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THE SUMMER ISSUE

## In Praise of Bryant Park

**New York's most idyllic public space.**

**By NATALIE RACE**

JUL 07, 2009



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**IN THE darkest** depths of winter, when my new-transplant-to-New York roommates and I feared that the cold and gray of January would never lift, we had an unfortunate and depressing tendency to chronicle all the things we would not miss about New York if we were to move and return to our respective southern homelands. A few selections from the list: people who don't move all the way down the car on the subway, schlepping our groceries up three flights of stairs, frigid gusts of wind that take your breath away, subway vomiters. I could go on.

Finally, the bravest and least cold of us declared a new list-making game: things we would miss if we left New York. This game was infinitely more fun and celebratory than the first, and had the added benefit of reminding us in ways big and small of why the heck we were in New York in the first place.

At the top of my list: lunches at Bryant Park. Without a doubt, the best reason to take a job in midtown Manhattan is the promise of spring and summer lunches spent in that urban oasis of green. Sure, Central Park gets all the hype—despite the glamorous distinction of hosting New York’s Fashion Week, I have yet to see a Bryant Park magnet for sale in Chinatown—but the nine-acre **Bryant Park** is better suited to the daily needs of the city dweller.

*Perfectly proportioned to give the passing pedestrian or lurching office drone a substantial drink of nature without being large enough to significantly obstruct traffic patterns, Bryant Park works beautifully with the pace of urban life.*

I refuse to concede that this is simply a product of my life-long prejudice in favor of the overlooked or under-appreciated; for me, Central Park is too much of an ordeal—too vast and overwhelming—to host a practical break in the middle of the day. To spend time in “The Park,” one has to really commit to it. There are often picnic blankets involved, not to mention all the carriage traffic to be dodged, and to be honest, I usually want my park-visits to be more like a comma than an out-loud reading of the genealogy of Christ. I need a moment to catch my breath in the middle of the day, not lose my breath trying to get to the memorable part. Frankly, I don’t have time for that.

I do have time for smelling the grass, eating my lunch under the shade of a London plane tree, watching old men perform tai chi, wondering if one of my co-workers would want to play chess one afternoon, browsing in the HSBC reading room and thinking about joining one of the free yoga classes—all of which I can actually do at Bryant Park without abandoning my workday attire or fighting with a heel stuck in the grass. The beauty of Bryant Park is that I can participate in the world of whimsy outside the office in a way that fits into my life. And for the full three-quarters of an hour that I’m there, it’s *my* life again.

The restorers of Bryant Park not only have provided amenities that I can actually characterize with the word “whimsy”—and that without mentioning the carousel, skating rink, or ping-pong tables—but they respect my layout sensibilities so much that I, park-going peon that I am, can place my hunter green folding chair wherever I see fit. Even on a day when there doesn’t seem to be any correlation between the effort and intent I put into my work, and the result (or lack thereof), I can actively shape and participate in the life of a public space. The simple gift of movable chairs is, in actuality, a gift of agency and empowerment to the thousands of people who eat their lunch in the shade of those lush trees. I am reminded that my actions do have consequences, that I can tangibly affect my world—even if, for today, that is only in the orientation of a Bryant Park chair.

Besides redeeming my lunch hour, the park’s own history is a compelling tale of urban life re-emerging from a symbol of urban decay. Like many parks in New York City, Bryant Park began as a potter’s field before the city grew out to meet it and the park’s interred inhabitants were relocated to Ward’s Island. As recently as the ’70s, some dubbed it

“Needle Park,” and I’m pretty sure this wasn’t a prescient reference to the handiwork of the Project Runway finalists. It wasn’t until the vision of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation was realized in the early ’90s that Bryant Park became the outdoor cafeteria and breath of fresh air that New Yorkers now know. A plot of land once characterized by poverty, death, and crime is now breathing life into its retail neighbors as well as its human neighbors.

In comparison to Central Park, Bryant is tiny, barely even visible from the top of nearby Rockefeller Center. But its size is precisely why it succeeds. Perfectly proportioned to give the passing pedestrian or lunching office drone a substantial drink of nature without being large enough to significantly obstruct traffic patterns, Bryant Park works beautifully with the pace of urban life. The green space between Fifth and Sixth Avenues interrupts just enough to give the city dweller the breath of air she needs to keep up her frantic pace, but not enough to symbolize (or for that matter, actualize) retreat. It’s compact – like my new apartment and my new standard of personal space. It knows its precise place as complement to the built environment, imagining itself as contiguous with the offices and commercial interests around it, even making space for kiosks aplenty rather than trying to make visitors forget they are in one of the busiest commercial districts in the world. Bryant Park is a lesson in efficient relaxation; stepping in and out of that leisure zone is as easy as can be.

With a lunch break this idyllic and fuss-free, who needs a long weekend at the country house? Thoreau, keep your Walden! Like Goldilocks, I’ve found my place and it fits just right.

**CURATOR**

*This article also appeared on [The Curator](#), an online culture magazine published in New York by the International Arts Movement.*

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