

The New York Times

New York's Tiny Squares Offer Breathing Room



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

Slivers of green, like Abingdon Square in the West Village, bolster the livability factor. Many benefit from neighborhood groups that look after their upkeep.

By JAKE MOONEY

Published: October 15, 2010

ABINGDON SQUARE PARK, a 0.222-acre triangle of greenery in the West Village, is not a place that requires much time for exploration. A lap of its curving byways, around a manicured garden island, takes just a minute or two. Indeed, most everyone there on a recent sunny Saturday was partaking in the square's main day-to-day activity: sitting on benches.

Yet that is a pleasure, devotees say, that should not be understated. For neighbors of the park it is a place to read, to sit quietly in the shade, to meet friends and in general to retreat from the busy streets just a few steps away. The advantages of life near a big park, with acres of forest and lawn, are well known and well chronicled. But living on a square like Abingdon, or any of a handful of other patches of greenery tucked in around New York, is a more intimate and private experience.

“It’s a wonderful place to just go and collect your thoughts and think about current projects,” said Michael Neville, an artist and composer who has lived for 33 years on Bank Street, about a block from [Abingdon Square](#). “The plantings, the landscape and the whole environment is just so beautiful and calming.”

All that, real estate brokers say, means apartments and houses on green spaces, even very small ones, sell or rent for a premium. Peter Comitini, a vice president of the Corcoran Group, said the appeal of places like [Duane Park](#) in TriBeCa, where he recently sold a three-bedroom co-op unit, was largely visual.

“It creates a little more room to breathe between you and the next closest building,” Mr. Comitini said, “and I think that has value right there.”

Besides interesting locations — squares tend to be in places where the urban grid breaks down, like Greenwich Village, the Upper West Side near Broadway and Lower Manhattan — Mr. Comitini said units near squares had built-in advantages.

“They offer greater light and views, and those are things that are at a premium in the city,” he said. “The stuff that doesn’t sell is the stuff that faces a dark shaftway in the back, and this is the polar opposite of that.”

People in search of a unit on a square have a range of options. Some vest-pocket parks, like [Verdi Square](#), at West 73rd Street and Broadway, are bustling and vibrant. Others, like [Jackson Square](#), just northeast of Abingdon at Eighth and Greenwich Avenues, are shady and placid. Most are in Manhattan, where open space is rarest, but there are exceptions, like [Cobble Hill Park](#), on Verandah Place in Brooklyn, a 0.585-acre site where a neighborhood petition drive in the 1960s defeated plans for an apartment building. Two-family town houses there have sold in recent years for \$2.2 million or more.

[Straus Park](#), at Broadway and 106th Street in Manhattan, is named for the department store mogul Isidor Straus and his wife, Ida, both of whom perished in the sinking of the Titanic. Among the visitors to the park on a recent afternoon were a man eating lunch, a mother and child blowing bubbles, and a pigtailed girl jumping rope.

Across Broadway, at 272 West 107th Street, two condominium units that look out over the park are for sale. One is 15C, with three bedrooms and two and a half baths, on the market for \$2.75 million, and listed by Lisa Lippman and Scott Moore at Brown Harris Stevens. It has a large eat-in kitchen, and its balcony and floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room look out to the Hudson River. The square is far below; the treetops look like a welcome mat of greenery.

Also on the Upper West Side, but on a much busier corner, is 200 West 72nd Street, a new rental building that faces Verdi Square. The focal point of that square is a subway station, served by the No. 1 local and the Nos. 2 and 3 express trains. Gray’s Papaya is on one side of Broadway, Urban Outfitters on the other, and the building has a Trader Joe’s on the ground floor.

The building’s unit closest to the action is 3H, a two-bedroom two-bath

apartment that Cody Moore, an agent in the leasing office, said was available for \$9,800 a month. Its tall windows, at treetop level, afford a dizzying perch for people-watching: the sidewalks are a constant stream of pedestrians. Apartment 15E, with three bedrooms and two and a half baths, is at a greater remove, but it has an 830-square-foot terrace from which it is possible to hear a saxophone player in the square. Monthly rent, Ms. Moore said, is \$18,000.

