

The phenomenon is also occurring in Brooklyn and Manhattan, though to lesser degrees: nearly 9 percent and nearly 4 percent, respectively, according to the [Localize.city](https://www.localize.city) analysis.

But even in those boroughs, some neighborhoods are getting a large share of such development: In Inwood, a whopping 76 percent of new units are being developed by aboveground tracks.

How did we get here?

For one thing, as anyone involved in New York real estate is quick to point out, there is simply a limited amount of land to build on. With the city in the midst of a housing crisis, developers are reconsidering sites they might have rejected in the past. But while properties near trains might be less expensive to buy, they can require more spending on foundations and window systems.

“We will do whatever we need to do to get land,” said Nancy Packes, president of Nancy Packes Data Services, a real estate consultancy and database provider.

And if there isn't available land, the city and developers are looking to create it by building platforms over train tracks and putting megaprojects on top. These projects, like Hudson Yards on Manhattan's Far West Side, benefit from engineering advances that facilitate the construction of these platforms, but can take years, if not decades, to complete.

Since the late 1920s, there has been talk of decking over Sunnyside Yard, the 180-acre active rail yard between the Queens neighborhoods of Sunnyside and Long Island City.

Recently the city and Amtrak released a [master plan](#), developed with PAU, the architecture and urban design firm, that proposes building 12,000 affordable homes, other buildings and open space on top of a 115-acre platform over a large portion of the rail yard.

However, a timeline, cost and funding for the plan has yet to be determined. The price tag for the deck alone — which includes infrastructure plus adjustments to the rail yards to accommodate the platform — is estimated at \$14.4 billion. The plan would be realized in phases over multiple decades.

In Brooklyn, the 22-acre [Pacific Park](#) development in Prospect Heights was first announced in 2003, when it was called Atlantic Yards. Four residential projects are up and running next to the rail yards, and two more are under construction.

The major developer, Greenland Forest City Partners, hopes to begin construction of the five-acre platform over the train yard this year and is working with Dattner Architects on a design for 680 Atlantic Avenue, the first project to be built on it.

Some rezoning projects over the years have directly encouraged development near train lines.

The rezoning of a corridor along Jerome Avenue in the southwest Bronx, for instance, has resulted in the replacement of low-rise buildings that housed businesses like auto repair shops with large-scale residential projects that include affordable housing. Because the corridor has elevated tracks that serve the No. 4 subway line, new buildings require setbacks and noise mitigation.

The city's Noise Code does not specifically address track-side development, according to a spokesman for the Department of Environmental Protection, which helps enforce the code. However, the rezoning of industrial areas to allow residential development or establishing special districts that mix commercial and residential uses generally requires plans to address noise.

The city standard is an interior noise level of no more than 45 decibels (sounds at or below 70 decibels are considered safe), though some developers seek to do better. A whisper might register 30 decibels, according to DEP, while [a train might register 100 decibels](#).

Improvements in window technology have made living by trains possible.

As late as the 1970s, single-pane windows were still the norm. But in the aftermath of the energy crisis, double-pane windows — the ones with an air space between the inner and outer glass — were adopted in the name of thermal insulation.

These windows also had the benefit of reducing outside noise from entering apartments.

Now there are a variety of window types to dampen noise: Some have two panes of glass that differ in thickness. There are windows with laminated glass. And there are triple-pane windows.



98 Front Street, in Dumbo, is steps from an elevated line. Credit...Stefano Ukmar for The New York Times

At 98 Front Street in Dumbo, a Hope Street Capital project sitting near an elevated line and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the windows have two sets of double panes — in other words, quadruple panes — adding up to a window unit that is two inches in depth.

And then there are “trickle vent” windows, which have a narrow louver at the top that can be opened to let in a “trickle” of fresh air but not as much noise as a standard double-sash window would.

Silverback Development installed such windows at [Hero LIC](#), a condominium tower designed by Woods Bagot at Queens Plaza South. The trickle-vent feature added about \$40,000 to the cost of the windows, according to Josh Schuster, the managing principal.

Prices for available units in the building range from \$600,000 to \$1.3 million, with a two-bedroom overlooking the tracks from the 10th floor going for \$1.175 million.

“You can have all the amenities in the world,” Mr. Schuster said, “but if the windows are not adequate it diminishes the overall quality.”

Shifts in architectural styles may have contributed to noise issues. Predominantly glass facades let in more light, but “bricks and concrete are better at keeping out sound,” said Tejav DeGanyar, who heads the Virtual Construction Lab of [Schüco](#), a German window manufacturer with an office in New York.

For their Court Square project in Long Island City, a 50-story tower next to the No. 7 train, the developers Tavros Holdings and Charney Companies are using a glass curtain wall that has different noise transmission ratings. On floors closest to the train level, the curtain wall will have a 40 OITC rating, which stands for outdoor/indoor transmission class. The rating elsewhere in the building will range from 32 to 35 OITC, which costs about 15 to 20 percent less, said Sam Charney, the principal of Charney Companies.

The higher rating, he said, “will make the apartments so silent you’ll be able to hear a pin drop,” he added.

Developers and their brokers try to tout the advantages of projects by trains.

Because being near train tracks often means a new building has some distance from other buildings, many of these apartments have more light and a sense of openness than they would if the project faced another tall building.

“As long as windows cut out the noise, hey, it’s not so bad looking at a track versus looking into someone’s else’s window,” said Ms. Packes.

And while it is still a stretch to call views of trains truly desirable, there may be something to be said of a view that embodies the hard-charging, never-sleeping character of city life.

“It’s ever-changing, dynamic,” said Brendan Aguayo, managing director of Halstead Development Marketing, who is heading sales and marketing for Galerie, Ms. Yu’s building. He said that apartments facing the tracks have sold on par with apartments on other sides of the building, (though they were priced 3 percent lower than apartments facing Jackson Avenue).

Still, you won’t see photos of train tracks on Galerie’s website, nor on the websites of most other rail-side developments.

“You don’t know your view will be of train tracks until you actually show up at the apartment,” said Mr. Rubin, of Localize.city, which includes information on proximity to trains in its listings.

At [1399 Park Avenue](#), a 72-unit condo building in East Harlem, for instance, Localize.city warns that [a train rumbles by an average of 623 times a day](#), based on train schedules. Hill West, the architecture firm that designed the building for Heritage Real Estate Partners, said it used double-pane windows, with laminated glass of variable thicknesses to mitigate train noise.



Charlie West, a luxury condo in Manhattan’s Hell’s Kitchen, was built over Amtrak tracks. Credit...Stefano Ukmar for The New York Times

Valentina Cooper, who lives at [Charlie West](#), a luxury condominium in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan, wasn't even aware there was a train running under her building when she and her husband purchased their apartment last year. The project, from the El Ad US Holding and Mi & Co Development, is built over Amtrak tracks.

It took a year to build a platform before construction could begin on the twin-towered, 131-unit project, according to [ODA New York](#), which designed it.

"The whole site was treated as a bridge," said Christian Bailey, a founding principal of the architecture firm.

On a recent Sunday, Steven Perez, a receptionist at the front desk, said he sometimes heard a distant rumbling of a train and occasionally even felt a slight vibration.

But Ms. Cooper, who has lived in the couple's fourth-floor apartment since September, said she has "never heard or felt anything."