Central Park is one of the most famous public spaces in the world. It is also a highly contested political space, and has been since its construction in 1857. During Boss Tweed’s run of Tammany Hall jobs in the park were handed out as favors, causing grievous damages to its landscaping, according to the park’s designer Frederick Law Olmsted. In 2013 current mayor Bill de Blasio announced that he would ban the horse carriage industry if elected to office. Both the Teamsters and the tourists have made this bill hard to pass. Critics say the ban is less about animal rights than it is about appeasing a group of wealthy real estate brokers under the corporate moniker of “New Yorkers for Clean Livable and Safe Streets.” Just this month (March 2016) the City of New York has been quietly renewing cab licenses for another 2 years. This has the Irish pedicab industry relieved, as they feared the ban might be a loss of their jobs too.

2. Trump Tower, 725 5th Ave
The lobby of Trump Tower is actually a public space. In fact, it’s a covered pedestrian walkway and 4 story atrium featuring high-end retail. This type of space is known as a POPS, or a privately owned public space. According to zoning laws, by setting aside space for public use land owners are able to build up, and surpass the density per square mile regulations of their land. Inside the tower is 1,800 square feet of public space, with 80 linear feet of seating and plants. The plants, seating, and retail, however, have a complicated history. Sometimes the benches are removed for more retail, such as ice cream or “Trump for President” souveniers. Sometimes the plants are on top of the benches to prevent sleeping. For each violation of public space use, Donald Trump is fined $2,000.

3. Paley Park, 3 E 53rd Street

Paley Park is considered one of the “finest urban spaces in the U.S.” by the Project for Public Spaces organization, which is founded on the ideas of sociologist and urbanist William H. Whyte. It is called a “pocket park,” or otherwise a “vest-pocket park,” “par-kette,” or “vesty.” The naming conventions reveal that these are beloved spaces, as Paley Park is in particular. The park was given to the public, as a plaque reads, by CBS President William S. Paley and named for his father Samuel. The landowners received no zoning bonuses, nor were they required by law to create a public space. It is simply a gift.

4. Seagram Building plaza, 375 Park Ave
The conditions for public space in New York’s zoning laws begins at the Seagram Building plaza. In 1956 William Whyte published *The Organization Man*, a book about corporate culture. Then he began to think about urban revitalization, and in 1969 he was asked by the New York City Planning Commission to find out why the Seagram Building plaza functioned as a public space much better than others. His findings were adopted in the 1971 regulation changes. Many of his observations can be seen in effect in the above Streetview photo from June 2011. There is lots of sunlight, plenty of comfortable seating, water, plants and trees, nearby food, and “triangulation,” a term which means interesting objects to talk about that bring people together, like Urs Fischer’s playful “Untitled (Lamp/Bear).” On this day chairs were set up for an outdoor music program.

5. Bryant Park, 6th Ave & 42nd Street

Bryant Park is my favorite public space in New York. It is not a landscape park, like Central Park, but is a city park, designed for city activities, like meeting friends, eating lunch, people watching, even playing ping-pong, shuffleboard, doing aerobics or watching an outdoor movie. With the New York Public Library next door, it’s a nice place to read a book. These haven’t always been the park’s activities. In the 1980s it was a favorite place for dealing drugs. William Whyte and and the Project for Public Space made recommendations for a redesign, including the now iconic moveable folding chairs. The new park was rebuilt on top of book stacks for the public library. The site has one more exceptional quality: a well maintained public restroom. This is courtesy of 34th Street Partnership, a private management company. Although the park is part of the New York City Park system it is owned by the Bryant Park Corporation, originally called the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation and funded by the Rockefellers.
Elizabeth Street Garden is a privately owned public garden on Elizabeth Street in the Little Italy area of lower Manhattan. This area is represented by Community Board 2, a group of volunteer neighborhood enthusiasts appointed by the Borough President. CB2 was one of the first of such boards that were established in the 1960s. There are 12 in Manhattan and 59 across New York City. According to Friends of Elizabeth Street Garden, Little Italy and SoHo make up 23% of CB2’s population, and only 3% of its green space. With so little green space this eclectic garden has lots of friends. It also has lots of competition for its valuable real estate. In February 2016 NYC Housing & Development applied for 16 million dollars to build 60 affordable housing units on site. This comes after Elizabeth Street was left off a list of 34 neighborhood gardens officially adopted as public greenspaces by the New York Parks system. Recently it was announced that NYCHA’s request was not approved, giving the little garden new life just in time for spring.

Federal Plaza, Lafayette & Worth Street
Federal Plaza is the site of the most famous public art controversy in U.S. history. In 1979 the Federal Government commissioned a sculpture from renown NYC minimalist Richard Serra as part of the Art-in-Architecture program. Serra had previous private commissions throughout the city, both nearby, at the St. John Rotary, which is the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, and in the middle of the street at 183rd & Webster Avenue in the Bronx. His reputation for large scale rusted Cor-Ten steel structures was well known. For the Federal Plaza he constructed a 120 feet long and 12 feet high steel arc that divided the plaza in half, much to the annoyance of the government workers in the Javits Federal Building. One particular worker, a Chief Judge of the U.S. Customs Court, sought to have the artwork removed. After a lengthy public trial, the judge succeeded. Because the sculpture was “site-specific,” Serra contended that the sculpture’s location informed its existence, and therefore the removal was equivalent to its destruction. As a result of this event the Visual Artists Rights Act was establish in 1990, which protects works of art as members of the artists’ own corporeality. When the dust settled the plaza was re-landscaped.

8. Foley Square, 111 Worth Street

Just across the street from Federal Plaza is Foley Square, a site of much history and many public meanings. Named after Tammany man & saloon keeper "Big Tom" Foley, the square occupies the location of New York’s original fresh water source, Collect Pond. One block east on Duane Street is an African burial ground uncovered during construction in 1991. At the time of its use it was outside the city walls, as burial ceremonies for Africans were not allowed in the city. Lorenzo Pace’s monumental sculpture “Triumph of the Human Spirit” was commissioned as a memorial for the Foley Square fountain. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks the square was used as a medical outpost, and it was one of the sites of Occupy Wall Street.
The last stop on the tour is the 9/11 Memorial site on the grounds of the former World Trade Center. Two basins with falling water mark the absence of the twin towers, World Trade 1 and 2. This space reveals how New York City rebuilds after a tragedy. In my opinion, despite the politics and tricky business negotiations, the space is a success, primarily, I think, because it leaves most of the space open. There is plenty of rebuilding in the neighborhood, but the memorial is a demonstration of not-building, but “letting be.” Most of the site consists of a plaza with low turf and evenly spaced trees between ample walkways. Another thoughtful consideration was reconnecting Greenwich Street north and south, which had been cut-off by the former trade center. Both the openness of the plaza and the reopening of Greenwhich Street were decisions made to increase the quality of daily life in the often dark and severe Financial District. As memorials go, I find that these mundane considerations are full of deep and good meaning.