

GREENACRE PARK

POCKET PARK

Location

New York, USA

Project Address

217 E 51st St, New York, NY
10022 USA

Project Type

Publicly accessible private park

Area

6,000 ft² (557 m²)

Year of Completion

1971

Occupant

Public

Design Team

Sasaki, Dawson, DeMay and
Associates

Keywords

Waterfall
Pocket park

Awards

BSLA, Merit Award, 3rd Professional
Awards Program, 1986
American Association of
Nurserymen, Landscape Award,
20th Landscape Awards Program,
1972

Biophilic Patterns

Refuge
Presence of Water
Non-Visual connection with Nature
Mystery

*Prepared by Lilli Fisher for Terrapin
Bright Green.
All photos courtesy of Terrapin Bright
Green.*

“[The people of New York] will find here some moments of serenity in this busy world.”

Abby Rockefeller Mauze

PROJECT SUMMARY

Greenacre Park is a 6,000-square foot oasis nestled among the tall towers of midtown Manhattan. Inside the park a 25-foot tall waterfall cools the air and mutes the noise of the surrounding traffic, creating space for quietude—a rarity in the hectic city center. The park has three distinct levels which provide users several choices of environmental conditions. The spatial configuration and excellent use of biophilic design principles imbue this popular park with a sense of tranquility even during periods of heavy utilization.

Designed by Hideo Sasaki in conjunction with Harmon Goldstone for Abby Rockefeller Mauze's Greenacre Foundation, this park exemplifies the urban vest-pocket park style. These compact natural areas nested in dense urban centers are conveniently located to provide an essential service to their urban users: access to nature. For residents of Midtown East and employees of nearby businesses, Greenacre park is a restorative space in which they can take short breaks, such as a morning coffee, lunch, or afternoon meeting.

As a pocket park, Greenacre is also an excellent example of biophilic urban acupuncture, a socio-environmental concept

that advocates for the use of small-scale biophilic interventions to transform the larger urban context and reduce stress in the built environment. It serves as a refuge from the overstimulating environment of Midtown Manhattan's crowded streets. Inside the park, the noise, odors, and heat of the city are subdued by the park's abundance of plants and water features. A lush sheath of ivy covers the western wall, the entire eastern wall is a relief sculpture composed of rough-hewn stones from which water slowly trickles, and the northern wall features a waterfall surrounded by ivy cascades. The visual complexity of these elements transforms this narrow, potentially confining, space into an immersive environment.

Above: Ground level. A canopy of honey locust trees, accented by flowering shrubs, provides shade and visual interest to the seating area. P1 P2

NATURE IN THE SPACE

- [P1] Visual Connection with Nature.**
Ivy covering the west wall, abundant trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants throughout.
- [P2] Non-Visual Connection with Nature.** The sound of water, the smell of plants, and the haptic experience of cool air and rough stone.
- [P3] Non-Rhythmic Sensory Stimuli.**
Water features, rustling ivy on the west wall and tree canopy above, birds flitting in and out of the space, birdsongs.
- [P4] Access to Thermal & Airflow Variability.** Cool air wafts up from the water features, shading provided by trees, movable furniture ensures preferred conditions.
- [P5] Presence of Water.** Water trickles through a stone sculpture and relief wall into the runnel that spans the length of the eastern wall. A 25 ft tall waterfall cascades down the north wall.
- [P6] Dynamic & Diffuse Light.**
Light filters in through tree canopy; lower, upper and middle levels experience different amounts of infiltration; and movable furniture provides seating options.
- [P7] Connection with Natural Systems.**
The opportunity to observe bird, insect and plant life interactions, seasonal changes in canopy density and plant colors.

NATURAL ANALOGUES

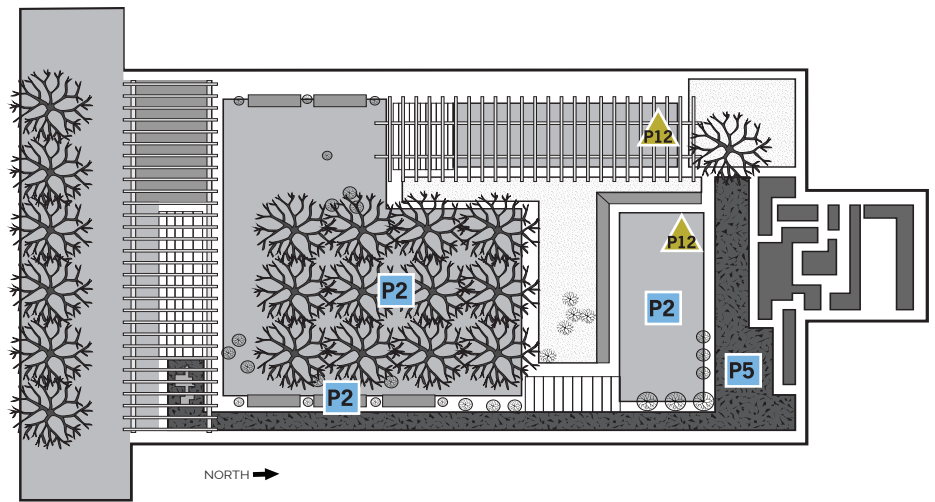
- [P8] Biomorphic Forms & Patterns.**
Not significantly represented in the design.
- [P9] Material Connection with Nature.**
Rough hewn stone of the east wall, water sculpture, and waterfall; rough granite benches.
- [P10] Complexity & Order.**
The varying texture and size of the stone used in the dripping wall.

