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Bryant Park's new lease on life

**Roy Strickland
James Sanders**

The introduction of small concession businesses, arts programming, and modest landscaping modifications has rescued midtown Manhattan's largest open space from crime and neglect

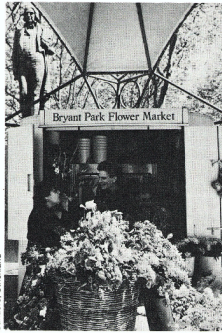
Four years ago, New York City's Bryant Park was in crisis. Here was a public space, surrounded by some of the nation's most distinguished corporations and institutions, that was poorly maintained and perceived as dangerous by a public intimidated by the drug sellers and indigents who dominated the space. The park's reputation was so poor that it was considered safe territory by street criminals, who would hide there from the police.

Today, Bryant Park's book market draws visitors who peruse titles beside an elegant fountain. A flower market serves the executives and staffs of nearby office buildings. The park's landscape has been refreshed, and maintenance has been improved. Crime, according to the police, is down 75 percent. And New Yorkers and tourists, who just three summers ago were wary of walking past the park, are flocking there in droves.

Background

Bryant Park had been in slow decline since the 1950s. The seediness of nearby Times Square was spreading along 42nd Street, the park's northern border. At the park's eastern edge, the Fifth Avenue shopping district witnessed the closing of department store after department store. Stern's, a mainstay of middle-class retailing located directly opposite the park, shut down and was replaced by an office building.

Manhattan's wealthy population continued to move north; 42nd Street, once the very center of the



A flower market, book market, and outdoor cafes have lured new visitors to Bryant.

city, was being left behind. Drug sellers moved into Bryant Park. Unemployed young people took over the benches. Indigents, suffering government cutbacks in social services, made the park their home.

In 1979, the Parks Council, a nonprofit New York civic group with a fifty-year history of advocating park building and improvements, launched a Bryant Park project. Barbara Fife, the Parks Council's president, and Jeannette Bamford, its executive director, believed that a series of small-scale improvements, quickly implemented, would help arrest the park's decay. By introducing new activities to the space, they hoped they could encourage New Yorkers to return to the park in sufficient numbers to balance illegitimate activities and perhaps even inhibit them.

The Parks Council thus considered its task more of a programmatic challenge than an architect-

The Magazine of Livability
Published by
Partners for Livable Places

Volume 3 Number 7

July-August 1983

\$3.00

PLACE

tural or physical one: the park, an officially designated New York scenic landmark, was still handsome, and major renovations seemed unnecessary.

The Bryant Park project's constraints were considerable: all new activities had to be appropriate to a public park; no activities could damage the park's delicate ecological balance; no improvements could compromise the park's landmark designation; and no public funds could be used, although the Parks Department, Police Department, and Office of the Mayor were to be integral parts of the planning.

Learning from the drug sellers

The Parks Council retained the authors in November 1979 to direct and implement the project. Frequent visits to the park were the first step in developing the project's program. During these visits, it was observed that drug dealing was concentrated along the 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue sides of the park. By standing at the park's entrances and steps, the sellers could hawk their

wares, escort prospective buyers into the park, and make deals.

Most drug buyers appeared to be middle-class people indistinguishable from those who were afraid to enter the park. Secretaries, office boys, and middle-management executives all bought drugs in the park. They did not seem to mind the park's derelict condition; they may very well have appreciated it: a park empty of legitimate uses allowed them to purchase their drugs with little chance of being observed by their fellow office-workers or employers.

Like good merchants, the drug sellers believed in making their customers comfortable: to make the park a selling floor, they verbally harassed people who came to use the park legitimately. To claim their turf, intimidating young men formed gauntlets at each entrance.

The Bryant Park planners decided to challenge the drug dealers' dominance by pre-empting their turf. Wherever a center for drug selling was located, a new activity was planned: at the Lowell Fountain

Plaza, a book market; at the corner of 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue, a flower market; and along the rows of trees paralleling 42nd Street, a reduced-price tickets booth and a cafe. By adding these new activities at conspicuous locations, the project planners hoped to attract legitimate users who had felt excluded from the park for years.

