

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

*I had a chance to speak with Sarah McEneaney. In 2003 McEneaney and John Struble founded the first nonprofit group, the Reading Viaduct Project, to advocate for turning the Reading Viaduct into a public park. Viaduct Greene recognized the connection between the Viaduct and the Pennsylvania Railroad freight line west of Broad Street. In 2013 the two groups merged and today they are known as Friends of the Rail Park. Sarah is a visual artist and community activist who lives and works in Philadelphia. Her paintings are characterized by their autobiographical content, detailed brushwork, and brilliant color. McEneaney's intimate subject matter focuses on daily scenes from her home, studio, travels, and neighborhood. Her work is included in public collections such as the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) and she has received numerous grants and awards. McEneaney is represented by Locks Gallery, Philadelphia and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.*

**Bridgette Mayer (BM):** Hi Sarah! Thank you for taking some time to talk about the Rail Park and The Friends of the Rail Park. Many people in the community are not fully aware of the history of this project, how it came about and even why it is important for our Philadelphia community and the significance of having this walking park and space. As someone who envisioned and started working on this in 2003, I was hoping you could share a little of the history of the Rail Park and how it came to be and what the original vision was for the park.

**Sarah McEneaney (SM):**

**Hi Bridgette, Our original vision was simply to take an abandoned railroad viaduct that mother nature had turned into a spontaneous garden into a public green space. You could say that the site itself inspired us. Our vision was not any more specific than that because we wanted the design to come from the communities the park would travel through.**

**BM:** Can you tell us a little bit about how the vision of the Rail Park has changed in the past 15 years and where it is now?

**SM:** On June 14 of this year Phase One of the Rail Park opened. The park is part of the City of Philadelphia park system. This is something we wanted from the beginning. As someone who visits the park several times each day I can tell you that it is loved and well used by neighbors, Philadelphians and visitors from all backgrounds. Everyone is excited about future phases. We are focused on engaging with all the communities near the Rail Park on future phases

**BM:** What have been some of the challenges along the way and what has been the biggest challenge?

**SM:** In the early years there was some opposition to repurposing the Reading Viaduct into a park. Studies conducted by the City (in 2004 and 2009) confirmed that the cost of remediation into a park was less than the cost of demolition. This is mostly due to the contaminants in the soil on the line. To remediate for recreational use the top 18-24" of soil is removed and capped with 'clean' soil. This is also how rural and suburban Rails to Trails projects are built. Another challenge is of course raising

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**funds. The Rail Park would not be open today without the work and support (financial and otherwise) of our partners, the Center City District and the City of Philadelphia. Generous funding also came from the State of Pennsylvania, the William Penn Foundation and numerous other foundations, businesses and individuals. Community engagement is an ongoing and rewarding challenge. The design of Phase One, by Studio Bryan Hanes, came about through a series of community meetings. We are committed to continuing and improving on that process so that the Rail Park will reflect all Philadelphians.**

**BM:** Why do you think the Rail Park is such an important project and space for Philadelphia?

**SM:** Phase One of the Rail Park is the first public green space in the Callowhill/ Chinatown North neighborhood. We all know how important access to green space is to a healthy life in the City. Seeing how the park is being used by so many proves this point. The history of the neighborhood and the rail lines is super interesting. In the 1800 and early 1900's Philadelphia was the 'Workshop of the World'. Baldwin Locomotives and all the supporting manufacturers were based along the Rail Park line that brought goods (the western cut and tunnel) and passengers (on the viaduct) into Philadelphia. For example, anthracite came in from Pennsylvania coal mines to the coal yards in Callowhill that today is the site of a PECO sub-station - power for a large part of Center City. The Philadelphia design company Cloud Gehshan created a fantastic history wall , laser cut on weathering steel that is installed at the 13th and Noble Street entrance to Phase One. Visitors to the park love that wall.

**BM:** Can you talk about The Friends of the Rail Park and the purpose of this group? What are the main objectives you/they are trying to accomplish and how can the community (besides supporting our benefit exhibition) support you in your endeavors?

**SM:** Friends of the Rail Park is dedicated to the realization of the 3-mile linear Rail Park. The Rail Park passes through or near 10 different neighborhoods and will serve as a connector of communities and a walking/bicycling commuter route. In partnership with The City of Philadelphia and Center City District we will maintain the Rail Park and work on building future phases. We encourage everyone to get involved, in whatever way they can. We have a membership program with levels to fit all budgets and are working on a volunteer program. Please visit us at [therailpark.org](http://therailpark.org) !

**BM:** Were you born and raised in Philadelphia? How long have you been an artist working here? How have you seen the city change (for good and bad) since you have lived here?

**SM:** I was born in Munich, Germany (my father worked in the post-WWII US foreign service) and grew up in a suburb of New York City. I came to Philadelphia for college in 1973 and have been living, working and exhibiting here ever since. Philly is my home. It's changed a lot in that time, but I loved it when I arrived and love it more every day.

**BM:** Thanks Sarah! Is there anything else you want to say? I appreciate your time in educating us on the history of the Rail Park and how folks can get involved with the Friends of the Rail Park!

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**SM: Thank you Bridgette ! and thank you very much for organizing the benefit . We all appreciate it very much.**