

THE CINCINNATI POST



Saturday, June 14, 2003

An urban war zone only a decade ago, Manhattan's Bryant Park is an oasis attracting thousands of midday visitors. Could Cincinnati learn from its example?

Park a how-to for city

By **Barry M. Horstman**
Post staff reporter

NEW YORK — There was a time 10 years or so ago, urban consultant John Alschuler notes, when "you couldn't go in Bryant Park unarmed without taking your life in your hands."

At lunchtime Tuesday, though, when nearly 6,000 people flocked to the graceful park on a gloriously bright day in midtown Manhattan, the only dangers lurking seemed to be sunburn or not finding a place to sit.

The dramatic turnaround at the 161-year-old park built on a former potter's field, Alschuler and others believe, holds important lessons for Cincinnati as it ponders strategies for revitalizing Fountain Square as part of a comprehensive rejuvenation program for a downtown still slowly rebounding from

See **PARK** on 6A



On warm, sunny days, thousands of New Yorkers flock to Bryant Park, a green oasis some feel could serve as a model for revitalizing Fountain Square. Above, one of the park's older visitors manages to find a quiet spot to read.

BARRY HORSTMAN/The Post

Saturday, June 14, 2003

Park: Lessons could be applied to Square

From 1A

the lingering effects of the 2001 riots.

"If you're looking for a model, you couldn't do much better," said Aischuler, a consultant to Mayor Charlie Luken's Economic Development Task Force.

Not all Cincinnatians would agree - yet. Long accustomed to viewing New York as the poster child for nearly every conceivable big-city ill, many Cincinnatians, community leaders and average citizens alike, share the attitude that if the Big Apple is the answer to the Queen City's problems, then the cure perhaps is worse than the disease.

Bryant Park, however, may be a notable exception, because the clearest glimpse at Fountain Square's potential future may come, not from the various reports circulating Cincinnati City Hall and other local offices, but 600 miles to the northeast in a bustling park that has become one of the most inspiring urban success stories in America.

Any comparison between Bryant Park and Fountain Square must take into account obvious differences in scale. Eight-acre Bryant Park is considerably bigger than one block-wide Fountain Square, and within a few blocks has access to many times more people than the 85,000 workers found throughout all of downtown Cincinnati. Moreover, Fountain Square, last month's fatal-shooting notwithstanding, has never remotely approached Bryant Park's one-time serious crime level.

Even so, officials in both cities insist that many of the ideas that resurrected Bryant Park could pump much-needed life into the square that has long been Cincinnati's geographic and spiritual heart.

Named after poet and editor William Cullen Bryant, Bryant Park crackles with the kind of energy, vibrancy and activity only occasionally found at Fountain Square, despite the latter's common description as "the most successful urban plaza in America" - a quarter century-old citation from urban designers now valid more in a historical than contemporary sense.

Sunny days routinely draw crowds of 4,000 to 5,000 brown-noggers to Bryant Park for lunch and about 20,000 overall throughout the day - the kind of crowd that Fountain Square attracts on

such as Oktoberfest or the lighting of the city's Christmas tree.

Bryant Park's normal crowd is a diverse one, ranging from sharply attired businessmen and women to parents and grandparents watching children ride a carousel to players exuding a studied casualness as they take advantage of the bocce court, chess boards and backgammon tables. A rough headcount is made daily at 1:15 p.m. by two workers with hand tabulators, with Tuesday's total of nearly 5,900 - attributable in part to a break in the chilly, rainy weather that preceded it - being an all-time lunch-hour high.

Determined to make the park more than simply a place where a busy lunchtime crowd pauses for a half hour, Bryant Park's managers have crafted an attractive, constantly changing lineup of varied offerings and activities to make it a destination where people linger, succeeding in another area in which Fountain Square falls short.

Free yoga lessons and free wireless Internet access are lures, the latter persuading many who formerly rushed back to their offices to bring their laptops and stretch their lunch hour. After business hours, thousands throw blankets on the park's lush Great Lawn to enjoy "Broadway Under the Stars" and classic movies shown weekly at sunset during the spring and summer. The biggest crowds, approaching 15,000, are drawn by periodic free concerts by big-name acts such as Sting and the Barenaked Ladies, and the park also hosts the weekly concert series of ABC's "Good Morning America."

Perhaps most important, crime, once on the verge of consuming the park and forcing nearly all desirable visitors and activities from it, now is all but nonexistent. About two dozen homeless people live in the park, except for the overnight hours when it is closed, but they are so heavily outnumbered as to be neither a deterrent nor a threat to other visitors.

"You'll never hear anyone say they don't feel safe in Bryant Park," said Daniel Biederman, executive director of the Bryant Park Restoration Corp., the private non-profit group that manages the park. "Now there's a felony maybe every other year."

That is a happy, against-all-odds ending that once would have been dismissed as too implausible even for Broadway au-

thor nearby 42nd Street.

