

# Islands in the Stream of Traffic Provide an Escape

By BARBARA STEWART

Not long ago, the two concrete traffic islands in Midtown, near Macy's, were symbols of a blighted New York. Grandly named Herald Square and Greeley Square, they were cracked slabs set in the midst of cacophonous traffic. There were scraggly bushes along the edges and some benches, where homeless people dozed and drug dealers rested between sales.

Today, the little triangles — shaped like a bow tie, between 32nd and 34th Streets at Broadway and Sixth Avenue, one of the city's most congested intersections — are another world. At lunch time on a recent Friday, hundreds of people gathered to sit in the sun or in the shade of the honeylocust trees, reading, talking, drinking and eating. They set out their lunches on the small tables and had the unusual urban luxury of arranging the light wooden chairs however they wanted — alone, in big groups, or in twos for intimate conversations.

Though people on all sides were smoking, eating and drinking, there was no litter at all. The statues — Horace Greeley and the goddess Minerva, a clock and bell ringers — are polished. In a week or two, there will be two newsstands and cafe kiosks. In a couple of months, two rare and precious urban commodities are going to be added, one in each park — public bathrooms.

The traffic barrels by, like a waterfall. But the black iron fences and gates and the greenery along the perimeter — bushes, flowers and slender trees — create a buffer from the honking, sirens and exhaust fumes. Sounds and smells still penetrate, of course, but though the islands are right in the middle of the intersections, they feel like places apart.

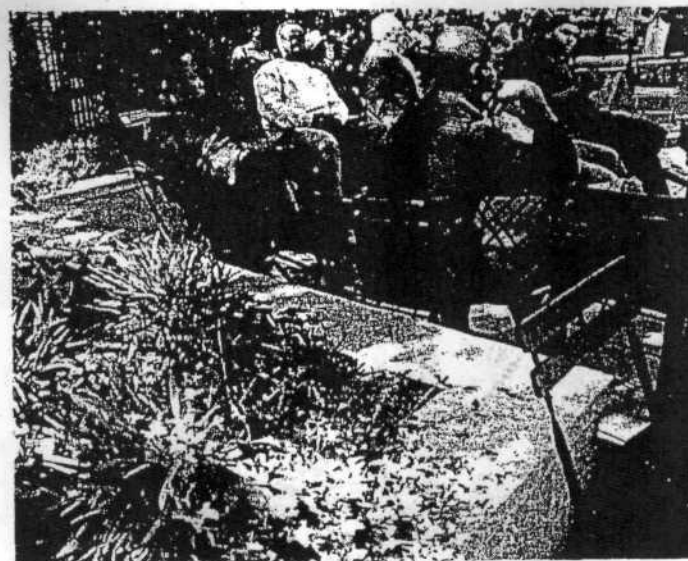
"Nice, to sit on a chair, be a little human," said John Marto of Jersey City, on a break from cleaning garbage chutes. "You can eat at a table; you don't have to pay."

The makeover of Greeley, 13,715 square feet, and Herald, 9,830 square feet, cost \$2.25 million. The cost of maintenance — gardening, cleaning and security — is \$250,000 a year.

Their renovation was planned and carried out, and is being paid for, by the 34th Street Partnership, a business improvement district. After years of negotiations between the district and the city, the two sides came to an agreement in 1996 that allows the district to manage the parks. The president of the 34th Street Partnership, Daniel A. Biederman, oversaw a similar renovation of Bryant Park, which was also run-down and crime-ridden and is now a



Photographs by Frances Roberts for The New York Times



thriving gathering spot.

The motivation for the cleanup at Herald and Greeley is obvious. When traffic is at its peak, 11,000 people walk past 34th Street and Broadway every hour. To the numerous neighborhood merchants selling Nathan's hot dogs, Kmart jeans and Macy's mink stoles, all are potential customers.

Long a successful shopping hub, the area declined during the 70's and

80's. In the 90's, the neighborhood's fortunes turned, with Macy's investment in a \$100 million face lift and the opening of the Manhattan Mall, with more than 100 shops and boutiques. Greeley and Herald, pleasant and safe, give shoppers a place to rest before plunging back into the retail crowds, and employees a shady, breezy spot for lunch breaks. They also contribute to the new and more expensive images that merchants

Visitors to Herald Square, above, and Greeley Square, left, can sit in islands of greenery and comparative quiet just off one of New York's busiest intersections.

are cultivating.

Mr. Biederman said he applied the lessons of Bryant Park to Herald and Greeley. The movable chairs are crucial, he said. They allow people to choose where they want to sit. So far, none have been stolen, he added. The uniformed security guards are important, too. Without guards and the feeling of safety they bring, women would tend to avoid the parks, he said. Studies show that parks that women avoid quickly become messy and chaotic and are more likely to have crime.

Steve Seldinger, a security guard, explained the rules: "No sitting on the wall. No radios, no music. No feet on chairs or the wall."

There did not seem to be any rebels among the many visitors on a recent Friday. People seemed grateful for the order and serenity.

"There used to be drugs and homeless people," said Bob Nalbene, a manager for a health maintenance organization. "But now, with these plantings and chairs, it's very inviting. People are taking care of it. It's a place you want to come."