

A GUIDE TO  
**GREAT AMERICAN  
PUBLIC PLACES**

A journey of discovery, learning and delight  
in the public realm

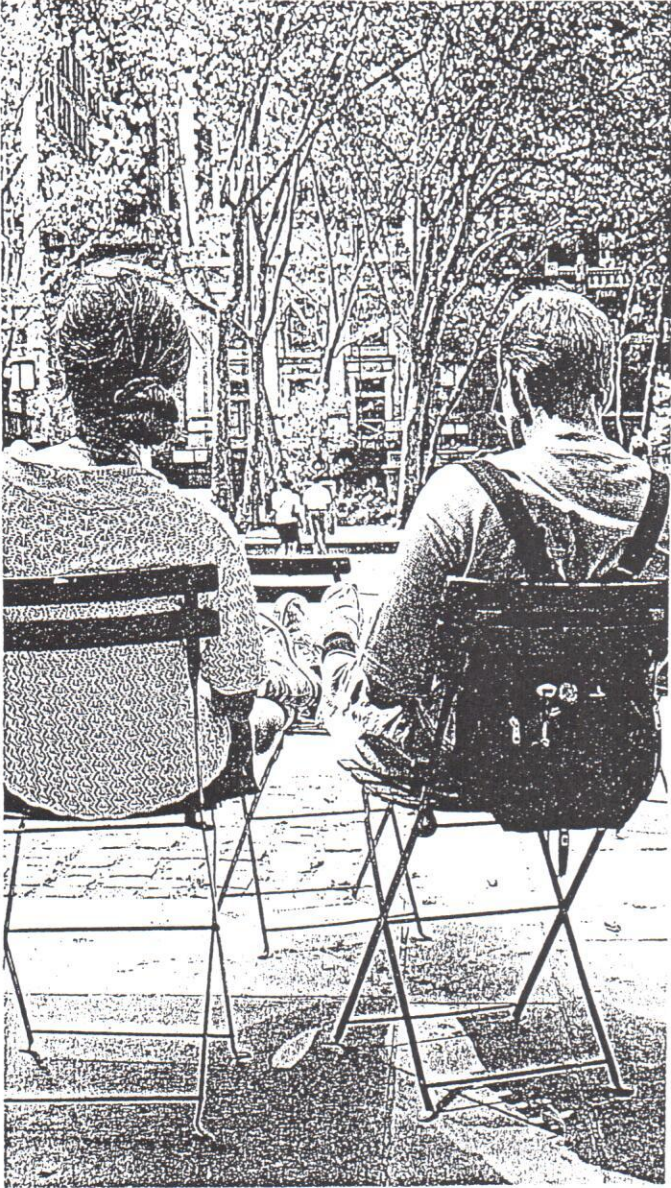


**Gianni Longo**

with a foreword by Deaderick C. Montague  
and with an afterword by Tony Hiss

## Outdoor Living Rooms

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*Bryant Park is kept scrupulously clean, thanks to a combination of selective, well-thought-out rules, unobtrusive policing, and regular maintenance of the furniture, flower beds, and lawns.*

**T**he living room is a shared space where the members of a household congregate, play, take care of business. On a grander scale, the five places in this chapter serve the same purpose for city residents, providing a common ground—an outdoor living room—where the community can meet in celebration or confrontation, in matters of business, or simply for the sake of social recreation. All five are flexible in their uses and exceedingly well maintained and designed.

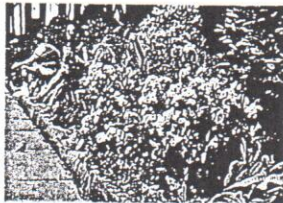
The Promenade and Plaza at Rockefeller Center, in Manhattan, are the closest thing that New York City has to a town square. On the Columbia University campus, the Low Memorial Library Steps provide the student body with a social arena for both serious and frivolous pursuits. Bryant Park, in Manhattan, and Post Office Square, in Boston, are glorious new gathering places for city workers (the former the recipient of a transformative renovation, the latter built from scratch). They offer valuable lessons on how to involve the private sector in restoring high-quality public places or creating new ones. Finally, Washington Square, in San Francisco, is a superb example of a neighborhood park that is peacefully shared by a diverse group of residents. ■

