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Tale of two designs: O'Bryant Square languishes; Director Park flourishes

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Could Holladay Park project be a model for future plans?



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - O'Bryant Square has little activity outside the lunch hour. Three blocks away, Director Park attracts all sorts of people with a variety of programs. Bad design is part of the problem at O'Bryant, but some park experts believe it can be overcome if the city were to commit to enlivening the square.

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon, O'Bryant Square in downtown Portland is mostly deserted. On the park's raised northeast corner, two piles of discarded clothing and one discarded shoe sit in the shade of a tree, a flattened cardboard box on the ground beside them.

Four men are sleeping on the park's upper level. A dozen or so people rest on the park's perimeter, on benches and retaining walls, most in shade, all but a few balancing lunches from the nearby 10th and Alder food carts on their laps.

Five park garbage cans are already overflowing at 3:15 p.m., with chopsticks and half-filled sauce cups on the ground beside the cans. Plastic forks and paper napkins are scattered throughout the park's bark dust.

A tall, 30-ish man with a scruffy beard scavenges a couple of the garbage cans, coming away with what looks like some leftover biryani and a half-filled paper Coke cup with straw. There is absolutely nobody in the center of the park, its plaza. The large bronze fountain built in the shape of a rose dominates the plaza but is empty. The fountain hasn't spouted water for at least 13 years.

Two men and two women, travelers maybe, homeless quite possibly, have taken ownership of the park's northwest corner. Approached by a reporter, one of the women shakes her finger and shouts, "Keep walking."



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Director Park attracts all sorts of people with a variety of programs.

A few blocks away, lively Director Park has shown what intelligent programming and around the clock security can accomplish. Holladay Park next to the Lloyd Center is on its way to joining the list of Portland destination parks. O'Bryant Square is, well, the counterpoint, an example of what happens when a city park is badly designed and allowed to determine its own fate.

Design is the primary reason O'Bryant can't be made to feel safe, says Matthew Arnold, associate principal director of urban design and planning at SERA Architects. More specifically, Arnold says, the problem is the altered grade of the park.

From street level looking north, Southwest Ninth and Park avenues slope downhill. But inside O'Bryant, the reverse is true. The park steps up from south to north to accommodate an underground parking garage entrance on Stark Street. So for those on the outside, three of the park's four sides are less than uninviting — they present blank concrete walls. The result? "You can't see into (O'Bryant) and people can't see out of it," says Arnold. "That means the whole north portion of the park, there are no eyes on the park. Any illicit activity common to O'Bryant Square can occur back in those areas out of sight of the public."

And illicit activity does take place in that "Keep walking" area, from homeless camping to drug dealing, as Arnold and his colleagues at SERA's design studio are well aware. More than a decade ago they proposed changes to O'Bryant and have authored a series of online articles about the park, called "Can a Broken Urban Park Be Fixed?"

There is almost no pedestrian traffic on three of O'Bryant's four sides, Arnold points out. The Union Bank of California to the east and the Pittock Building to the west turn their backs on the park — no sidewalk cafes or retail shops with customers coming and going. The parking garage eliminates any possibility of street activity on the north side. The south side has possibilities, but half its sight line from the sidewalk is blocked by a squat structure that houses the parking garage's electrical and ventilation systems.

'Declaring defeat'

At popular Director Park, three blocks south, Programming Manager Alicia Hammock says she's aware that eyes are constantly on her no matter where she moves in the public space. She frequently gets calls from people in the surrounding towers when they spot something going on in the park that they don't like. There are no such eyes on O'Bryant.

"You feel like you're unobserved and you can get away with all sorts of stuff," says Arnold. "And (people) do."

At Holladay Park next to the Lloyd Center, intensive programming is being implemented to make the park feel safer and more inviting. Arnold says programming alone won't do the job at O'Bryant, not as long as the park's sightlines are so obstructed. Maybe, he says, 11 a.m. to 2

p.m. events, combined with tables and chairs in the plaza to attract more lunchtime food cart customers, would help. But outside of those hours he's dubious about the park substantially being changed.

"As long as it has that grade with the lack of observation from the outside, it's going to be hard to get the drug dealers to leave the top," he says.

Parks officials say there are no plans to repair and restart O'Bryant's water fountain, which might attract more women and children. Arnold says that if the city isn't willing to invest in revitalizing O'Bryant Square, it should consider closing the park.

But Alex Garvin, Yale University professor of urban planning and author of "Public Parks: The Key to Livable Communities," says a city should never close a park such as O'Bryant. In Garvin's view, every park writes a chapter in a city's ongoing story pitting livability against decay. "That means you have given up as a society," Garvin says. "If you can't make a park a place that residents of the city want to go to, you are declaring defeat. And you cannot ever do that."

Mike Abbate, Portland Parks & Recreation director, agrees with Arnold that programming alone won't substantially change O'Bryant. "It needs a big capital investment. It needs to be rebuilt from the ground up," Abbate says.

Abbate calls the north-side parking garage entrance "a death knell to public space." He says forming a public/private partnership to pay for changes at O'Bryant won't be as easy as it was at Holladay Park, where investors in the Lloyd Center were a natural source for funding. There don't appear to be any interested private parties willing to save O'Bryant Square.

Garvin isn't buying that reasoning. "Don't tell me you can't find a way to pay for something that is necessary," he says. "You always can find a way. That's what people like Dan Biederman do for a living."

