

Winslow Homer Walk

By the City / For the City Idea N^o. 591
A Midblock Passage in Midtown

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Before: Google Street Views from 57th Street (left) and 56th Street (right)

THE LONG BLOCKS of midtown Manhattan are uncomfortable for pedestrians. Midtown regulars know which midblock building lobbies go through centers of the blocks, giving significant shortcuts for some trips. And as Jane Jacobs pointed out, walkers like the parts of the grid where squares and streets like Madison Avenue and Union Square add richness (and shorter blocks) to the original Commissioners' Plan of 1811, so they can look ahead and see a variety of routes and intersections.

Midtown has a tradition of places like Shubert Alley that open the middle of the block, and a newer tradition of using the bonus plazas given by New York City's 1961 zoning plan for pedestrian cut-throughs at buildings like the Equitable Building on Seventh Avenue. For this competition, we looked at a midblock passage between 56th and 57th Streets that's blocked in the middle and poorly used by most passersby.

Directly opposite the Art Students League on West 57th Street, our proposed Winslow Homer Walk (Homer once taught at the art school) brings the passage down to ground level and removes the fence between the raised "Hooters Plaza" on 56th Street and the more formal raised plaza on 57th Street connected to the building at 888 Seventh Avenue. Decades of studies have shown that raised plazas are less used than spaces at ground level, and the severe Modernist plaza at 888 is not very welcoming.

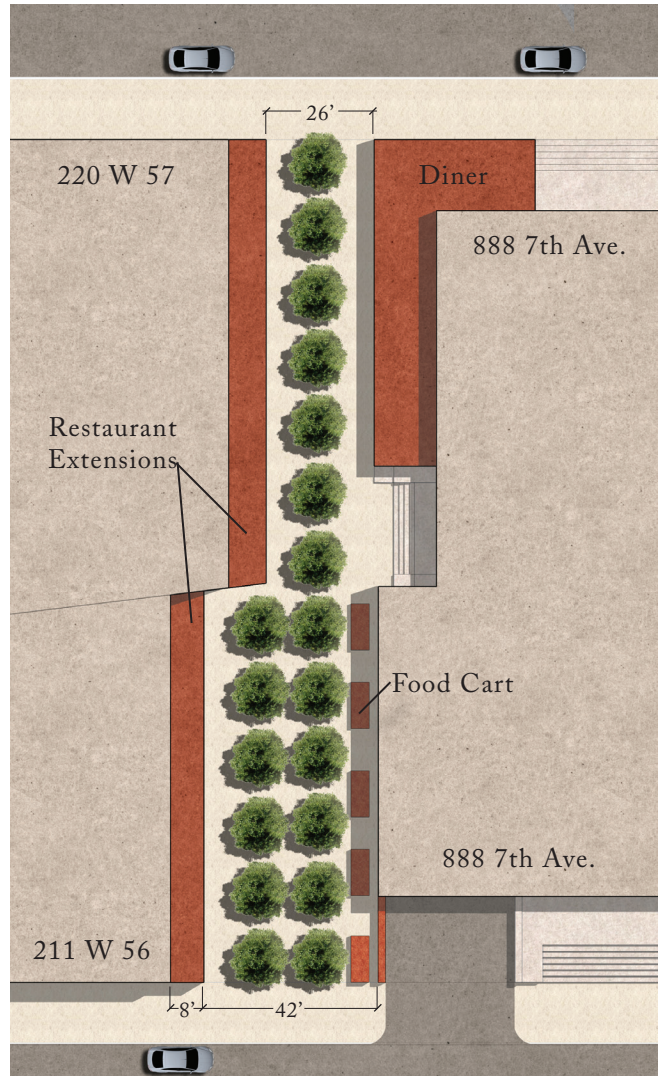
The existing plazas on 56th and 57th Streets are both 50 feet wide, but there is a jog in the middle of the block, where the fence separates the two places. We moved the Brooklyn Diner on 57th Street around the corner, so that it faces on to Homer Walk. 888 Seventh Avenue gets a broad stair on 57th for its main entrance.

On the other side of the walk, we added a one-story addition with a small roof terrace to 220 West 57th Street, so that a restaurant in the building could easily open to outdoor tables in the Walk. The diner and the restaurant extension hide some bare brick walls that were never designed to be seen and bring the width of the walk down to a more intimate scale. A row of trees down the middle of the walk makes a canopy over the space and also camouflage the bare walls next to the Walk.

The 56th Street side of the Walk is quieter, and we've made that side wider,

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Plans of Homer Walk before (left) and after (right)

with more trees and more outdoor tables. A narrow two-story addition to 211 West 56th Street on the west side of the Walk gives a beautiful face to a boring utilitarian design from the 1960s and opens to the tables in the passage. On the opposite side, a new marble wall similar to the one on the other side of the garage entrance for 888 makes a backdrop for a row of New York food carts served by outdoor seating.

In the end, our plan removed 37 parking spaces from the garages at 888 Seventh Avenue and 211 West 56th Street in order to bring the plaza down to ground level. At the same time we added thousands of square feet

of public and commercial space. That is the type of thing we need to do more of as we move away from the auto-centric planning of the last fifty years. Luckily, our DOT is leading the way.

In terms of density and transportation, we live in the most walkable city in America, with carbon footprints similar to the Europeans. In terms of streets, squares and places like Homer Walk, we need to make more places in the public realm where people want to be. New Yorkers, unlike the politicians in Albany, want the Congestion Zone. When we reduce the number of cars in the city, we can make more places like Homer Walk.

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Before: Looking south from 57th Street between Seventh Avenue and Broadway



The Brooklyn diner on West 57th Street