

NYC parks expert offers a proven growth plan

By Robert Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

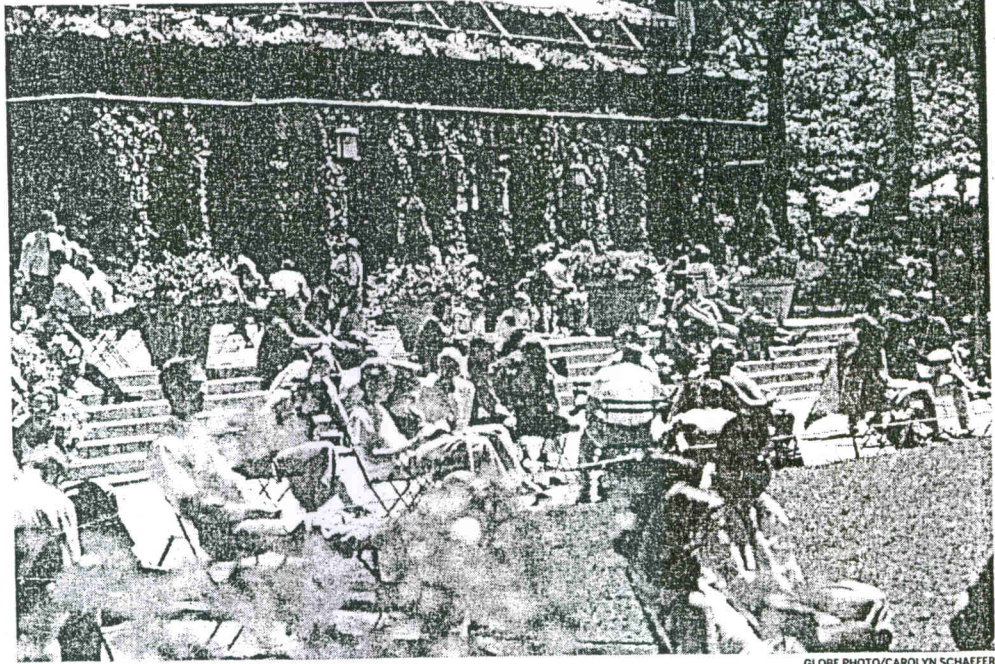
Dan Biederman's job is to make parks work. He's a private businessman who manages three parks in Manhattan under contract with the city. One of them is Bryant Park, the patch of green that sits behind the New York Public Library. I can remember 25 years ago when Bryant Park was a nightmare, almost empty except for the drug dealers who stood along the paths like leafless trees. Once I saw rat-catchers, guys who beat the undergrowth to drive rats into big nets. If Bryant Park was fixable, surely no park is hopeless. And today Bryant Park is a gem, full of life, music, flowers, food, and, most important, people.

Biederman spoke here a couple of weeks ago. The setting was a Harvard symposium on the subject of what to do with the new land that will be created in downtown Boston when the Central Artery disappears, after the Big Dig. Biederman's comments, though, apply to all parks. He's got 10 rules for how you make a good park. We'll get to those in a minute. I was struck by something else he said. He talked about how hard it's been for him to attract enough people to Bryant Park to make it feel safe and cheerful. Mind you, Bryant is a small, 7-acre park in the middle of one of the most densely peopled places in the world. (Just for comparison, the Boston Public Garden is 24 acres.)

He talked about the need for parks and plazas to be the right size for their use. Boston's City Hall Plaza, he said, isn't merely too big; it's too big for its purpose. He noted that the small Piazza San Marco in Venice, in a city flooded with tourists, is nevertheless "barely filled with activity." As Jane Jacobs pointed out long ago, small, lively urban spaces are usually better than big empty ones.

Anyway, here are Biederman's 10 rules, which I've put in my own words:

- Make the park visible, easy to see into, and easy to walk into. You should be able to preview what you're entering, without visual barriers. Ideally there should be no changes of level — no sunken or raised areas — but if there are, the steps should be wide and gently sloped.



GLOBE PHOTO/CAROLYN SCHAEFER

People now flock to New York City's Bryant Park, which was once a blighted green space.

- Pick up the litter. Litter, including graffiti, is a visual cue to disorder. Biederman laments, though, that he's enforced this rule so strongly that he now has trouble getting his litter-pickers to quit picking up leaves.

- Provide visible security. Bryant Park has unarmed, uniformed security guards who stop people from playing loud radios, feeding pigeons, spitting, smoking pot, and so forth. It's the "broken windows" concept, pioneered by police commissioner William J. Bratton in New York: Stop the little crimes, and the big ones will take care of themselves.

- Light it up. The park must be visible at night, even if it's closed then, or people will think of it as dangerous. And the light must be white: no blue mercury or yellow sodium lamps.

- Provide lots of plants and flowers. Women especially, Biederman believes, respond to flowers in a park.

- Provide movable chairs. The late William Whyte, in his filmed studies of how people use plazas and parks, was the first to notice that movable chairs are much preferred over fixed benches. Bryant Park uses light metal "Parisian park chairs." You can easily move your chair into the sun or the shade, depending on the weather. Or you can pull several chairs into

a social grouping. Biederman showed a slide of the park when it was empty, at the end of a day, in which the arrangement of chairs formed a record of the conversations that had taken place.

- Don't be shy of commerce. "Everybody's afraid someone is going to make a buck," notes Biederman. He suggests maybe 5 percent of the area be devoted to money-making uses. Bryant Park has an indoor/outdoor cafe, designed by noted architect Hugh Hardy, that becomes a major social mixer for young people in the evening. Biederman didn't say so, but he might have added that every great European plaza is edged with a rich mix of commercial and civic uses.

- Provide restrooms and keep them clean. "If you want women in the park, there must be no smell of urine," says Biederman, "and don't send a male to find out." The best indicator of a park's success, he thinks, is a high ratio of women to men.

- Provide programmed activities. In Bryant Park, Juilliard music students perform, outdoor HBO movies are shown, and there's even an occasional fashion show under a temporary tent.

- Think of the surroundings as part of the park. A park is interactive with everything around it. A good sidewalk newsstand, for in-

stance, will help the park and be helped by it.

If you get the park right, there's a payoff in more than urban delight. The restoration of Bryant Park, claims Biederman, has lifted rental rates in the adjacent buildings by \$5 per square foot. The park is entirely privately funded, through grants, business district assessments, and profits from the cafe and other commerce.

Biederman's prescriptions apply to a fairly conventional kind of park. Another speaker at the Harvard symposium showed a fantastic plaza in Rotterdam, where movable, 100-foot-tall computer-driven light fixtures, resembling construction cranes, can be operated by grown-ups and kids at a computer panel. "You can aim the light at your lover," we were told by the Dutch speaker — who, like Biederman, warned that "public spaces should not be too big."

The Rotterdam plaza was great, but that's the Netherlands, and this is the United States. In our country, public officials are frightened of even seeming to spend anybody's money on the public world. The Biederman model is a better one for us.

Robert Campbell's e-mail address is camglobe@aol.com.