NATURE OF THE SPACE

- [P11] Prospect.** The upper level is elevated above street level.
- [P12] Refuge.** Three walled enclosure with a covered entryway, lower level obscured by plantings, covered upper level, sounds of the waterfall.
- [P13] Mystery.** The lower level where the waterfall empties is not visible from the entryway.
- [P14] Risk/Peril.** Not significantly represented in the design.

Site Plan: This plan reveals how Sasaki used plants, water, and trellises to create three distinct areas. A large T-shaped flower bed serves a physical divider. Water frames the lower level on the northern end of the park, and the raised platform on the west wall is demarcated by a steel trellis.

Section: This section highlights the multi-tiered structure of the waterfall, the geometric patterns of the relief sculpture wall, and the elevation change between the street, ground level, and lower level.



SITE PLAN



SECTION

[12] REFUGE

Greenacre park is insulated from the surrounding environment by three walls which enclose it in dense greenery, water, and gray stone. The park is raised a few feet from ground level, further separating it from the noise and commotion of the street. After ascending the stairs, the first space visitors enter is an open platform with numerous small tables, partially sheltered by a canopy of honey locust trees. While this area is the largest and most social of the park's three distinct areas, it retains an atmosphere of tranquillity even during the park's most popular hours.

Greenacre park provides **a hierarchy of places for withdrawal from environmental conditions or the main flow of activity, in which the individual is protected from behind and overhead.** Along the ivy-covered western wall, there is a raised platform, shaded by a patinated steel trellis. Wedged into the northwest corner of the park, near the waterfall, this area is removed from the highly social environment of the main level. The refuge condition increases in intensity as

visitors walk toward the northern end of the platform where the ivy-covered wall joins with a planted area containing trees, shrubs, and a rich understory of shade plants. An unimpeded view of the lower areas of the park heightens the sense of security and provides a good balance of prospect and refuge conditions.

While only partially covered overhead, the lower level may be the strongest example of refuge conditions. It is depressed several feet beneath ground level. When seated, visitors are unable to see the street and are instead surrounded by plant life and water. In addition to being visually obscured from the street, the lower level is further secluded from the surrounding activity by the sound of the waterfall, which blocks all street noise and screens out the sounds of conversation. The lower level is the smallest area of the park and offers less seating than the other two areas, resulting in a higher ratio of individuals sitting alone than in groups, encouraging introspection.



[P5] PRESENCE OF WATER

Greenacre park is unified by water. At the entrance to the park, visitors encounter an abstract stone sculpture, through which a slow flow of water trickles. The pool beneath the sculpture joins a runnel that spans the length of the park's eastern wall. A relief sculpture composed of varying sizes of stone blocks runs parallel to it. The relief sculpture contains an invisible source of water, which streams in rivulets over the stone and stains it with random markings that slowly dry and disappear throughout the day. At the junction of the eastern and northern walls, the runnel meets the base of a 25-foot waterfall. Above, there is a break in the tree canopy so that for a few short hours each day, light splinters across the surface of the water.

The experience at Greenacre park is **enhanced through the capacity to see, hear, and touch water**. The sound of rushing water that emanates from the waterfall, accompanied by the gentle trickle from the water sculptures, drowns out the urban noise and creates a tranquil environment that seems miles away from the city. In addition, evaporation of the water features generates natural air conditioning. Sitting along the relief sculpture wall or on the lower level adjacent to the waterfall, visitors enjoy significantly decreased temperatures.

Left: Ground level. Water trickles from between the coarse stone blocks of a sculptural wall into a pebble lined runnel. P2 P3 P5



[P2] NON-VISUAL CONNECTION WITH NATURE

The immersive quality of Greenacre park is produced in large part by auditory, olfactory, and haptic experiences of nature. Visitors are often observed closing their eyes to take in these sensations more fully. The sound of water punctuated by birdsongs, the texture of the rough granite benches, the smell of air filtered and fragranced by plants, and the feeling of a cool breeze flowing off the water, conspire to transport visitors from their urban environs. These non-visual sensory stimuli engender a **deliberate and positive reference to nature, living systems, or natural processes**, creating a restorative atmosphere.

