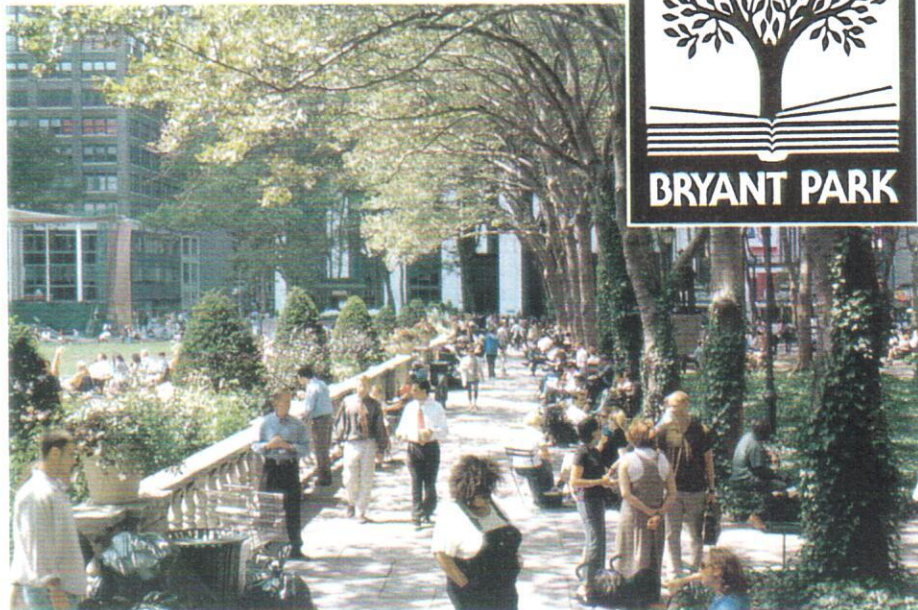


Bringing Back Bryant Park

By 1987, Bryant Park, a six-acre public park in midtown Manhattan, had fallen into neglect, becoming a threat to pedestrians and a liability to local businesses and neighboring institutions like the New York City Public Library. Ten years later, the park is a showplace that attracts thousands of visitors daily to its lawns, gardens, fountains, sandwich kiosks, restaurants, public restrooms, and special events. What made the difference? The answer is the not-for-profit Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC), which, in 1987, took over management of the park from the city, raised capital funds secured by the credit of a business improvement district (BID), and spent them on a well-researched program of rebuilding and maintenance.

Everything about the design of Bryant Park made it a haven for criminals. Raised above sidewalk level, the park was surrounded by protective shrubs and a tall iron fence, and it could be entered only through a few narrow gateways. It was subdivided by bushes and cul-de-sac, creating what should have been intimate, secluded spots for visitors but instead became protective cover for drug dealers and muggers.

The park might have continued to decline indefinitely had it not been for a comparable decline in the library building. Years of deferred maintenance had left their mark, and in the late 1970s the Rockefeller Brothers Fund be-



A limestone balustrade surrounds Bryant Park's great lawn and separates it from the wide paths and London plane trees that line it; a cast-iron fence encloses the park.

gan to consider funding renovations; however, the fund concluded that renovations should proceed only if the park's problems were resolved. The fund turned to William "Holly" Whyte, who outlined his observations about the park and recommendations for its improvement. Whyte's main point was that the problem with Bryant Park was underuse. "Access is the nub of the matter," he wrote. "Psychologically, as well as physically, Bryant Park is a hidden place The best way to meet the problem is to promote the widest possible use and enjoyment by people."

In 1980, a neighborhood and city effort began to transform the park through an innovative private management and financing program. Daniel Biederman and Andrew Heiskell, chairman of the board of the public library, formed BPRC, which was charged with

developing a plan for the park. Biederman began experimenting with a series of efforts to bring people back into the park, including refreshment kiosks and book stalls, while also exploring how to generate revenue.

The new Bryant Park reflects standards set by the great parks of Paris. Underlying the perceived order of Parisian parks is an undeniable sense of comfort and safety, also evident in Bryant Park. The park's most prominent feature is the great lawn, which takes up 18 percent of the total six acres.

Another important element of the restoration, and one that gets much attention, was the introduction of the movable chairs recommended by Whyte. Few of the park's European café chairs have been lost to theft.

Safety and security issues were a critical element of planning. BPRC has two or three security officers on patrol during park operating hours and two after hours. To open up the park and increase the sense of safety, the designer removed the shrubbery around the fence and added four new entrances. At its summer peak, Bryant Park has some 55 employees working in security, sanitation, gardening, and special events. All park employ-



The new Bryant Park has become a popular lunch spot. Dining options range from brown-bagging on the well-used (and rarely stolen) movable chairs to small kiosks, an open-air café, and a full-service restaurant.



GRAND CENTRAL PARTNERSHIP

Bryant Park's most prominent feature is its great lawn, beneath which are housed 84 miles of New York Public Library shelves.

ees work for BPRC or the Bryant Park Management Corporation.

