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A Tiny Park Fights for Sunlight Among New York City Skyscrapers

By Winnie Hu

New Yorkers have to elbow their way onto packed subways below ground. They have to eke out room on teeming sidewalks and streets just to get anywhere.

And in a city where no space can be taken for granted, increasingly they have to fight for the very light and air above their heads.

A city plan to rezone the heart of Manhattan has touched off a new campaign to protect the afternoon light falling on a beloved park that offers honey locust trees, azaleas, pansies and a 25-foot-high waterfall. It is a lush oasis in a neighborhood starved for green space.

The foundation that runs the park, on East 51st Street between Second and Third Avenues, says the rezoning would allow taller buildings that could block its afternoon sun, endangering the plant life and making the spot colder, darker and far less inviting. This patch of greenery — known as Greenacre Park, a 1971 gift from a granddaughter of the industrialist John D. Rockefeller Sr. — is at the center of a brewing battle between light and darkness as the city grows ever more vertical.

“You have to have light — it’s kind of a no-brainer,” said Gail O. Caulkins, the president of the Greenacre Foundation and the granddaughter of the philanthropist Abby Rockefeller Mauze.

Even as modern skyscrapers bring space to [densely packed metropolises](#) like New York, they darken their neighbors’ doorsteps and raise quality-of-life questions about whether people have a right to sunlight.

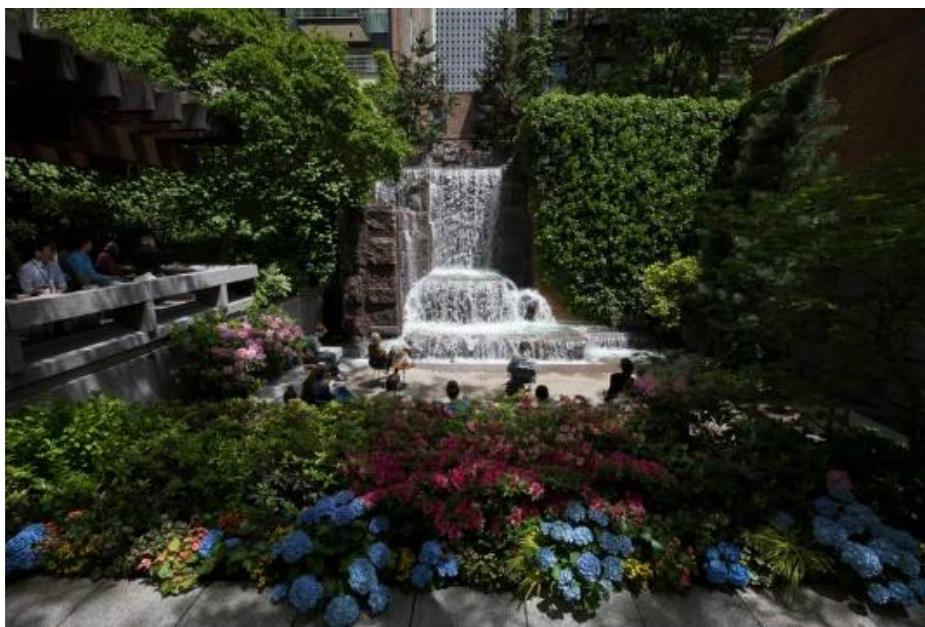
In Boston, where shadow laws protect Boston Common and the Public Garden, city officials have come under criticism for [seeking to revise the laws to](#) allow a skyscraper to be built on a city-owned site in return for \$153 million that would be used for park and public housing improvements.

Adrian Benepe, a former New York City parks commissioner, said urban parks were among the last remaining “common grounds” for access to sunlight.

“As cities grow more vertical, you’re wiping out the sunlight on many streets,” he said. “And parks are the only place to consistently find sunlight.”

Not even Central Park has been safe from shadows. In 1987, hundreds of people [formed a line through the park](#) and opened black umbrellas on cue in a symbolic protest of the Time Warner Center in Columbus Circle, whose design was ultimately tweaked. More recently, in 2014, a series of towers planned along West 57th Street prompted the local community board’s [Central Park Sunshine Task Force](#).

The city does assess the impact of shadows from new construction, but only when a zoning change is required, prompting many to



Greenacre Park, a lunchtime oasis for workers in Midtown Manhattan created by the Rockefeller family, is in danger of losing its sunlight. Rezoning might allow taller buildings that could block its afternoon sun. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

call for a more comprehensive policy that reviews the effects of all tall buildings.

After Michael Kwartler, an architect and shadows consultant who wrote a 1991 proposal on preserving sunlight in parks, found that the huge towers rising in Hudson Yards would block much of the sunlight on a boulevard and park planned as part of the development, changes were made, but not enough to prevent extensive shadows.

“It’s an issue that really needs to be solved, and not on a case-by-case basis,” he said.

Greenacre Park, a space so small (6,360 square feet) that it is called a “vest pocket park,” was pieced together from three lots once occupied by a store, a garage and part of a synagogue. Today, it feels like the terrace of a grand country estate, with Knoll chairs and tables beside vibrant flower beds, a trellis with heat lamps for the chill, and cascading water drowning out the urban din. It has an average of 700 visitors daily.

As part of the rezoning plan, which is meant to maintain the east side of Midtown Manhattan as a world-class commercial corridor, the city conducted a [shadows study](#) showing no significant adverse impact on Greenacre Park. Rachaele Raynoff, a spokeswoman for the planning department, said “projected incremental development” from the proposed zoning changes would create “no more shadow on the space than buildings that can be built today.”

The [rezoning plan](#), which requires approval by the Planning Commission and the City Council, aims to expand the city’s tax base, attract more jobs and finance improvements to subway stations, streets and sidewalks.

The Greenacre Foundation commissioned [its own shadows study](#). Jacob Dugopolski, with the firm WXY, found that development on six sites could cast the entire park into shadow. The foundation has called for

height limits on those sites, or at the very least a public review of their shadow impact on the park.

It has organized a [“Fight for Light” campaign](#) backed by the Municipal Art Society; New Yorkers for Parks; Gale A. Brewer, the Manhattan borough president; and City Councilman Daniel R. Garodnick, whose district includes the park.

City planners said they did not expect the size and shape of the buildings used in the foundation’s study to be built under the rezoning plan, though they also said that the city did not impose height limits in Midtown and that a review just for those sites would duplicate their work.

This is not the first time that Greenacre Park has faced the loss of sunlight. In 1980, there was another campaign against a planned building that would have blocked the light.

“In a large park, if there’s a shadow cast by a tall, skinny building, people can just move to another part of the park,” said Lois Cremmins, the foundation’s executive director. “But in a vest pocket park of this size, the light is obliterated.”

For regulars like Neil Storer, 54, a marketing consultant, the park would not be the same.

“Oases don’t exist without sunlight,” he said. “Trees and plants will wither. So will humans. We need sunlight for the vitamin D and the feel-good factor.”

Kate Wichmann, 32, an interior designer, said she would not have bothered to stop if the park were in shadow.

“I’d keep walking,” she said. “I have a dark apartment. I have a dark office. That’s the last thing I’d do. ♦