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A downtown park really can make a difference

New York City oasis holds some good lessons for Dallas



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If I were looking for a quiet oasis in New York City, it wouldn't be on 42nd Street.

This is the core of the Big Apple. Traffic flows, horns honk incessantly, neon signs turn night into day, and tourists compete for locals for walking space on sidewalks.

But just steps from the Theater district is an eight-acre tract of land where a miracle seems to take place. The noise goes away, people slow down. Everything becomes softer.

Bryant Park is a wonderful gift New Yorkers and visitors alike. The park has been around since the 1850s. But its role never has

been more significant than it is today.

My visit to the park during a New York vacation last week was primarily for relaxation. But it also was to resolve for this doubting individual whether downtown green space really makes that much difference. It does.

Bryant Park often is cited as the type of park that downtown Dallas needs. The Inside the Loop Committee, appointed by Mayor Laura Miller to come up with ideas for revitalizing down-

town, surprised her with a proposal to build a park in the heart of the city.

This "big idea" would be an important economic development tool for downtown as well as a major amenity for the growing number of urban dwellers in the central city, committee members said.

Since the Inside the Loop Committee made its recommendation, the downtown park proposal has floated back and forth. City officials like the idea. But they don't particularly like the price.

Clearing a block of downtown property and developing a park large enough to have an impact will cost millions of dollars. With residents on the outskirts of Dallas saying they need more green space, too, the competition for funds will be keen.

But it is impossible to visit Bryant Park without understanding what the committee is talking about. The transformation that takes place when you step onto the long green lawn and watch children riding on an antique carousel and older people playing chess is amazing.

The century-old New York Public Library frames one side of the park. A scenic restaurant operates nearby. Old-style kiosks are located throughout the grounds along with statues of famous and not-so-famous individuals from the city's past.

Bryant Park was nearly lost to drug dealers in the 1970s and 1980s. A redesign of the park in the 1930s included an iron fence surrounding the property. That made it an easy place for pushers to do business. But a restoration project that was completed a de-

cade ago has given the park the look and feel it enjoys today. And a police presence ensures the safety of the grounds without making visitors feel unwelcome.

Development across the streets surrounding the park has been steady and impressive. Construction can be seen everywhere. The buildings are a far cry from what was there a couple of decades ago. There is a luxury hotel, top-rated restaurants and many stores.

The site under consideration for a downtown Dallas park tracks well with the design of Bryant Park. The property is located across the street from the old Dallas City Hall, which would provide a vista similar to that of the New York Public Library.

The challenge for Dallas will be to make the park large enough to have an impact. The Inside the

Loop Committee has suggested 10 acres. That may seem overly ambitious.

But the success of Bryant Park hasn't depended solely on tax money. The Bryant Park Restoration Corporation led a privately funded restoration and redesign of the park.

Dallas can achieve the same goal. There are individuals and foundations in this city that are capable of helping to finance an urban park downtown if the need for this project is properly explained.

The funds are there. What Dallas needs now is the vision and the determination.

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