

The Sounds of Silence

Even in the world's most hectic city, one can enjoy some good old-fashioned peace and quiet. BY SEÁNAN FORBES



Clean, lean, and serene - The Center for Architecture

AS MUCH AS WE LOVE the city's hustle and bustle, sometimes we need a break from the frenetic buzz. Despite New York's well-earned reputation as a maelstrom of sound and fury, there are quiet niches, indoors and out, throughout Manhattan, and finding them can reward you with the ultimate prize for a harried, put-upon city dweller: the prize of peace. Working from the north down, then, here are some of the city's best hidden zones of tranquility.

Between 110th and 114th Streets on Amsterdam Avenue, the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine is the world's largest Gothic cathedral. While the building is often crammed with tourists, the Biblical Garden nestled in the Cathedral's south side is an oasis of solitude, with the only thing likely to disturb you being a peacock running from schoolchildren. For even more space, cross Amsterdam Avenue, walk up to 116th Street, and avail yourself of the grounds of Columbia University, where there's lots of room to roam. (St John the Divine: Monday - Saturday, 7:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.; Sunday, 7:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Columbia University's grounds are open 24 hours a day.)

The Westside Community Garden, between 89th and 90th Streets and Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues, is a sweet retreat from the crowds at the American Museum of Natural History. You're welcome to just come and sit, but

be sure to curb your canines before entering the garden, since local school kids often get their bare hands in the dirt. (Hours: Daylight.)

Central Park holds much more than hell-bent-for-health joggers circling the reservoir, the masses filling Sheep's Meadow, and tourists taking photos of Belvedere Castle. Behind the Delacorte Public Theater, Shakespeare's Garden has winding paths and stairways, cleverly crafted railings, and rustic benches. In any season, it is a graceful place to sit, browse, or drowse.

More formal (and even quieter) is the park's Conservatory Garden — six acres hidden behind the tall, wrought iron Vanderbilt Gate that could just as easily be in Italy, France or England as in New York. While there, sit beneath the arbor, choose a sequestered bench, or walk the hedge-lined paths. One word of caution, though — check the board inside the gate for when to avoid their bi-monthly lunchtime tours. (Shakespeare's Garden keeps the same hours as Central Park overall. The Conservatory Garden is open from 8:00 a.m. to dusk.)

Back-to-back refuges from midtown madness can be found between 54th and 56th Streets on Madison Avenue. From 54th to 55th, the Sony Atrium offers food shops, a skylight, and places to sit. One block north, the Sculpture Garden at 590 Madison has fewer shops, but more trees, tables, and chirping. (Sony Atrium: daily, from 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 p.m.; The Sculpture Garden at 590 Madison: daily, from 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.)

The General Theological Seminary's plain front conceals what could be an Oxford quad. Hand over a photo ID, sign the guest register, and walk into an extended garden, fronted with old buildings. Unless a pipe's broken on 20th Street, the only sound you're likely to hear is a church bell. (9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.; closed Sundays)

The Center for Architecture has three stories of spare, clean, public space. The ground floor holds a small gallery, and if you walk down the narrow concrete steps you'll find the current exhibits, seating, and solitude. There are also two underground galleries, each with natural light. (Weekdays, 9:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.; Saturdays, 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.; closed Sundays)

The Elevated Acre would normally be easy to miss, as it's up a flight of stairs to the left of 55 Water Street. Upstairs, you'll find teak benches and decking and a river view, with concrete seat-

ing overlooking a swath of grass. Unless the wind is precisely wrong, the space is oddly sheltered, so brace yourself for culture shock when you return to the street. Being on the acre is a bit like being on Cape Cod, and the noise of the city can be startling after the retreat. (7:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m. daily)

60 Wall Street has an intricate mirror-tiled ceiling, food stalls, palm trees, and free wi-fi. It's seldom empty but always quiet, as many of the tables are occupied by people playing backgammon and chess. It's also ideal for foul weather, as you can get to the 2 and 3 trains without leaving the building. (Open daily, 7:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.)

From Battery City's South Cove to the Hudson River walk, and from Battery Park to north of the boat basin (allowing for detours around the Chelsea Piers, the heliport, and a few other roadblocks), the banks of the Hudson River offer world-class views, comfortable resting places, and dozens of niches for relaxation. Various spots along the walk offer redwood decks, piers with seating, balconies that jut out over the water, and grassy spots with willow trees that make them perfect for hiding from the world. Best of all, each of these areas feels refreshingly and utterly unique. While some stretches are only good for walking (midtown to the fifties, near Trump's collection of buildings), there are also areas that beg people to sit and take refuge. ■

PLACES FOR PEACE

BATTERY PARK CITY
bpcparks.org

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
stjohndivine.org

CENTER FOR ARCHITECTURE
aiany.org/centerforarchitecture

CENTRAL PARK
centralparknyc.org

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
columbia.edu

GENERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
gts.edu

HUDSON RIVER
hudsonriverpark.org

KAYAKING ON THE HUDSON
downtownboathouse.org

ROWING IN CENTRAL PARK
centralparknyc.org/site/PageServer?
pagename=programs_sports_rowboating

WESTSIDE COMMUNITY GARDEN
westsidecommunitygarden.org