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More New York City Parks Become Retailers

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Bryant Park, in Midtown Manhattan, offers shopping opportunities this time of year. Credit Michael Nagle for The New York Times

It did not take a degree in merchandising for Melina Shannon-DiPietro, an executive of Friends of the High Line, to realize that there was a retail opportunity waiting to be tapped at the elevated-railway-turned-park. "We had visitors asking the gardeners and custodians if they could buy the shirts off their back," Ms. Shannon-DiPietro said.

Taking a cue from the well-oiled machine of museum retailing, some high-profile parks in New York City have added a new activity to the traditional list of dog walking, bird-watching and jogging: shopping for parks-branded merchandise.

In person and online, the High Line now sells \$800,000 a year worth of tote bags, gardening tools and even High Line socks. Most of the park's 100 products were added this year.

"In 2009, we had six items online — things like logo T-shirts and baseball caps," Ms. Shannon-DiPietro said. "But the High Line is so much about design, and we have since responded to the desire for pieces from emerging designers and artists in New York."

This year, for the first time, the holiday market in Bryant Park includes a booth for the Midtown park itself, where, on a recent weekday, shoppers could choose from a set of four bluestone Bryant Park coasters etched with leaves (\$38); a 1,000-piece puzzle showing an aerial view of a square dance in the park (\$28); and a silk necktie imprinted with the signature bistro chairs that dot the park's lawn in summer (\$78). The actual chairs are also available, for \$125 each, on the park's website.

Daniel A. Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Management Corporation, said that for now the revenue from the retail enterprise was modest, especially compared with income the park receives from its business improvement district, park-based restaurants and corporate sponsorships.

But those sources also started out small, he noted, and have since grown to cover the annual operating budget of \$11.4 million for the park, which receives no government support. "We have 76 products, and this year we'll gross about \$40,000," Mr. Biederman said. "There's so much affection for Bryant Park that we'll figure out a way to push the goods out."

It probably is not surprising that parks have gotten into the retail game, as they increasingly look for sources of revenue outside the public sector; zoos and botanical gardens have been doing this for years. And with tourism in New York thriving, it seems that visitors want to take home a piece of the city's parks.

In the last fiscal year, the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit organization that manages the park on behalf of the city, sold \$750,000 worth of merchandise, up 10 percent over two years. Now available: park-themed snow globes (\$55); glass ornaments hand-painted with images of Bow Bridge, Bethesda Fountain and the bronze statue of the heroic dog Balto (\$20.99); and Obelisk bookmarks (\$10.99), along with the usual tote bags and ball caps.

The conservancy now has three permanent retail outlets in the park, at the Dairy Visitor Center, Belvedere Castle and the Charles A. Dana Discovery Center. For the first time this year, it also has a booth at the Columbus Circle holiday market.

Still, the retail sales do not represent a major revenue stream for the conservancy, which has achieved extraordinary success in private fund-raising.

"When you consider staff salaries and facility costs, we really don't profit all that much," said Elizabeth Kaledin, a spokeswoman for the conservancy. "Our retail arm is all about elevating the visitor experience and raising awareness about the Central Park Conservancy's work and 'brand.'"

The city's parks department sells its own branded merchandise from within its headquarters — the Arsenal Building in Central Park, at Fifth Avenue and 64th Street. Until a few years ago, most of the merchandise appealed mainly to staff members who worked for the department.

Christine T. Dabrow, the department's director of marketing, said, however, that the store's inventory had recently expanded to include 24 items, including choices likely to appeal more to tourists, like hot-pink baseball caps featuring the agency's leaf logo (\$10); a World's Fair tote bag (\$5); and a "selfie stick" (\$15) — a mini-tripod for that ubiquitous park activity.

"We've created products that have a much broader appeal," Ms. Dabrow said. "I feel that owning parks merchandise creates a fuzzy, warm feeling towards us, and maybe then people will think in terms of supporting us in other ways."

Most parks — even big ones with well-established conservancies — do not bother with merchandising. The Prospect Park Alliance in Brooklyn, for example, said that creating a sophisticated retail program would be time-consuming and costly, and that the return might not justify the expense. The alliance does let people buy trees and benches, but those stay in the park (with a plaque to commemorate the purchase). Neither Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx nor Flushing Meadows Park in Queens sells branded items.

But Battery Park, at the foot of Manhattan, is venturing into merchandising this spring when its new SeaGlass Carousel, with 30 luminous fish figures, opens to the public. Gifts related to the park and the carousel will be sold at a new kiosk. "We want any item that we develop to really tell the story of the Battery," said Warrie Price, founder and president of the Battery Conservancy, which supports the park.

There is some fear that parks could overdo it, with sales kiosks as common as at theme parks. The High Line is operating a 32-square-foot shop in nearby Chelsea Market for the holiday season, where fans can load up on engineer caps, silk scarves designed by Diane von Furstenberg and train-track trivets. Opening a shop offsite was partly based on the cold weather, but Friends of the High Line was also conscious of not intruding too much on the park experience.

"We love the High Line as a space where people get to experience the city," said Ms. Shannon-DiPietro, the group's director of food and retail. "So we want to be judicious."