Bryant Park's restrooms are a welcome anomaly in a city with few clean, safe, public toilets. A 1911 landmark structure, located at the 42nd Street park entrance, was refurbished to serve both men and women, at a cost of about \$160,000. Bryant Park's restrooms are open whenever the park is, with some clearly posted rules of conduct. (For example, no bathing is allowed.) Both restrooms are attended and cleaned every few minutes and contain fresh flowers and baby changing stations; the women's room has full-length mirrors.

The restrooms are not the only areas with strict rules about use. Throughout the park, clearly posted rules prohibit alcohol and drugs; dogs on the lawn; pigeon feeding; panhandling; organized ball games; and loud, amplified music.

Since Bryant Park reopened in 1992, media coverage has been relentlessly positive. One early event that drew crowds was Bryant Park's successful bid to lure the fashion industry. In 1993 and 1994, the Council of Fashion Designers of America erected enormous white tents in the park twice each year for runway shows. Success has brought many other activities to the park, including regular musical events and Monday night movies, which are projected onto a 20-by-40-foot screen.

The Bryant Park Grill opened in May 1995, after 15 years of effort. When the original restaurateur pulled out, BPRC got a \$4.2 million loan to build the restaurant on its own



and paid \$750,000 for tenant improvements. Bryant Park Grill recorded an \$8.6 million gross in its first operating year. The Bryant Park Café opened later in 1995 on the deck next to the library and quickly became a popular afterwork spot among young professionals. Simon Sips, Inc., a gourmet coffee stand, the first kiosk concessionaire in the park, was followed by other kiosks selling sandwiches and salads. Restaurateur Michael Weinstein eventually took over all of the park's concessions, including its first restaurant.

BPRC raised \$9.5 million to pay for park renovations and \$7 million to build restaurants and other concessions through the city, private donations, and a bank loan. Park rentals and fees and a BID assessment of about \$0.14 per square foot (\$0.16 per square

foot in fiscal year 1998) on commercial property owners provide three-quarters of annual operating expenses. (The remainder comes from the city, which turns over to BPRC \$250,000 annually for park maintenance.) Rent paid by the two restaurants is being used to amortize the debt.

The success of the park feeds the success of the neighborhood. Seven million square feet of office and retail space border Bryant Park. Two years after the newly refurbished park opened, leasing activity on Sixth Avenue increased 60 percent in the first eight months of 1994 compared with 1993. Leasing agents have reported that the park, which used to be a deterrent to leasing space, is now a marketing tool; some brokers even refer to the park as a "deal clincher."

Today, Bryant Park is an anchor for a larger effort to revitalize midtown Manhattan and a model for park management and restoration around the world. Its success and beauty are of great interest at a time when safety issues are uppermost on people's minds.

This solution was adapted from a case study in Urban Parks and Open Space, recently published by ULI in cooperation with the Trust for Public Land. (To order, call ULI Publications Orders at 800-321-5011 and ask for catalog number U10.)



Visit Bryant Park with the "BIDs: Bryant Park/Grand Central Partnership" mobile workshop on November 5 at ULI's fall meeting.



Ten Easy Lessons on Urban Redevelopment

Editor's Note: For 17 years, Daniel A. Biederman has been working to turn around commercial districts in midtown Manhattan at the invitation of major property owners and three New York City mayors. His experiences as head of three highly successful Manhattan BIDs offer plenty of lessons for those interested in replicating his successes.

Private property owners and their tenants have been the real heroes of our efforts in midtown Manhattan. They have spent hundreds of hours working with us and have generously supported our programs to reclaim these districts, so that today we run a \$20 million "business" devoted to improving the quality of life for midtown's office workers, shoppers, tourists, and residents.

By any standards, we have been very successful. Bryant Park, our first project and showpiece, has been transformed from a park with 150 robberies a year (and an occasional murder), ugly drug markets, and graffiti to a world-renowned park with beautiful gardens, exciting entertain-

ment, attractive and successful concessions, and total crime of only four felonies in the last four years. Drugs in Bryant Park are just a bad memory. (See "Bringing Back Bryant Park" on page 112.)

Grand Central Partnership, our largest effort to date, is the most ambitious BID in the United States, setting an example for others in the comprehensiveness of its programs, the sophistication of its financing techniques, and its attention to minute details. Crime is down more than 70 percent in the Grand Central area, street litter is nonexistent, more than 800 homeless people who used to occupy the streets and Grand Central Terminal are now in permanent or temporary housing, and a beautiful new streetscape greets office workers on their way into and out of their buildings.

Our latest effort, 34th Street Partnership, has succeeded—in just five years—in cutting crime more than 50 percent, eliminating what used to be ankle-deep piles of litter on every corner, removing all traces of graffiti from the area, and lighting up the streets so that visitors to Madison Square Garden, the Empire State Building, Macy's Herald Square, and Pennsylvania Station no longer feel intimidated. We now are embarking on a smaller redo of our success with Bryant Park, fixing up the legendary Herald and Greeley Square parks.

