

## Pretty Public Parks – Thanks to Private Efforts

WRITTEN BY KELLY HOLT

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In a December 2 editorial in *The Atlasphere*, John Stossel opined that once again, privatization answers a public woe. In his report about beautiful Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan, the opener reads, “Many see the privatization of public parks as an evil encroachment by the rich in the public sphere. But in reality privatized parks today are friendlier and more inclusive than ever.”

Governments managing poorly maintained, dangerous and dirty public parks whine when criticized because “budgets are slashed and there isn’t enough money.” Such with Bryant Park. But Dan Biederman changed that. **Biederman**, a prominent New York City downtown manager and pioneer in the field of privately funded space management (according to Wikipedia), co-founded several partnerships operating in midtown Manhattan. In the case of Bryant Park, the partnership was dedicated to “bringing people back to the park while exploring how to generate revenue.” The park, once a dangerous haven for drug dealers, is now one of Manhattan’s most beautiful and most visited public sites, and the largest U.S. effort to provide private management and funding to a public park.

Biederman, with permission from officials frustrated with failed government clean-up efforts, raised private funds from neighboring businesses, real estate owners, concessions, and event sponsorships (all benefit from a cleaned-up park). “Since 1996, we have not asked the city government for a single dollar.”

Stossel agreed with Biederman’s plan and results, but noted that Boston journalist Shirley Kressel, did not. He asked her what was wrong with getting the money from private businesses.

Kressel: Because it goes into private pockets.

Stossel: So what?

Kressel: Because it’s very good (for Dan) to use the public land for running a private business, a rent-a-park, where all year ’round there’s commercial revenue from renting it out to businesses. He keeps all that money. People don’t realize that.

Stossel still doesn’t care. The park is nice, it’s enjoyed and people don’t have to pay taxes to support it. And Biederman plans to apply the efforts to Boston Common, America’s oldest public park, but with a different funding model – that of Central Park, upon whose board Stossel serves. Stossel claims that when government managed Central Park, it was a horrifying crime zone. No one argues. But now that those living near it donated most of the renovation and maintenance money, they love it. It’s a wonderful park.

Kressel says she’ll oppose Biederman’s Boston plan:

We don’t need ... to teach our next generation of children that the only way they can get a public realm is as the charity ward of rich people and corporations. We can afford our public realm. We’re entitled to it. We pay taxes, and that’s the government’s job. It’s not, because these people, the money bags, get to decide how the park is used and who goes there and who the desirables are and who are the undesirables. Undesirables are primarily homeless people.... Homeless people have to be somewhere. If we don’t make a system that accommodates people who don’t have a place to live, they have to be in the public realm.

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Biederman's answer:

We have the same number of homeless people in Bryant Park today as we had when it was viewed by everyone as horrible in the early 1980s. What we didn't have then – and we have now – is 4,000 other people. The ratio of non-homeless to homeless is 4,000 to 13 instead of 250 to 13. So any female walking into Bryant Park who might have in the past been concerned about her security says, "This doesn't look like a homeless hangout to me." The homeless people are welcomed into Bryant Park if they follow the rules. And those same 13 people are there almost every day. We know their names.

Supporters of privatization say Kressel's logic falls apart at every seam. Aren't taxes "progressive" in nature, taking from the rich for the benefit of the poor – aren't we teaching our children to rely on the rich to take care of the public realm? If charity of the rich and corporations is the only way people can access "a public realm," why not make it *real charity*, not the faux charity of government redistribution? Isn't that what real charity is for, and isn't that "charity" better enacted on a voluntary rather than mandatory basis, as would occur under a tax-supported system? The "entitlement" to which she refers is the problem.

Stossel and Biederman aren't the first, nor last, to extol privatization. Lawrence Reed's 1996 book *Private Cures for Public Ills: The Promise for Privatization* explored the very idea exemplified by Biederman's efforts and is a good reference on the topic.

And the support of privatization should always be approached with a grain of you know what. Be sure the privatization efforts you support and participate in are *voluntary* and not confused with Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Clothed nowadays as "private solutions," they are the same old wolf in new wool. PPPs, partnerships between governments and private entities working against public and private interests, are often unclear and confusing, designed by the omniregency of government to appear as a good solution.

Stossel concluded:

Once again, the creative minds of the private sector invent solutions that never occur to government bureaucrats. If government would just get out of the way, entrepreneurship and innovation, stimulated by the profit motive, will make our lives better.

And he's right.