



Minneapolis' new central library deserves better neighbors than the scruffy parking lots that skirt it on three sides. This view, from Lot C, looks north from 4th Street and Nicollet Mall toward Lots B and A. The city hopes for a park. MARLIN LEVISON • mlevison@startribune.com

# Wish it were here: a park like NYC's near library

← BERG FROM AA1

It was a potter's field through most of the 1800s and remade as a city park in the 1890s. It was redone again in the 1930s as a formal French garden and an "outdoor reading room" for the adjacent central library. By the 1970s, as New York slipped toward insolvency, the park fell into neglect and was overtaken by criminals, drug addicts and vagrants. A dramatic turnaround began in 1988 when the city approved plans from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and business leaders to form a nonprofit corporation to restore the park and take over its operation.

Director Biederman's primary aims were to entice crowds back into the park, forge a new public affection for it, and promote moneymaking attractions that would help sustain far higher standards of beauty, safety and cleanliness than the public sector could deliver.

He leaned on the work of William H. Whyte, the noted social observer who studied closely people's attractions — and rejections — of public spaces. Confidence was a main factor. People had to *see into* the park to judge its safety. The space would have to be drop-dead beautiful and meticulously maintained to show that someone actually cared. And there must be things for people to do. "The new standard was not excellence," said Biederman. "It was perfection."

An infusion of \$18 million in private money reopened the park in 1991. It has since become one of New York's most popular places, drawing as many as 20,000 visitors on a sunny day. Here's what people see: Two restaurants with outdoor seating that extend the library's "back porch" into the park; a shady outdoor reading room with mobile book cases; colorful flower beds; gravel paths; tall trees; a carousel; tables for chess; a pitch for petanque (think bocce ball); kiosks selling flowers, ice cream and sandwiches; a big grassy lawn for sunbathing and — most important — 2,000 green, movable chairs. Traditional park benches aren't designed for conversation and flexibility, Biederman noticed, but small chairs can be rearranged from sun to shade or in any pattern that people want.

Perhaps the park's most astounding feature is its public restrooms, recently remodeled with indirect cove lighting, gleaming mosaic tiles, cherry wood-framed mirrors and, of course, fresh flowers. The park also offers wireless Internet hookup and regular entertainment. (The Dixie Chicks, Beach Boys and Christina Aguilera performed this summer.) In winter there's a skating rink and a Christmas market.

Bryant Park's annual operating budget is \$5 million. So the place is immaculate. Scraps of paper barely touch the ground before they are snatched up. Weeds have no chance. Uniformed crews constantly prune, water, polish, tend and watch.

June Wharton, a security officer, showed a visitor around. "I love this park," he said, with the lilting accent of his native Trinidad and an obvious sense of pride. Wharton's job is to wear two faces — as a friendly helper and as a strict enforcer of park rules: no panhandling, littering or loitering; no sleeping; no feeding the pigeons; no open bottles; no spitting, loud cursing or harassing women. Yes, there are scam artists: a fake nun who claims to be raising money for kids, a chess hustler, and so on. There are a few homeless people, too. But once the ratio exceeds one homeless person for every 50 other visitors (the point at which visitors will avoid the park), Wharton and other officers find excuses to start evicting.

Those problems, however, are overwhelmed by the park's popularity with nearby office workers. "They get so relaxed that they leave their jackets, cell phones, purses, even laptops," said Wharton. "But we keep an eye out for that."

## Downtown trends

New downtown green spaces have become a trend in recent years. San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens

and Chicago's Millennium Park are major examples. Two factors drive the growing demand: more people moving downtown to escape suburban traffic, and more cities understanding the environmental need to lessen the runoff and atmospheric heat created by large stretches of urban pavement. What's most often missing is public money. Few cities can afford to buy and convert expensive downtown land, especially if it's not going to directly generate new tax revenue. Increasingly, cities are turning to private sources, among them the Trust for Public Land, which has a growing interest in the greening of urban property. Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle and Santa Fe, N.M., are currently pursuing park projects with the Trust's help.

"One thing that's exciting about downtown parks is that housing and offices provide people for the parks and the parks provide increased real estate value for the housing and the offices," said Peter Harnik, the Trust's director of City Park Excellence. The same amount of money can purchase and protect more acres of remote land, he said, but far fewer people benefit.

There's a particular irony to Minneapolis' hopes for a library park: As currently used, the block, or blocks, under study aren't doing much for the city; yet, as explained in the graphic on page AA1, converting one or more of them to green space would be a task of major complexity.

A library park will emerge only if private money is found; if land-owners agree; if local, regional and federal governments are satisfied, and if the demands of transit and green space can be made compatible. A visit to Bryant Park should convince you that it's worth a try.

Steve Berg is a Star Tribune editorial writer.

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