

A park transformed

CITY TALES: New York's Bryant Park is not what it used to be—a haven for drugs and crime | *Kiley Humphries*



DIANE BONDAREFF/AP

NEW YORK CITY— On a warm spring day more people meander through New York City's Bryant Park than any other park in the world, on a per acre basis. The change since 1988, when few not looking for drugs or heading for a mugging set foot in what was called "Needle Park," is extraordinary. New Yorkers may be accustomed to it, but lessons in transformation can be learned for other urban parks. How did it happen?

Now, the nine-acre park—located just east of Times Square and adjacent to the New York Public Library's historic central branch—sports 2,000 chairs and 500 tables scattered in clusters lining the stone and dirt walkways. Six kiosks selling flowers, sandwiches, and cappuccino sit by a fountain that's lit at night. The park has broad entryways, clean restrooms, free wireless internet, 24-hour security, and impeccably kept flower gardens.

Twenty years ago, though, high bushes lining the outside border created security for illegal activity. Drug dealers, prostitutes, pickpockets, and muggers roamed freely: Locals knew to stay away and hotels warned tourists to avoid the area. The price of business real estate surrounding the park was dropping, and city officials had little hope for reviving the park and little money to invest in it.

Enter the Bryant Park Corporation, a group of private businessmen led by Daniel Biederman with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The group agreed on a plan to reclaim the dying park by creating a Business Improvement District (BID) and turning over the city-owned space to private management. Desperate city officials agreed, closing the park completely for four years to give time for the largest attempt in U.S. history to apply private management backed by private funding to a public park.

Though first tested in the 1960s, BIDs have mainly caught on across America since the 1990s. A BID is a private-public partnership where property owners in a specific district agree to pay more for neighborhood improvement, with the prospect of making their property worth more: New York City

has 57 BIDs, with the total in North America now about 1,200. The Bryant Park Corporation threw \$30 million into transforming the park: Bushes came down, upkeep began, security guards patrolled, new restrooms and kiosks opened, and both crime and grime took a hike.

Now the park is the venue for lunch concerts, a summer film festival, free performances by Broadway and opera singers, a free ice-skating rink during cold months, and other activities. Bryant Park even has free wireless Internet service.. All events in the park are open to the public with the exception of "Fashion Week," a haute couture extravaganza.

The money comes from corporate sponsorships and from an assessment on all local property owners, which is then passed on to the Bryant Park Corporation, which provides security, sanitation, maintenance, gardens, and horticultural installations. The property owners who pay the additional assessment have benefited because rental values have increased by up to 225 percent, averaging an additional \$20 to \$25 per square foot. A \$1 billion skyscraper project, One Bryant Park, is scheduled for completion next year along the northwest corner of the park, where future rent is expected to exceed \$100 per square foot.

Bryant Park no longer gets any public funding, yet its budget is 20 times what the city used to offer. BIDs are not immune from criticism, though. Some argue that in passing management rights to the private sector, cities are privatizing important public spaces that potentially could no longer be used for free speech and public demonstrations. Some fear BIDs acting for the benefit of corporations rather than citizens, and that BIDs rid parks of the homeless. Bryant Park does not allow sleeping on benches or pulling up chairs to make beds.

Also, BID campaigns do not always succeed. In New York an East 86th Street BID did not materialize due to a lack of business support. And parks, as the urbanologist Jane Jacobs noted, are "volatile places." Eternal vigilance is the price of park liberty.