Situated near Times Square behind the New York Public Library, the site that would eventually become Bryant Park once saw Washington's troops race across it after being routed by the British in the Battle of Long Island in the Revolutionary War and later, during the Civil War, was used for Union Army drills.

That part of the park's colorful history seems especially appropriate, because by the late 1970s it had become an urban warzone, a haven for drug dealers and muggers avoided by savvy New Yorkers. Nearly 750 serious crimes occurred there annually, prompting many office workers and residents to walk a block out of their way to avoid even coming into contact with the park's perimeter on Sixth Avenue between 40th and 42nd streets, particularly after sundown.

Indeed, only five years after the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission described Bryant Park as "an urban amenity worthy of our civic pride," urban sociologist William Whyte offered a more sobering assessment in a 1979 report in which he concluded: "If you went out and hired the dope dealers, you couldn't get a more villainous crew to show you the urgency of the situation."

With that bleak prognosis serving as a call to arms, financing and prodding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund led to the establishment in the 1980s of the Bryant Park Restoration Corp., which launched a decade-long campaign to transform the park via a plan calling for private management and funding.

New York officials, only too happy to hand off a seemingly insoluble dilemma to the private sector, enthusiastically backed the idea, guided by then-Mayor Ed Koch's willingness to embrace one of the early examples of privatization of municipal services in America. The BPRC now oversees every facet of park operations, from security and litter removal to flower planting and lease negotiations with the park's tenants.

Nearly \$18 million, most of it private donations from adjacent property owners and others, eventually bankrolled the park's renovation. Today, the BPRC's \$4 million annual budget also comes from private sources, about \$750,000 of it from assessments on adjacent properties and the rest from lease payments

other major events held in the park annually.

Opposition, however, came from preservationists who, despite the fact that the park was well on its way to becoming a public space used only by those members of the public who were criminals, wanted it to remain untouched. Others disapproved of turning over a small percentage of a public park to private businesses such as the upscale Bryant Park Grill restaurant and ice cream, coffee and snack kiosks, while some perceived a conspiracy to convert the park into a quasi-backyard for the surrounding high-rises that overtime would force others out of it.

Once the "new" Bryant Park opened in 1992, though, the complaints evaporated. Literally overnight, crime dropped by 92 percent and the number of annual visitors doubled, patterns that have continued in the same direction for the past decade.

In "A Guide to Great American Public Places," Gianni Longo calls Bryant Park "one of the most sensual, graceful open spaces in New York City." Bryant Park, Aischuler adds, is "a new Central Park at the crossroads of the city" that, thanks to extensive media exposure at concerts and other high-profile events, has seen its distinctive 300-by-215-foot lawn, flanked on one side by the library's imposing facade, become an increasingly identifiable New York City landmark. When officials searched for an effective symbol for New York City's bid for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, a huge "NYC 2012" was mowed in Bryant Park's lawn to be photographed from above.

Despite Bryant Park's larger size, creative landscaping gives it a more intimate, relaxed and verdant atmosphere than the rather harsh environment created by Fountain Square's largely paved design - a concept that Aischuler, who favors a much greener Fountain Square, has consistently urged Cincinnati leaders to heed. From certain spots in the park, towering trees create a ceiling that blocks out the nearby high-rises, and even at the most exposed points, the trees soften the views of the surrounding concrete, steel and glass.

"It's a bit of a cliché to call it an oasis, I guess, but that's what it is," marketing consultant Robert Loeb said last week while enjoying an outdoor lunch with four colleagues. "One minute you're

boom!, you're in this little quiet green patch. You can almost forget you're in the city."

Perhaps no one is more pleased about Bryant Park's reversal of fortune than surrounding property owners, who have seen land values and leases soar over the past decade. At the Grace Building, a gently sloped high-rise that rarely topped 80 percent occupancy at prices averaging about \$35 per square foot in the early 1990s, now is fully leased at rates in the mid-to-high \$50s range, Biederman said.

An award citation from the Urban Land Institute underlines the impressive progress. "The success of the park," the ULI award said, "feeds the success of the neighborhood."

In trying to apply the lessons of Bryant Park to Cincinnati, Aischuler focuses on "three things they did right" in transferring the park's management to a private entity, redeveloping it with

revenue generated by the restaurant and other activities, and "policing it aggressively."

While addressing various Cincinnati audiences in recent months, Aischuler has consistently hammered away at all three points. A new group that consolidates the efforts of existing downtown organizations, he says, could streamline planning for Fountain Square and surrounding blocks of retail. A "glass café" would be a welcome addition to the square, he adds.

But none of that will matter, he emphasizes, unless downtown safety - in reality and perception - is no longer an issue. "If it's not safe, nothing else matters," Aischuler told one group last week at the Mercantile Library.

If nothing else, Bryant Park - where one day this week the only thing a security guard had to worry about was a tipped-over chair - proves his point.