Change at Holladay Park

Biederman is the New York City parks expert hired by the new owners of the Lloyd Center to re-energize Holladay Park. He says there are plenty of potential funding sources to subsidize urban park programming other than wealthy corporate neighbors.

At Bryant Park in New York, Bank of America pays about \$3 million a year for naming rights on the skating rink. Southwest Airlines maintains a small corner kiosk and Bryant Park workers wear Southwest Airlines polo shirts, which nets the park more than \$2 million in annual revenue. The evening film series and poetry workshops, and even the park's Wi-Fi and ping pong table, have corporate sponsors.

A city has to be committed to building positive momentum at a park to encourage investors, according to Biederman. His company was hired this year to redo Military Park in Newark, New Jersey. Most of the initial funding is coming from wealthy Newark residents, he says, and real estate investors who have come to believe the park will flourish and are buying up nearby property.

“You find people who for whatever reasons have a strong interest in the adjacent public areas improving and then you use them as your leaders,” Biederman says. “O’Bryant is well enough situated.”

SERA’s Arnold has another idea. The parking garage beneath O’Bryant is owned by the city and Arnold says it is unlikely the city would give away the revenue from the garage in order to remove it and bring O’Bryant back to grade.

Maybe, Arnold says, a funding deal can be worked out with a downtown corporation badly in need of its own parking. They could pay for renovating the parking garage so, like the underground garage at Director Park, its entrance would be on an adjoining block — beneath the Fox Tower in Director’s case. In return, the corporation could get dedicated parking spaces. There’s a surface parking lot just to the north of O’Bryant which could handle the entrance.

Three blocks away, Director Park’s Hammock says she’s thought about O’Bryant Square, and she’s convinced that a little programming money could produce a major change there, even with the park’s structural drawbacks. When the O’Bryant fountain was flowing two decades ago, she says, the park was very popular. Install a food cart or two right in O’Bryant for more eyes on the park, place tables and chairs in the plaza, then build with some events. Above all, she says, hire full-time security and park rangers — just like at Director and Holladay parks — to start developing positive relationships with parkgoers.

“It doesn’t always have to take a lot of money to positively activate an open space,” Hammock says.



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Despite Park Bureau warnings, a few Portlanders are taking advantage of Keller Fountain's cool water on hot summer days. In years past, large crowds often flocked to the fountain and park experts say those crowds helped keep the park safer.

Keller Fountain is off limits – sort of

Noted parks authority Alex Garvin has toured Portland's parks and, for the most part, praises them. He applauds Portland's willingness to invest in its parks. But the city is making a big mistake, says Yale University professor Garvin, in closing iconic Keller Fountain at Southwest Third Avenue and Clay Street downtown to waders.

For years, Keller was a park to which families flocked, much like the Pearl District's Jamison Square Fountain is today. Adults and children frolicked in the many layers of the park's cascading waterfalls. But in 2008 the city declared Keller and nearby Lovejoy fountains off-limits to waders because their water treatment systems needed updating, and the steep drop-offs were considered unsafe. The former is fixable, with a new filtration system. The park's design is not.

If Portland is trying to save money by avoiding lawsuits as a result of somebody falling off one of Keller's wading pools, the city is making a mistake, Garvin says.

Garvin calls the closing of Keller as a wading park “an outrage.” In his view, the public activity that used to take place there provided an incalculable civic value and represents precisely what public parks are supposed to provide.

“They are going to spend more money on crime prevention there because they’ve made it unattractive,” Garvin says. “They had better turn up the water or they’ll pay more.”

The Oregon Health Authority’s Public Health Division licenses wading pools around the state, and officials there say the steep drop-offs at Keller are so dangerous they won’t grant the city a license to allow wading in the fountain. Signs throughout the park make it clear that playing in the water is forbidden.

Nevertheless, Keller is not quite as empty as it is supposed to be. A few plucky people are starting to dip their feet back in the fountain’s many pools. And park rangers don’t seem intent on clearing out the waders.

The official word from Portland Parks & Recreation? “We wish everyone would follow the rules,” says Portland Parks & Recreation spokesman Mark Ross.

East side gets a park with programs

When New York City parks authority Dan Biederman was touring Portland recently, he said he couldn’t help but notice there weren’t any parks with regular year-round programming on the city’s east side. That’s about to change.

Biederman is generally recognized as the nation’s leading expert in activating public parks through programming. Using fitness classes, art shows and evening movies (plus added security) he gets people using parks to feel safe. He was in Portland because his Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp. has been hired to turn Holladay Park, next to the Lloyd Center, into a popular public gathering place.

Four-acre Gateway Park & Plaza, at Northeast Halsey Street and 106th Avenue, is slated to open in spring 2017. Mike Abbate, director of Portland Parks & Recreation, says it will be the first east-side park with regular, year-round paid programming, much like Director Park downtown. Abbate envisions a number of possibilities, from concerts and movies to a farmers market on the park’s plaza. Green spaces with picnic areas and playgrounds also are in the plan.

“I kind of think it will become the Pioneer Courthouse Square for East Portland,” Abbate says. The park’s final design will begin to take shape this fall. The \$4.07 million to build the park will come from system development charges, with an additional \$1 million for park improvements coming from the Portland Development Commission.