Giving the park a new image

Once the project's programmatic elements were determined, it became apparent that the park needed more than a series of new activities. Much of Bryant Park's problem was perceptual: the public perceived the space as more dangerous than it was, and this perception was reinforced by the maze-like design of the park's hedges, trees, and stone walls, which isolated the park from view. The park had been designed in the 1930s as an oasis, and it had been elevated a few feet above the sidewalk to separate it from 42nd Street's activities. As a result, it was difficult to see into the park, a condition that helped drug sales and frightened pedestrians who were wary of entering a space they could not survey. A conspicuous symbol of the project—an advertisement—was needed to reassure pedestrians that there was now a benign presence in the park.

This need was solved architecturally by designing a series of tubular-steel-and-canvas pavilions, whose style reflected the classical landscape of the park, as shelters for the planned book market, cafe, tickets booth, and flower market. These pavilions would visually link the new activities, make them appear part of a coordinated plan, and bespeak an old-fashioned concern for the park's quality. After having witnessed years of declining maintenance, the public would have to be charmed into returning to Bryant Park.

Funding and implementation

All these elements of the project were made a part of a master plan that proved to be essential to its

PLACE, the magazine of livability (ISSN 0278-274X), is published monthly by Partners for Livable Places, 1429 21st Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 887-5930; Robert H. McNulty, president. Subscriptions are \$24 a year; single copies are \$3. Third-class postage is paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to PLACE, Partners for Livable Places, 1429 21st Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036. Copyright © 1983 by Partners for Livable Places.

Editor: Duke Johns
Contributing News Editor: Peter McCall
Subscription Manager: Mary Young
Publisher: Dorothy Webb

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Partners for Livable Places and its programs are supported in part by grants and contracts from the Atlantic Richfield Foundation; Bankers Trust Company; Clorox Company; Conoco, CSX Corporation, Design Development Resources; William H. Donner Foundation, Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, Exxon Company, U.S.A., Wallace Alexander Gerberde Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States, H. J. Heinz II Charitable and Family Trust, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, J. M. Kaplan Fund, Henry Luce Foundation, Lynchburg Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, Monsarato Fund, Mott Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Edward John Noble Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, San Francisco Foundation, L. J. and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Theatre Projects Consultants, Westinghouse Electric Fund, and additional private contributors.



The park's pavilions, designed as temporary structures, visually link the new activities they house.

success. The budget for the Bryant Park Project ultimately approached \$450,000, a modest sum for the return of a major park to the enjoyment of the public, but a rather substantial one for any single donor or concessionaire. Because the plan was developed out of small-scale improvements, funding increments proved within the reach of the foundations that underwent improvements for the city's public spaces and of the concessionaires who would operate the park's markets. For example, a \$15,000 contribution from the Greenacre Foundation restored the Lowell Fountain; a \$50,000 donation from the J. M. Kaplan Fund was applied to the cost of three pavilions and the performance series; \$20,000 from the Bryant Park Flower Show—an organization that had long held yearly flower shows in the park—supported the planting of 20,000 seasonal flowers; and \$7,500 enabled a

retailer to purchase a stall at the book market. (Two of Bryant Park's book retailers would eventually buy two stalls each, at individual investments of \$15,000.)

During presentations to donors and concessionaires, the master plan demonstrated that comparatively modest donations could accumulate toward a large effect and that no activity or improvement would be an isolated effort but rather one that would enjoy a considerably changed Bryant Park. And because the master plan consisted of numerous small parts, it was possible to stage the project over a four-year period as funding became available.

Adjustments and accommodations

In implementing a project as complex as Bryant Park's, it was inevitable that adjustments in the original plan would be necessary. The Parks Department required that the park's landscape be pre-

served and that any of the project's physical installations be considered temporary. Pavilions, market stalls, and cafe utility cores were therefore designed to be erected and removed with the least damage to the park's paving and planting areas. Bluestone pavers, removed to facilitate the pouring of small concrete foundations for the pavilions, were carefully stored away (the Parks Council having agreed to restore the bluestone should the pavilions ever be dismantled). Utility lines for the cafes followed the patterns of the park's Belgian blocks, which were immediately reset and repointed. Wherever possible, the pavilions were located on Belgian block and concrete surfaces that were less precious and attractive than bluestone.