[Greenacre Park](#), on 51st Street between Second and Third Avenues, is not a square like the others, formed by the intersection of multiple streets. Instead, it is in a small notch of land at midblock, owned and maintained by the private Greenacre Foundation. Started by the [Rockefeller family](#), the foundation maintains a small concession stand, a handful of tables and chairs, and the park's centerpiece, a tiered waterfall 25 feet high.

The waterfall is audible through open windows in some units of the redeveloped condominium building just west of the park, at [211 East 51st Street](#). The view of the park from 6F and 7F, one-bedroom units on the eastern side of the building, is mostly of the tops of honey locust trees. But along with the units' white-oak floors and marble counters, the waterfall is a sort of amenity: a very large white-noise generator. Both units are listed by Josephine LaPietra at H. Justin Realty, 6F for \$1.075 million and 7F for \$1.095 million.

Greenacre Park has looked very much the same since it was founded in 1971, but many of the city's squares are only recently coming into their own after decades of disuse and deferred maintenance. Abington Square is one: it was the beneficiary of a renovation between 2000 and 2004 and is now maintained by the nonprofit Abington Square Alliance, to which some of the surrounding buildings contribute a monthly per-unit fee.

Jackson Square, with an even more recent renovation, is another. It has free wireless Internet, courtesy of an adjacent new condominium building at 122 Greenwich Avenue. Michelle MacLachlan, a resident of 122 Greenwich, says she goes to the square to read, sip coffee or do a bit of work. Ms. MacLachlan, who is 25 and works as a broker in the financial industry, describes the open space as precious.

"You don't think of that when you live in New York," she said. "You don't feel like that ever exists." It is, she added, quite different from the woodsier setting around her native Vancouver, British Columbia. "It's crazy how people will get so excited about 10 trees in a square," she said.

Ms. MacLachlan, who lives on the Eighth Avenue side of her building, said some neighbors had paid extra to face the square.

The curving glass building, also known as [One Jackson Square](#), has several available units on the park. One of them, 6D, a two-bedroom three-bath, is listed

with Heather Cook of the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group at \$6.35 million; it has a 319-square-foot terrace overlooking the square across Greenwich Avenue. A bedroom, which has floor-to-ceiling windows and one of two wood-burning fireplaces, offers an even more dramatic view.

The building's penthouse is also available. It has four bedrooms and a private roof deck with a pool and an outdoor kitchen. It is listed at \$21.75 million, also through Ms. Cook.

A short walk to the south, Unit 3C at 302 West 12th Street, a one-bedroom condo, is more humble. It has a wood-burning fireplace and access to a leafy common roof deck, but its fixtures are relatively drab. Still, it faces Abingdon Square, and is on the market for \$1.395 million, listed through Robert Browne at the Corcoran Group.

Lee Zimmerman, another Corcoran broker, is a founder of the Abingdon Square Alliance and lives in the building. One of the best things about the area, Mr. Zimmerman said, is getting to know the neighborhood characters who frequent the square.

One is Philip Thompson, 81, who has lived nearby on Jane Street since 1965. Mr. Thompson's name appears on a bench in the square: He dedicated a plaque to his longtime partner, Alex Szogyi, who died in 2007. They used to sit there together, and in recent years, Mr. Thompson said, the green space has provided solace.

"When you're sharing your apartment with somebody for so many years, the loneliness is very difficult," he said. "So just to be surrounded by the trees and flowers — all of a sudden you're chatting with somebody."

Mr. Zimmerman said he knew that feeling of reflection from the many hours he had spent in the square.

"It's not Central Park; it's not Prospect Park; it's not Battery Park," he said. "You kind of lose yourself in those kinds of parks. In the smaller parks, you find yourself."