

Take a (Solo) Stroll. Your Next Art Fix May Be Around the Block.

In these challenging times, New York City's small delights can offer a respite. Our critic reflects on a few old friends while practicing social distancing.



A building with character, and a quirky design: the AT&T building at 32 Avenue of the Americas in TriBeCa. Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times

By Will Heinrich, March 19, 2020

Most of New York's museums and art galleries have closed, but the city remains full of aesthetic destinations that can be experienced outdoors and alone. While we're all facing a lot more time apart from one another, I've been thinking back to the long, solitary walks I used to take, and the monuments, buildings and public art works that served me as both friends and destinations. Whether I was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan or in the other boroughs, there was always some interesting sight nearby to occasion a reflective journey.

In the early days of the pandemic, a friend sent me a sermon that C.S. Lewis preached to incoming Oxford scholars in 1939. In it, Lewis argues that catastrophes like war only make more obvious the permanent human condition, which is to live in the shadow of certain death. But he also suggests that the attention we devote to cultural pursuits in spite of that shadow is exactly what makes us human.

As we navigate these challenging times, I've been reflecting on some of the treasures and small delights that inhabit our collective urban backyard. These are places to go for a reprieve from the increasingly dire news alerts or just a break from your new home office — but please, if you do, maintain your social distance.

MANHATTAN

Joan of Arc Memorial



The monument, on the Upper West Side, was created by Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington (1876-1973).

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times



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As a lonely freshman at Columbia, I spent a lot of time pacing up and down Riverside Park — sometimes as far south as 72nd Street, but more often just to the Joan of Arc Memorial at 93rd. There's a sloping, wooded traffic island there right in the middle of Riverside Drive, and at its peak, atop a narrow pedestal of Mohegan granite, sits Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington's [gorgeous equestrian bronze](#).

The sculpture, dedicated here just over a century ago, in 1915, is an exhilarating allegory of the vital but unbridgeable relationship between spirit and flesh. Joan's mount is so finely detailed that you can pick out its bulging equine veins from 20 feet below, while the heroine herself, though just as well wrought, is mostly hidden inside her blank armor. As she looks up through the cruciform hilt of her sword, all you can make out is the yearning on her face.

The sculpture is also, incidentally, a monument to the absurdities of sexism. According to the city's Department of Parks and Recreation, an early version of Huntington's portrait of this inspired female general won honorable mention at the Salon in Paris in 1910 even though the jury was "skeptical that such an accomplished work of art could have been made solely by a woman." nycgovparks.org/parks

QUEENS

Old Quaker Meeting House



The Old Quaker Meeting House, in Flushing, Queens, was built in 1694 and is still in use.

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times



The sacred space has been a house of worship for over 300 years.

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times

When I first moved to Queens more than a decade ago, I walked the length of the elevated 7 train tracks from 46th Street, in Sunnyside, to their terminus in Flushing. It

took a couple of hours, and it felt as if I had crossed the world, passing vendors selling Ecuadorean street corn, a Filipino restaurant district, the Indian jewelry shops of Jackson Heights.

Flushing itself felt like being in Hong Kong, with its crowded streets, its shopping malls and low office buildings, and its signs mostly in Chinese. This bustling modernity lent a special, incongruous magic to the shingled [Old Quaker Meeting House](#), built in 1694 and still in use by the Religious Society of Friends. Located on Northern Boulevard between Main and Union Streets, it's a potent reminder that as quickly as everything seems to change these days, there are always remnants of the past all around us.

flushingfriends.org

MANHATTAN Buell Hall



Buell Hall on the Columbia University campus. The modest little house, our writer says, “looked almost as out of place as I felt” as a student.

Credit...

Landon Speers for The New York Times

Columbia University opened its Morningside Heights campus, designed by McKim, Mead & White, in 1897. A stately arrangement of placid quadrangles and tall brick edifices with copper roofs, it's an impressive place. But I came from a high school with barely more than 100 students in its graduating class, and the campus often felt a little

stiff and forbidding. So I was always glad to walk past one modest little house, with homey windows and rosier bricks, that looked almost as out of place as I felt.

Currently home to the school's Maison Française, [Buell Hall](#) (just steps from Amsterdam Avenue near 116th Street) is a relic of an institution called the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, which occupied this site before Columbia. With [classes being conducted online](#), the campus is fairly empty at the moment. It's a good place for a stroll, as long as you're strolling alone. columbia.edu/content/coronavirus

MANHATTAN

AT&T Long Distance Building



Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times



Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times



The AT&T tower is a favorite, partly because of the half-dozen weathered colors of its bricks and partly because it abruptly changes directions, “lining up against the diagonal avenue until, three-fifths of the way up, it readjusts itself, with a series of little patios.”

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times

There are many details that make this building, a glorious Art Deco mountain hulking over Tribeca Park, my favorite in the city — even with the ugly new antennas on the roof. There's the pink granite wainscoting at its foot, and how it reveals that the streets aren't level. If you walk around the building, which occupies a full city block, this wainscoting will be over your head on the Avenue of the Americas side, but only knee high on the building's eastern Church Street side.

There's the way the tower abruptly changes directions, lining up against the diagonal avenue until, three-fifths of the way up, it readjusts itself, with a series of little patios, to the orthogonal street grid. There are the handsome [mosaics in the lobby](#), solemn paeans to communications technology, and the building catches light throughout the day, like some kind of sacred mesa.

But mainly what I love are the bricks themselves. In a half-dozen weathered colors ranging from charcoal gray to bloody-steak pink, they're laid in an intricate series of projections and corners that give the building's sheer face the vibrating texture of a herringbone suit.

BROOKLYN

Greenpoint War Memorial



The war monument, consisting of a winged female figure, stands at the center of Monsignor McGolrick Park in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times

Paved avenues lead past neat rows of tall London plane trees in Monsignor McGolrick Park, their naked twigs forming dense brown networks in the sky. At the center of the park (between Nassau and Driggs Avenues, and Russell and Monitor Streets) stands the

[Greenpoint War Memorial](#), a winged female figure created by Carl Augustus Heber in 1923. On her tiptoes and with narrow wings half closed, she looks as if she's only just landed, but she's already brandishing her laurel twig, a token of victory. Her grave expression is an acknowledgment of all the Brooklynites maimed or killed on Europe's battlefields in World War I. But her finely modeled skirt looks damp with sweat, and her gravity also expresses a mute resignation to her own gruesome task. [Nycgovparks.org](#)

LOWER MANHATTAN
Chatham Square Cemetery



The Chatham Square Cemetery in Lower Manhattan isn't open to visitors, but whenever our writer is in the neighborhood he "stops for a moment to peer through the locked iron gate."

Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times



Credit: Landon Speers for The New York Times

The oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, Shearith Israel, was founded in Lower Manhattan in 1654. Though the congregation itself has long since moved to Central Park West, [its first cemetery still stands](#) in a tiny corner of Chinatown, just down the block from [Kimlau Square](#) at the foot of the Bowery.

It isn't open to visitors, but I've made it a habit, ever since first discovering it, of stopping for a moment to peer through the locked iron gate whenever I'm in the neighborhood. Standing against the chest-high stone wall recently, I read on one leaning gravestone that a certain Josiah Ellis departed this life on the 8th of October, 1798. The other stones were all either too worn to make out, or just a little too far — like the dead themselves, close at hand but forever out of reach. shearithisrael.org

Correction: March 22, 2020

A picture caption with an earlier version of this article misidentified the neighborhood where the Joan of Arc Memorial is located. It is the Upper West Side, not Morningside Heights.