The non-visual cues change as visitors move through the park. Shifting breezes carry the seasonal aromas of plants. The ground level is exposed to urban sound, but the honey locust canopy above is populated by songbirds, providing a pleasant distraction. The deeper visitors travel into the park, the more dominant the sound of the waterfall becomes. Sitting along the eastern wall, visitors can feel cool air flowing off the water. This sensation, however, is felt most strongly on the lower level in the spray of the roaring waterfall. The variability in the sounds, scents, and haptic experience of nature create an environment that is, at once, complex and familiar, stimulating interest while sustaining relaxation.

Right: Upper level. From the ground level, the lower level is obscured by plants, but the sight and sound of the waterfall entice exploration. P2 P5 P13

[P13] MYSTERY

The entrance to Greenacre park does not announce itself to pedestrians. Unlike many of the buildings on 51st street, the park does not have an awning that protrudes over the sidewalk, instead its stairs and patinaed steel trellis are flush with the walls of the adjacent buildings. For this reason, individuals approaching the park on the contiguous sidewalk are unlikely to notice it until they arrive at the entrance. This inconspicuous entryway can delight visitors with the experience of happening upon an unexpected slice of green in the midst of the city.

The ground level of the park is raised a few feet above street level and the lower level is depressed a few feet below it, obscuring the view of the park from the street. The waterfall is striking from the moment visitors approach the entrance, but it is only partially visible. **The promise of more information entices the individual to travel deeper into the environment**, providing opportunities for exploration and discovery.

The sight of the waterfall draws visitors in and may prompt them to notice the steps at the northern end of the park. Upon reaching the stairs, visitors discovers a sunken oasis, sunny and saturated with a cool mist. A bed of flowers lines a stone bench facing the waterfall, which visitors can now see cascades over multiple tiers into a pool that connects to the runnel along the east wall. Different elevations within the park make it feel larger than it initially appears as visitors moves through it.

HEALTH BENEFITS

The design of Greenacre park makes it an ideal space to relax and recharge, or to get some work done. These uses are supported by the biophilic experience of the space. Key patterns have the potential to support the following positive health responses:

[P2] Non-visual Connection with Nature

Reduced systolic blood pressure and stress hormones; Positively impacted cognitive performance; Perceived improvements in mental health and tranquility.

[P5] Presence of Water

Reduced stress, increased feelings of tranquility, lower heart rate, and blood pressure; Improved concentration and memory restoration; Enhanced perception and psychological responsiveness; Observed preferences and positive emotional responses.

[P12] Refuge

Improved concentration, attention, and perception of safety.

[P13] Mystery

Induced strong pleasure response.

The refuge conditions created by the park's spatial design, in addition to the ample use of water and the strong non-visual connections with nature, can restore memory and improve concentration and cognitive performance. These biophilic patterns facilitate productive uses of the space, including reading, writing, and collaborative or individual brainstorming sessions. These same patterns can also reduce stress and increase perceived safety, important amenities in an overstimulating city. In addition, partially obscured views may spark visitors' curiosities, inducing pleasure and interrupting the predictable pattern of the urban environment.



URBAN OASIS

Opportunities for exploration and relaxation are maximized by the spatial configuration, dense plantings, and water features at Greenacre Park. Visitors who reviewed the park on Yelp have described the space as “an escape hatch to peace and serenity,” a “genuine urban oasis” and “a little bit of Eden in Midtown East.” The strength of the design is in its ability to transport visitors from their hectic urban surroundings to a peaceful and restorative environment. One visitor even wrote, “it makes me feel like I’m on vacation.” The park’s rare combination of convenience and immersive qualities makes it an excellent example of biophilic urban acupuncture, and a much sought-after amenity in the area.

A common complaint voiced about Greenacre park is the fact that it becomes overcrowded at popular visiting times, such as during the workweek lunch hour. The high demand for the park is evidence of the need for more spaces like it throughout New York City. Midtown East has a few small parks, including Paley Park, a

similar space about a half mile away, and Peter Detmold Park on the waterfront. These parks are also much loved, and at times, overcrowded. Pocket parks like Greenacre offer strong social benefits because of their accessibility. If more of these green spaces were created, however, they have the potential to provide significant benefits beyond use value, such as reducing the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, and supporting migrating bird routes.

Access to nature is a biological necessity that urban residents are often lacking. As human societies continue to urbanize, innovative solutions that bring nature into city centers without compromising other spatial needs will be required to ensure the physical and psychological health of residents. Greenacre park is a demonstration of a small intervention that improves the health and wellbeing of numerous visitors every day.

Above: Lower level. A waterfall cascades down a tiered stone wall at the northern end of the park. A sunken seating area provides movable tables and chairs at the water's edge. P1 P2 P3 P5 P12



Terrapin Bright Green

Terrapin is an environmental consulting and strategic planning firm committed to improving the human environment through high performance development, policy, and related research. We provide biophilic design strategies with measurable outcomes that place our clients' properties at the forefront of innovative design. Visit us at www.terrapinbrightgreen.com, or email us at biophilia@terrapinbg.com.

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