

# The New York Times

October 15, 1995

## Urban Arcadia

By MITCHELL OWENS

MURDERS, PROSTITUTES, vagrants and portents of doom. That was Bryant Park just 10 years ago. Today, thanks to an \$8.9 million renovation completed in 1992, it seems almost impossible to believe that this Arcadian oasis was a drug den reviled throughout the 1970's and early 80's as "Needle Park." On a fine day, it is filled with office workers, shoppers and other visitors, with some reclining on a carefully tended lawn, others unwinding on dark green slatted folding chairs, and still others strolling along neat gravel paths in the dappled shade of more than 200 majestic plane trees.

Bryant Park is the crown jewel of Manhattan's alfresco preserves: trim, fresh-faced, astonishingly clean -- this is New York City, remember? Of course, the millions donated by public and private angels helped. So do the chic, bustling restaurants and kiosks at either end of the park and the surrounding office buildings, which generate most of the \$1.8 million needed annually for the park's upkeep. (Over \$300,000 comes from the concessions and special events; \$950,000 comes from tax assessments on the buildings.)

Once derelict, now divine, this six-acre plot behind the grandly Edwardian New York Public Library at 42d Street is eloquent proof that in the city that never sleeps, pockets of Seurat-style serenity can survive, even flourish. An estimated 10,000 visitors a day can't be wrong.

Though no plans of the park's initial incarnation in 1846 have survived, by the turn of the century it had become an Olmstedian ramble. Aimless paths meandered through pastoral clumps of red cedars, Norway maples and bronze ash trees. Here and there stood carved stone drinking fountains by Jacob Wrey Mould, the designer of Central Park's Bethesda Fountain. Its casual, small-town charm was right out of "The Music Man," hardly the stuff of which great metropolitan parks are made.

In 1934, however, it stepped Robert Moses. A Parks Commissioner who dreamed of filing down the rough edges of the city as efficiently as Baron Haussmann did in 1860's Paris, Moses decreed that Bryant Park be given a black-tie makeover, with neo-classical symmetry replacing the more casual Victorian original. Basing the alterations on the work of the now dimly remembered Lusby Simpson, who won a 1933 Bryant Park design competition, Moses and his chief landscape architect, Gilmore Clarke, installed a Beaux Arts scheme reminiscent of the formal public gardens of Paris. At the center was a football-field-size

lawn wrapped by a stone balustrade and flanked by slide-rule-perfect walks and double rows of London plane trees. Streamlined but still noble, the new park was as much a complement to the grandeur of the library as to the Parks Commissioner's imperial ambitions.

Unfortunately, God was not in the details.

What Moses and Clarke promised was a midtown oasis; what they delivered was a magnet for vice. In their zeal to insulate the park from the hurly-burly of nearby Times Square, they raised the historic sward two to five feet above street level. Steep steps removed it further from the fabric of the city. And though hedges and trees muffled 42d Street's vehicular din, the new quietude proved most attractive to miscreants. Visitors fled as muggers and drug dealers homesteaded the film-noir shadows.

"Once you were inside, you were basically trapped," said Lynden B. Miller, the public-garden designer whose successful revamping of the Conservatory Garden in Central Park brought her to the attention of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation in the mid-80's. Founded by the former chairman of the New York Public Library, Andrew Heiskell, the Parks Department, Mayor Edward S. Koch and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (which was restoring the library and wanted the adjacent park improved as well), the Restoration Corporation undertook a five-year renovation project and hired Miller and the landscape architects Hanna/Olin Ltd. to head it.

It was not a restoration they led, however, but a rehabilitation, a long-overdue architectural fine-tuning that critics have admiringly compared with the beloved Tuileries of Paris. "Moses made so many mistakes here," Miller said. "It was up to us to reverse them -- not to change the park but to make it better."

The theory was simple: that good design, well considered and properly maintained, can effect social change. Following the teachings of the guru of urban revitalization, William H. Whyte, author of "City: Rediscovering the Center" (Doubleday), the team began the task of turning Bryant Park's negatives into positives.

What the standoffish park needed was spatial generosity, the doors of its privacy flung open to welcome the public, to enable it once again to become a part of its neighborhood.

First, the high walls were lowered. Then the hedges vanished. Entrances to the park were added and the original ones widened. Gentle wheelchair ramps were incorporated. Additional lamps were cast to match the original fixtures, and, for safety, after dark the grounds were bathed in artificial moonlight from floodlights mounted on an office building.

(Work was halted temporarily to excavate the lawn in order to create space underground for library stacks.)

To free up sightlines and encourage more pedestrian traffic, openings were punched through the central lawn's balustrade. These openings also discourage the "keep off the grass" mentality: the lawn is forever home to sunbathers, picnickers and frolicking children. "That's where all my friends say the resemblance to a French park ends," Miller said with a laugh. "In France, you'd never be allowed near the grass."

One French tradition translated well in the renovation, however. Instead of furnishing the park with only stationary benches, more than 2,000 wood-and-metal folding chairs were brought in for seating. On one recent weekday, a cadre of businessmen was spotted pulling a dozen chairs into order for an early-morning breakfast conference. The next afternoon, six were commandeered by a group of young mothers leading their toddlers through a game of musical chairs. "I think if you offer people the opportunity to be responsible, they will be," Miller said. Cynics, take note: To date, only 50 or so chairs have been stolen.

The plantings are refreshingly humane, too. Instead of the typical low-maintenance, low-creativity civic landscaping -- geometric beds of coleus, begonia and other massed annuals - - Miller installed two of the largest perennial borders in the United States. Three hundred feet long and 12 feet deep, each is loaded with a cottage-style array of flowering plants and shrubs that not only thrive amid the skyscrapers and punishing heat but also provide visual interest through the seasons, even in winter: hosta, Japanese holly, spirea, oak-leaf hydrangea, astilbe, anemone, hellebore, hollyhock, phlox, Siberian iris and a variety of grasses.

Aerial enjoyment wasn't overlooked either. In spring, office workers in the surrounding skyscrapers gaze down onto more than 20,000 tulips and daffodils that burst from vast square beds of English ivy, a view that Miller compared to a patchwork quilt. "You want them to come down out of those towers and enjoy the day," Miller said. "The renovation of Bryant Park was all about enticing people back here, and then, once they made it, giving them a reason to stay."

Photos: A newly redesigned Bryant Park in 1935, based on a Beaux Artsscheme envisioned by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, resembled the formal public gardens of Paris. (pg. 22) (PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIMES WIDE WORLD PHOTOS); Bryant Park today welcomes visitors to its luxuriant greensward, busy kiosks and restaurants and tree-lined gravel paths. (pg. 24) (PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW BORDWIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)