




THE TALK OF THE TOWN

FACE-LIFT DEPT.

Don't tell the Mayor, but there are two spiffy new parks in midtown.

 WHEN Daniel Biederman presided over the reopening of Bryant Park, in 1992, he was all over the place—in the papers, on television, in magazines. Biederman is the head of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, the private business group that leased the once derelict park from the city, reconstructed it, and continues to run it. Biederman also used to head the Grand Central Partnership, the business-improvement district that is in charge of cleaning up the neighborhood around Grand Central Terminal, and he is still the president of the Thirty-fourth Street Partnership. With that much turf under his control, Biederman has sometimes seemed like the mayor of midtown, which is why the mayor of the entire city, Rudolph Giuliani, squeezed him out of his job at the Grand Central Partnership last year. Since then, Biederman has been keeping a low profile, trying to get along with a city administration that frowns on people who do things that the Mayor himself likes to be known for doing, like fixing up city parks.

Not long ago, the Thirty-fourth Street Partnership finished a renovation of Herald Square and Greeley Square,

two troublesome triangles at the intersection of Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street that the Parks Department had never been able to get right. Biederman, still stung by the city's treatment of him, decided not to have an opening at all but merely to let people start using the refurbished parks as soon as the construction crews packed up. They have been coming in droves, and the people who have reclaimed Herald Square and Greeley Square from the drug dealers and alcoholics who used to hang out there are not the same people who have been filling up Bryant Park. They are mostly black, Hispanic, and Asian, and there are plenty of women and families, who stop by after shopping in the mall across the street. The few critics of the Bryant Park project feel that it owes much of its success to the increase in well-heeled office workers in the area. Biederman, who is eager to rebut such critics, said, "This project proves that you don't need yuppies to make a park look well cared for and gentrified."

Biederman was walking through the parks on a chilly October morning, and he counted twenty-two people sitting on the movable chairs in Greeley Square. "When it's warmer, we get more than half women, and that is the real test. It's clear that women have read the visual cues here and now feel that it's safe."

These visual cues come largely from the teachings of Biederman's mentor, William H. Whyte, whose studies of

how people use parks made him something of a philosopher-king of public space. Whyte decreed that good public spaces require plenty of seating that is flexible, not fixed, and lots of visual access, so people passing by can see clearly into a park from the sidewalk. Biederman ordered two hundred lightweight green chairs for Greeley Square, and a hundred and fifty for Herald Square. There are a handful of small bistro tables, and not a stationary bench anywhere. Biederman likes the chairs to be kept in casual groupings. "It drives me crazy when my people clean up and put the chairs in military rows," he said. "They have to learn to leave them randomly, so the public sees that you don't have to sit in rows."

Biederman may be trying to keep a low profile as far as the Mayor is concerned, but he is actually rather Giuliani-like in his obsession with cleanliness and order. He approached one man and asked him to stop feeding the pigeons. "The dropped food brings rats," he said.

When Bryant Park was redesigned, the city put up some of the money, but the Thirty-fourth Street Partnership paid all the costs of design and construction of its two parks itself—roughly two and a half million dollars. For all that, the city is still the official landlord, and Herald and Greeley Squares have only one mayor, and his name is not Biederman.

—PAUL GOLDBERGER