Every week, I am asked by representatives of other neighborhoods, cities, and nations how to replicate this success. I have boiled down most of what I have learned in this business into the

following ten easy lessons for reviving commercial neighborhoods:

- 1. Top-quality people are what is most important.** Private consulting firms and Silicon Valley companies take this for granted, but sometimes the public organizations that run neighborhoods don't seem to get it. The workers who police, clean, and rebuild the capital plants of commercial districts must be chosen strictly on merit. They must be led by someone with vision and allowed to make mistakes in pursuit of top quality. When managers and staff members clearly cannot get the job done, they must be replaced by those who can. And a sizable portion of the organization's work week must be consumed in teaching all employees how to better serve their clients.
- 2. Choose great models to emulate.** Most of the great ideas and accomplishments in our projects were copied from other places, many of them far from midtown Manhattan. Much of our work is not invention but synthesis of the best ideas of others. In place making, some groups we've admired are the Rouse Company, the Walt Disney Company, Rockefeller Center, the city of Paris, and even the U.S. National Park Service. One could also learn a lot by wandering around Union Station in Washington, D.C., any city or town run by a top city manager, or many of America's small towns.
- 3. High standards are essential.** Although it is often a disagreeable role, leaders of any renovation effort must be absolutely insatiable in their quest for the best possible performance from all of their people. In the security area, for example, we

aim for *no* crime. We learned early on in our quest to fix Bryant Park that Rockefeller Center had less than one armed robbery a year, and we decided that we'd get there, too! Zero tolerance of graffiti also turned out to be an achievable goal, as did the placement (against all conventional wisdom) of beautiful trees, flowers, and vines throughout the formerly gray pavement of midtown.

4. Begin with the basics. It has become a bit of a downtown management cliché, but "clean and safe" are two standards that must be achieved before people feel comfortable in an area. Once these are achieved, other existing problems seem to become more glaring: the absence of vegetation, the functioning of urban amenities like taxis (we put in taxi stands), the ugliness of many public and private signs. Once you have achieved clean and safe, you have the credibility and support to attack dozens of other smaller problems.

5. Learn to look at a street differently. I once sat in a car on K Street in Washington, D.C., with a famous marketing executive and asked if he'd like to hear the 50 things I could see wrong with the street from where we sat. After 17 years of obsessing about these details, it wasn't hard to name them. The executive told me that he'd "never look at a street in the same way again."

I've learned to look at streets differently from dozens of mentors: William H. Whyte, Jr., Ben Thompson, Ed Bacon, Peter Malkin, Hugh Hardy, Laurie Olin, Fred Papert, Frank Stanton, and many of the property owners, asset managers, and building managers who have supported our ef-

forts over the years. Any effort to fix up a deteriorated commercial district needs people with trained eyes to lead it.

6. Avoid peripheral issues. Many cities and developers have come to me for help, only to describe an apparently insurmountable, unrelated problem that they believe will make progress very difficult. The problems cited almost always seem to me to be completely beside the point: racial politics, conflicts between residential neighborhoods and commercial/retail areas for city funds, loyalties to longstanding but unsuccessful civic organizations, and many more. To succeed, you simply must ignore these kinds of distractions, pressing forward with tunnel vision toward your objective. It is not always a recipe for popularity in the public forum, but it works!

7. Avoid political views of the world. Politics is the art of the possible, and compromise is admired and valued. But compromising your vision of a great commercial district is almost fatal to the success of your effort. In turning around Bryant Park, we said "no" to countless groups that wanted to chip away at the pristine nature of our vision. Many of those who originally demanded that we compromise now enjoy, admire, and award the final results. But without the backing of people like the Rockefeller brothers and the New York Public Library, we might not have been able to keep our vision intact.

8. Think of your district as the center of the world. Once your district is on its way to a turnaround, arguing its centrality helps in marketing

the results to outsiders. Almost every city or commercial district had an original reason for being, and efforts like ours often rediscover that reason. Urban redevelopment is not a game for the modest.

9. Create multiple revenue sources to finance capital and operating needs. Bryant Park, in particular, has benefited from the diversity of its seven revenue sources, allowing us to avoid service reductions and surprise the public with continual improvements in park services. Arranging dedicated revenue streams that survive the coming and going of city administrations is crucial. While I sometimes question whether the BID movement is the right long-term vehicle for urban rehabilitation, I'm quite interested in the future of dedicated, segregated revenue sources of other kinds.

10. Have patience! Having worked for more than five frustrating years on a single project, one day on the subway I met one of New York's sawiest environmental lawyers. I poured out my frustration to him, questioning whether the project would ever be successful. I often tell my staff members what he told me that day. The public forum, he said, is ultimately a rational place. Any sensible proposal to create a public good, backed by intelligent and reasonably powerful people of good will, will ultimately be accepted. He was right.

Your project *will* succeed.—**Daniel A. Biederman** is an urban redevelopment expert whose projects include midtown Manhattan's Bryant Park, Grand Central Partnership, and 34th Street Partnership.