Because the park was an official landmark that would require an extended approval process for permanent changes, the pavilions were designed to allow dismantling within

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a forty-eight-hour period, which permitted them to qualify as "temporary structures" that did not require public hearings. The tubular steel pieces were held together by pin joints that facilitated rapid erection and dismantling. The pavilions also were shaped and painted in consultation with the Landmarks Commission's staff to assure that they would complement the park's landscape and terraces.

Paralleling these adjustments were others arising from funding contingencies. An initial hesitancy by private concessionaires to become involved in Bryant Park resulted in the staging of the project over four years. Within six months of the plan's conception, one-half of the book market, a modest food service, hundreds of feet of flower beds, and a performance series were in place. The project's second year saw the expansion of the book market, the opening of the flower market, and the restoration of the fountain. As the project progressed, it became easier to find concessionaires, and at increasing levels of investment. During the fourth summer, a restaurateur was brought into Bryant Park to expand the food service. By then, the improvement of the park was so apparent that he invested \$85,000 in two new cafes—more than five times the amount of the park's original book sellers (who remained and prospered), and virtually without subsidy. At the start of the project, the concessionaires' capital costs were matched dollar-for-dollar by philanthropic donations; by the project's completion, Bryant Park's new activities were self-supporting.

Although the project was extensive, its composition of small-scale elements was clearly delineated from the beginning, and the concessionaires' participation was predicated as acceptance of this condition. The concessionaires had to adjust their retail practices to the seasonal nature of a park and to the strict supervision of the Parks Department. In return for their cooperation they enjoyed a minimal con-

cession fee, an increasingly pleasant shopping environment, and an immediate market of tens of thousands of midtown office workers and visitors.

The project's impact

When the project's new activities first appeared in Bryant Park, the atmosphere was, as expected, tense. As soon as the book market, cafe, and performance series were initiated, New Yorkers began to return to Bryant Park in substantial numbers, and the drug dealers grew alarmed. Brief confrontations occurred in which the sellers verbally harassed patrons, concessionaires, and performers; but once it was apparent that the new activities were there to stay, they resumed their business—and then gradually began to leave the park.

By placing new activities at the centers of drug selling, the project did in fact displace these illegitimate uses. Now many people were entering the park who were not buying marijuana or other drugs. Buyers became noticeably inhibited about buying drugs in well-populated places and began to move elsewhere for their purchases. Once the market moved, the dealers also moved.

The success of Bryant Park provides a set of lessons for similar efforts in downtown parks. Less construction, for instance, needs to be done to restore parks to positive use than is generally thought necessary. People are anxious to use urban parks and they need only perceive safety and activity to reenter parks.

It is balance among police surveillance, physical improvements, and new activities that makes public spaces seem safe and inviting. Among the strongest advocates of the Bryant Park project were the police, who recognized that their work alone could do little to improve the park.

In revitalizing an urban park, it is necessary to proceed with a master plan. The plan should be flexible enough to accommodate adjustments in programming, design, and

funding, yet strong enough to lend unity to improvements.

Coordination with municipal agencies is essential to the success of a privately initiated improvement project and should occur during all project steps.

Recapturing urban spaces from drug dealers, it is necessary to analyze the market for the sales. At Bryant Park, this market consisted of middle-class office workers who perceived the park as being outside the bounds of middle-class behavior. By bringing middle-class activities back to the park, the project inhibited buyers from making purchases within view of people like themselves engaged in legitimate use of the space.

On to Union Square

The lessons of Bryant Park will soon be applied to another park: thirty city-blocks away, Union Square, one of New York's most historic parks, will provide the context for Union Place, a new public space that will combine bookstalls, flower markets, a cafe, landscape improvements, and an outdoor performance stage on the site of a currently underused parking lot. The lot, adjacent to the square, is the site of a twice-weekly farmers market that will provide a focus for the new project. By reinforcing the strength of this activity, the project's community-based sponsor group hopes to reclaim the park from social problems similar to the ones that once afflicted Bryant Park.

Together, the Bryant Park project and Union Place will provide prototypes for the reclamation of urban parks. Pragmatic, effective, economical, and pleasurable, they are demonstrating that public-private restoration of a public environment can enhance a city's quality of life. ●

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