# Bryant Park

Manhattan, New York



*Redefined by its new design, Bryant Park no longer attempts to transport the visitor to some imaginary Arcadian landscape: the city is visible everywhere. The \$8.9 million, five-year renovation project was financed primarily by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and by companies that had offices overlooking the Park.*



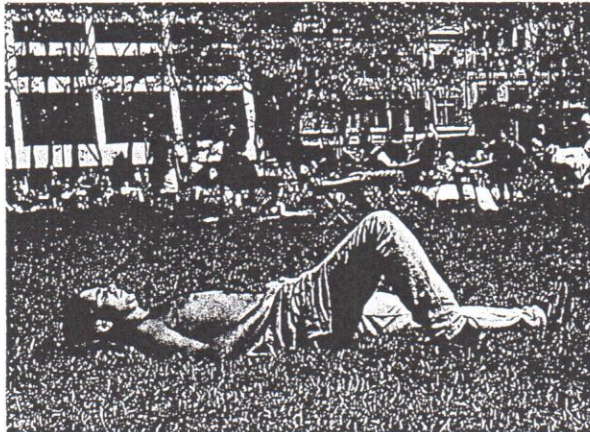
*On either side of the Great Lawn are 300-foot-long, 12-foot-deep perennial borders—one of the more intricately designed and better maintained flower displays in the city.*

**B**ryant Park, backyard to the New York Public Library, is one of the most sensual, graceful open spaces in New York City. Facing the Edwardian rear facade of the library, it draws office workers, shoppers, and out-of-town visitors—more than 10,000 people each day—to its sunny lawn, adorned with spectacular flowering perennial borders and flanked by allées lined with tall plane trees. Until recently, though, it was known as “needle park” for the drug dealers who once patronized it.

The key to Bryant Park’s resurgence has been its redesign—possibly the finest application of the observation and rehabilitation techniques pioneered by William H. Whyte, author of the seminal work *City; Rediscovering the Center*, and the main catalyst in the Park’s renaissance. His approach to the renovation of the six-acre site hinged on making the

interior more visible and accessible. The walls were lowered, new entrances were added and the original ones were widened, and the tall shrubs that had inadvertently served as a screen for drug deals were eliminated. Openings were made in the raised stone balustrade so that the park could be crossed from all directions. Replicas of the original 1930s lamps were installed, and floodlights were introduced for extra security at night. But the greatest touch—suggested by Whyte—was the addition of 2,000 green wood-and-metal folding chairs, which complement the more traditional stationary benches. The chairs transform the several food kiosks into spacious outdoor cafés, and, doubled up, serve as tables for alfresco lunches. They turn the lawn, a more contained and elegant version of Central Park's Great Lawn, into a theater of shifting stage sets.

The Park's management is in the hands of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, a privately funded group formed to lead the renovation effort and one of a new breed of nonprofit organizations that are being set up in cities everywhere to care for public parks. Using money from an assessment on nearby properties and revenues from on-site concessions, the Corporation spends close to \$2 million annually to keep the Park clean and the flowers blooming. And by providing this beautiful city park with an economic engine to sustain its landscape—a necessity that past redesign plans overlooked—it has also brought what appears to be the permanent return of a thankful public. ■



*The civilized behavior of patrons reflects the high degree of care given to the Park.*

## **It's All in the Details**

*The first major redesign of Bryant Park, undertaken by Robert Moses in 1934, turned what was left of the decayed original 1871 Victorian version into a formal, if not cold, Beaux Arts public garden. The seed of the park's future failure, however, was sewn into its design. The ideal that Moses pursued was a setting of "restful beauty," physically removed from the bustle of the surrounding midtown streets. Unfortunately, as William H. Whyte has pointed out, with few entrances, no diagonal walkways, and a vast unused lawn enclosed by restraining balustrades, the park discouraged the casual pedestrian from entering. Raising the park above street level and enclosing it with an iron fence, dense shrubbery, and trees made the grounds even more inhospitable. In time, the concealed quiet of the park proved most desirable to winos, vagrants, and drug dealers.*

*Numerous strategies to rid the park of these people were considered. A typical plan called for more police; another was to drastically limit the park's hours. It was even suggested that the park be entered only from the library, by those with library cards, which was, of course, unacceptably exclusionary. All of these tactics fell short, however, because they failed to consider the alienating effect of the park's design and did not offer a way to entice the public back.*