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## New York City Info

The Broad Ways of New York

E-mail

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One of the most popular avenues in New York City, which resonates across America, and around the world, is the spine of Manhattan known as Broadway. The avenue American theatre made famous connects two contrasting realities of the city – the humble apartments of northern Harlem and the canyon of wealth of Lower Manhattan. In actuality, Broadway begins at the border of the Bronx and Westchester County, thereby connecting the city to its northern suburbia.

Broadway has various identities where the subway rises and dips to trade places with vegetated medians. Quaint urban spaces provide respite at various locations along Broadway such as the African Burial Ground, Vergi Square, Zuccotti Park and Bowling Green. The larger spaces on Broadway such as Times Square, Madison Square Park, Union Square and City Hall Park are some of the first democratic spaces New Yorkers gravitate to for celebrations or protestations. Streets the length Broadway, that span dozens of neighborhoods, bring together different cognitive realities of many New Yorkers.

However, there are 4 other Broadways in the outer boroughs of New York City, but they are not as well known as their Manhattan namesake and they don't have the traffic quantity Broadway has. Ironically, in most locations Broadway is not really broad at all, but other streets in the city actually can be described as broad and carry comparable traffic.

The truly broad ways are Park Avenue, Malcolm X Blvd, West Side Highway in Manhattan; Hylan Blvd in Staten Island; Eastern Parkway, Ocean Parkway, Linden Blvd, Atlantic Avenue, Kings Highway in Brooklyn; Grand Concourse in the Bronx; and Northern Blvd, Union Turnpike, Queens Blvd in Queens. These are the anomalies of the New York grid, which aim to defy traffic congestion, while still fitting into the fabric of the city. Each broad way has a different feel, architecture, streetscape and character. Each individual broad way itself differs in various parts. Park Avenue in Harlem is very different from Park Avenue South.

Let us consider three of these broad ways and their importance to the city.

### Grand Concourse

Designed in 1892 to be the major thoroughfare connecting densely populated Manhattan to the open spaces of the Bronx, the Grand Concourse was New York's version of the *Champs-Élysées*. With its wide roads and landscaped medians, it aims to make the busy urban street scenic.

The civil engineer who conceived of the 180 foot wide Grand Concourse, Louis Risse, called it a road "designed for the city to come." Since Risse was the person who created the first official map of metropolitan New York, he had profound insight on how valuable an urban conduit the Grand Concourse would be. With the Ford Motor Company's Model T coming to market in 1908, the same year the Grand Concourse was completed, urban transportation in American cities, such as New York, was on the verge of being transformed. Wide thoroughfares like the Grand Concourse became more implemented by urban planning departments, however most never achieved the same architectural heights as the Grand Concourse.

Today, just like during early 20th century, the Grand Concourse is lined with 5 and 6 storey elevator apartments, of finely detailed Bronx Art Deco Style and Streamline facades. Other than Art Deco, you can also view buildings designed in Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Tudor and Spanish. The Grand Concourse is a highly eclectic thoroughfare that produces a coherent streetscape that is miles from being grotesque. The flanking buildings rest closely adjacent to each other, abutting in places with no setback from the sidewalk. The Grand Concourse is one of those architecturally appealing boulevards worth taking a stroll down or cycling on a summer evening. The regal quality of the Grand Concourse is underlined by the uniform scale and ornamentation of the buildings, with the trees acting as humanizing agents of a busy urban boulevard.

### Eastern Parkway

Eastern Parkway, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect who designed Central Park and Mount-Royal Park in Montreal, is unmatched by any street in New York City. Contrary to Risse, who saw the Grand Concourse as simply a well landscaped road, Olmsted viewed Eastern Parkway as a "linear park", which

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just happened to provide access for vehicular traffic. Olmsted wanted *New Yorkers to use Eastern Parkway with leisure and enjoy the greenery so much that they should not haste to get to their destination.*

*During the early days after its completion in 1874, and before residential development turned the linear park into a road similar to the Grand Concourse, you could have imagined residents using Eastern Parkway just as Olmsted desired. However, driving on present day Eastern Parkway still delivers a feeling of driving through a park. This only occurs during the summer months when the trees that line the parkway are at their greenest, with an over abundance of foliage. The architecture can only then be seen as a background to the parkway, whereas during the winter months, the architecture comes to foreground as the leafless trees ghost into the streetscape. The use of the historic Type M New York City streetlights helps Eastern Parkway keep its historic ambiance.*

The architecture of Eastern Parkway is that of 4 storey brownstones, single-family houses, semi-detached houses, and institutional buildings. Most buildings are set back 30 feet from the sidewalk offering residents privacy. The center medians are paved with Belgian Block and granite, giving Eastern Parkway the allure of a grand pedestrian way. Eastern Parkway offers its users picturesque axial views and revealing southern gazes downhill via the cross streets towards the neighbourhood of Crown Heights.

Beginning from Grand Army Plaza, the Brooklyn Public Library central building and the Brooklyn Museum are two notable buildings that set Eastern Parkway off travelling east. The parkway acts like two parallel residential streets with a busy thoroughfare between each other. Unfortunately, the linear park ends at Ralph Avenue, and a narrower, conventional inner city street appears lined with chicken wire fence, metal overhead doors, car repair shops and apartment buildings right up against the sidewalk.

### **Park Avenue**

This 6 mile avenue, interrupted by Grand Central Station and the MetLife Building, begins and ends in two starkly different New York's. On its southern end it exudes opulence and luxuriating architecture. At its northern end, its gritty urban aesthetic is modest and industrial.

Many of the apartments on Park Avenue south of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street may not as eye attracting as those on the Grand Concourse, but they are popular with wealthy families who need units with spacious bedrooms. Unlike Eastern Parkway, there is no mistaking Park Avenue for an actual park, even in the middle of the summer. However, a park does exist in a minimalist way. The well manicured green spaces on its median make Park Avenue, Midtown and South, more maintained than the other broad ways.

In Harlem, begonias and tulips are replaced by the stone and steel of the Metro-North elevated tracks. The rusticated stone portions of the elevated track consist of semicircular openings for the cross streets, in a nod to the great engineering projects of the Roman Empire. Instead of the towering apartments and International Style office buildings of Park Avenue South and Park Avenue Midtown, we see apartment complexes that look like the type of buildings from the cover of a Robert Moses propaganda flyer.

### **The importance of the broad ways**

Streets are the venues in which we experience the city most often. They are how we circulate through the maze of buildings, parks and superblocks. Traffic congestion is part of the New York City experience, unfortunately, but the broad ways should be the alleviators. Those tree-lined parkways and avenues are anomalies in a New York street life where traffic flow is oxymoronic. However, they do allow us to travel leisurely through the havoc and chaos of New York. They permit us to observe the intricacies of an eclectic architecture, feel the breeze from the leafy trees, smell the begonias as the subway rumbles beneath and be grateful for the shade of an elevated track. When you're stuck in traffic, it might feel like the broad way to destruction, but the pleasures of the broad ways provide formative New York experiences, even if they might take place at a really slow pace.

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