

# Tours and Tales of New York

November 2015

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*In this monthly email newsletter, we share stories about New York past and present. That's great for history lovers and armchair travelers. But you'll enjoy the city so much more when you take a tour with one of us. We are licensed NYC tour guides working independently in a partnership we call Take a Walk New York.*

*This newsletter has our planned tour schedule for the month. If you'd like a tour that is not listed here, contact one of us to discuss a custom tour: [alan.r.cohen@verizon.net](mailto:alan.r.cohen@verizon.net) or [lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com](mailto:lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com).*

*Please share this newsletter with your friends. Forward it to them, or ask them to email us to be put on the mailing list and receive the newsletter directly. Four referrals earn you a free tour.*

*Laurie Lewis and Alan Cohen*

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## How Old Is That Skyscraper?

Since the late 1800s, when structural steel and safe passenger elevators made tall buildings possible, New York has been a city noted for its skyline. It helps that the bedrock of most of Manhattan is sturdy schist, which can easily support massive structures. And the buildings did become massive—not just tall but wide as well, sometimes filling an entire square block.

The 1915 debut of Ernest R. Graham's Equitable Building, which still stands at 120 Broadway, revealed the price of going large just because one can. The 39-story twin boxes occupy the entire plot but affect a much larger area, robbing this part of the Financial District of light and air.

City leaders reacted swiftly, passing the nation's first zoning law in 1916. That law is still on the books. A complicated formula that considers width as well as height mandates how tall a building can rise before part of it must be set back to allow light to penetrate to the street. As a building goes higher, it needs more setbacks. The result of this law is a distinctive tiered skyscraper form known as wedding cake architecture (see photo). Nearly all wedding cake buildings rose after 1916.



In the late 1920s and 1930s, Art Deco was the rage. Sleek, geometric ornamentation graced the façade of skyscrapers. The combination of the required setbacks and the Art Deco aesthetic resulted in some of New York's most iconic buildings, such as the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. Artistic motifs inside and out soften their large footprints, and the void created by setbacks enables the towers to stand out, resulting in the city's famous skyline.

Its glorious skyline notwithstanding, New York is a city of pedestrians. A 1961 zoning regulation has appealed both to architects who want to go tall and to pedestrians who want to take a load off. Buildings can rise higher if they include public space at or near ground level. This zoning change has resulted in outdoor “pocket parks” surrounded by office and residential monoliths and a proliferation of atriums in the lobbies of skyscrapers. While the first zoning law created space on high, the later one created space where people can actually experience and savor it.

### An Exception to Every Rule

The tall structures of Rockefeller Center incorporate setbacks, as mandated by the 1916 zoning ordinance. Rockefeller Center is more than buildings; it includes plazas, promenades, and gardens. These features suggest that the complex was developed after 1961, when inclusion of such public spaces allowed developers to increase the height of their buildings. Not so; Rockefeller Center was built mainly in the 1930s, and it is an Art Deco masterpiece. So why does it have so much open space?

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., acquired the land just before the stock market crash of 1929. When his original development plans fell through, he decided to build a commercial center with magnificent buildings, huge artworks fitting for such vast space, and plenty of open areas. The decision was brilliant. The complex attracted visitors galore, and it continues to be a major draw today.

When your name is Rockefeller, you can afford to break with convention and see what happens.

Building materials and shapes have always been clues to the age of a structure. Glass buildings became popular in the late twentieth century and remain so today. Many twenty-first century buildings defy conventional forms, with amorphous shapes and wavy patterns.

So when you take a walk through Manhattan, try to guess the age of a skyscraper, give or take 30 years. A massive vertical oblong predates 1916. Setbacks indicate it was built later. A decorative structure likely dates from the 1930s, the Art Deco era. An indoor atrium or open outdoor space near an exceptionally tall building suggests it went up after 1961. A glass tower is fairly recent, and if it isn't an ordinary geometric shape like a rectangle, it probably was built in this century.

Using these cues to determine the age of a building isn't an exact science. But it does make for an interesting diversion as you walk the streets of New York.

#### And the Winner Is...

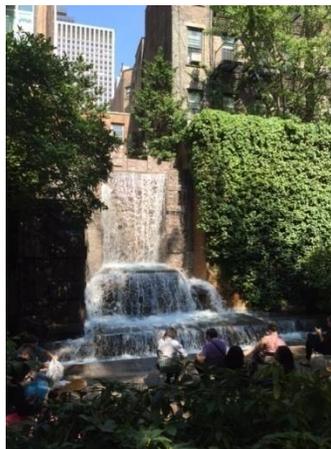
Paula T, who correctly named the raccoon as the type of animal that likes to nap in the wisteria pergola in Conservatory Garden. As the first person to email the correct answer to the question in the last newsletter, Paula has earned a free tour. For this month's question and your chance to win a free tour, see the last page.

# November Tours

*These are walking tours. Most cover 1 to 2 miles and last 2 to 2½ hours. Cost is \$15 per person. Please email the guide ([lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com](mailto:lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com) or [alan.r.cohen@verizon.net](mailto:alan.r.cohen@verizon.net)) if you plan to attend. Arrive 10 minutes before the listed time. Tours are cancelled in severe weather; call or text Laurie (917-306-2868) or Alan (917-363-4292) if in doubt. Tell friends about our tours!*

## Featured tour: Wide Open Midtown Spaces: The East 50s

Busy Midtown Manhattan has beautiful open spaces, some outdoors, others in. Learn why such valuable real estate has little commercial activity and why gardens appear among giant buildings—not just in Midtown but throughout the city. Visit landmarks like the Seagram Building and Lever House. Enjoy the original “pocket parks” and more recent ones that offer calm and peace in the midst of a fast-paced business district.



*A perfect tour for changeable fall weather, as many of these spaces are indoor atriums*

### Meet:

At the northeast corner of 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue, at the bottom of the waterfall

### When:

**Wed, Nov 11 at 10 AM**  
If you want, watch the nearby Veterans Day Parade after the tour!

**Sat, Nov 14 at 1 PM**

## Central Park: Marvels of the Northern Half

The north end of Central Park has some of the city’s greatest landscapes: the famous Reservoir; the quiet Pool; the North Woods, where city dwellers can take a hike; the Harlem Meer; and lovely Conservatory Garden, one of New York’s best-kept secrets. Enjoy the views in their best season, autumn.

**Meet** on Sunday, November 8, at 12 noon, at the northeast corner of 90<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West.

