Dates & Background Information:

Dedicated to Samuel Paley, Paley Park came to fruition as a product of the William S. Paley Foundation, a group committed to developing and teaching new methods of reconstructing various limbs of children and adults alike; near the entrance lies a plaque dedicated Samuel Paley. Designed by landscape architects Zion & Breen, the park officially opened on May 23rd, 1967. It is located on a site previously occupied by a once popular club, called the Stork Club. It is a privately owned public space (POPS) which allows for completely free public use during operating hours, and closes its gate at night (6am-10pm). Interestingly, since the space is privately owned, cigarette smoking within the park is completely allowed. Some other notable projects by Zion & Breen include the sculpture garden at the MOMA, the redesign of Liberty Island in 1986, and many campus plans such as Princeton, Yale, and Rutgers University.

Location & Site Context:

The park is located at 3 East 53rd St. in Midtown Manhattan’s cultural district, occupying a 4,200 square foot rectangular lot. There is dense urban fabric surrounding the site, which consists of mostly high-rises, while the MOMA and Rockefeller Center are within three blocks of the site to the west and southwest, respectively. The park is surrounded on three of four sides, with one side open, effectively spilling out onto the public sidewalk. Referred to as a Pocket Park—or minipark/vest-pocket park—Paley operates as an open urban space at a very small scale, serving immediately local population (approximately a 4-block radius). Paley Park is the archetype pocket park, one that is directly visible from the street in an area of high pedestrian traffic and helps bring natural light to the street level. Other pocket parks of merit include Greenacre Park in NYC, and Downtown Squares in Savannah, Georgia.

Architectural Elements & Material Culture:

Elevated slightly from street level, the park is accessible by a small set of stairs and ramps at both ends of the entrance. Equally spaced honey locust trees lain 20’ apart amongst rough-hewn granite pavers not only create a canopy to shade the public space during the summer, but also extend to the curb, effectively drawing in pleasantly surprised pedestrians. The side walls are covered in ivy, which acts as vertical green space, while occupying the length of the rear wall is a 20’ high waterfall. Wire-mesh chairs and small marble café tables are movable, and can be rearranged to suit user’s needs.

Intended Response & Reception:

The intention of the waterfall is to create grey noise, much like white noise, but with a randomly generated decibel intensity. What this does for the space is that it helps to mask the omnipresent noise of the surrounding city, and it creates a comfortable plaza for conversation and interaction because it’s difficult to overhear others over the noise of the waterfall. Airy trees create comfortable shade in the summer, and in conjunction with the waterfall and the draped ivy on the walls, create what many call an oasis in the midst of a bustling city. Unlike other parks, Paley Park does not attempt to be multi-functional; its success lies in its simplicity. Its primary functions are simply for sitting, relaxing, eating, and serving as a place to meet up with peers.
Paley Park is located in the heart of midtown Manhattan, just 6 blocks south of Central Park.

Well-known landmarks around the site include the MOMA one avenue west, and Rockefeller Center three streets south of the site.

There does appear to be a healthy amount of greenery around the park, especially around the church to the south and Rockefeller Center, however, Paley Park does seem to be the only strictly usable park space in the immediate area.

Images courtesy of Google Earth.
Conclusions:

The success of this park proves that size is no issue. In fact, unlike so many parks which try to be infinitely expansive, Paley Park utilizes its small lot to create a very intimate, even romantic setting through a grand water feature and vertical planes of greenery. The sight, smell, and soothing noise of falling water serve as a reprieve of serenity, juxtaposing the steel landscape surrounding it. Here, simple is not simple-minded. The park is not overdone with architectural elements, instead, they are pushed to the edges, while the center makes use of a modest grid of trees, a few flower planters, and movable outdoor furniture. This way, occupants can arrange the seating to their desire, either grouping tables together for larger gatherings, spacing them further apart for more private conversations, or getting face to face with the waterfall. The space which must have been revolutionary at the time of conception is reminiscent of a Tuscan villa garden. The backlighting of the waterfall provides another subtle layer of beauty, that works in tandem to bring attention to the feature. Furthermore, because it is privately owned, it appears to be quite clean and free of litter which one might find at a similar public park. For these reasons, it is understandable why Paley Park is often referred to as one of the finest urban spaces in the U.S.

References:


Projects for Public Spaces; www.pps.org


GREENSWARD FOUNDATION, www.greenswardparks.org

Images:


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