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WHO, WHAT, WHERE & HOW—AROUND THE PARKS

PROFILE

Transformer

Dan Biederman turns his unique talents to rehabbing Boston Common

It's "cartoonish," says Dan Biederman, referring to the argument he has heard often over the years that partnerships between urban parks and corporate sponsors will result in public land rife with garish billboards. The Harvard MBA and former adviser to Singapore's urban redevelopment authority rose to national prominence in 1991 when he spearheaded the transformation of Manhattan's Bryant Park through private funding. He typically challenges skeptics who advance the billboard argument to walk through the once derelict Bryant Park with a notepad and a pen.

"I tell them to give me a list of whatever they find that's objectionable," he says. "But I've never heard back from anybody so far."

Indeed, Bryant Park is widely considered to be a public-private partnership success story—with tasteful markers throughout the park providing quiet attribution to those who have paid for the improvements. Biederman is now applying his considerable planning and fundraising savvy as a consultant to America's first park: Boston Common.

While much of Biederman's past work with urban parks has involved, as he puts it, "making horrible parks great and making dull parks lively," the historic Boston Common presents a different set of challenges. The park gets heavy use from tourists, Hollywood film crews, activist groups, political figures staging



rallies, and various other event organizers. In all, 250 groups a year use Boston Common to stage their events.

So, the most accurate description of the state of the Common in recent years might be, Biederman says, "overused and under-maintained." When almost \$1 million was cut from the city's \$15 million parks and recreation budget in 2009, Mayor Thomas Menino sought Biederman's assistance in restoring and enriching Boston Common with the help of private funds.

And Biederman quickly set to work outlining a multi-faceted funding strategy, courting corporate sponsors, and selecting areas of the 54-acre park to serve as programming focal points. In conjunction with the

Friends of the Public Garden (a nonprofit group supporting the adjacent Public Garden as well as the Common), Biederman recently oversaw the refurbishment of—and addition of a plaza to—Brewer Fountain, one of the landmarks of the common. He places a high priority on such efforts, pointing to the programming that can now make the fountain "a more amenable place."

Biederman says he takes on projects like Boston Common because his success with Bryant Park fueled his can-do attitude. He admits, though, that when he first enters into a consulting engagement and immerses himself in the challenges facing an urban park, it can be "a little nerve-wracking." The first day on the Boston Common project, he says, I asked myself, Why did I take



this engagement? But the unique challenges of the park have also made for an interesting and rewarding undertaking. Biederman says the historic significance of the park, its wide name recognition, and the dedication of 85-year old Friends of the Public Garden President Henry Lee have all helped generate public excitement over the improvements. Furthermore, he adds, the concerned, focused working relationship between Lee and Mayor Menino has kept the best interests of Boston front and center.

Biederman admits his conviction that the private sector should help pay for parks has led him to make some mistakes in the past. Mainly, he says, he's taken for granted at times that his case for private-sector money in support of public land makes as much sense to others as it does to him. "I've learned...I have to pay attention to the arguments others make about government's [funding] obligations." He relates also how much he has learned about the willingness of corporate America to dialogue and negotiate about what sort of credit they will receive in exchange for funding. He shares anecdotes such as Google's forgetting to ask for anything in

return for supplying WiFi to Bryant Park. And Bank of America's hosting a classical music series and supplying a banner so small it could not be seen from most seats.

Biederman has simple advice for park professionals who worry about courting corporate money.

First, he says, "Remember that there is a lot of money in the corporate sponsorship and event economy...Why not let the private sector pay?" Second, he adds, "Be ready to dialogue and negotiate for what you want." He attributes New York's success with corporate park sponsorships in part to the sophistication and boldness of its government leaders in dialoguing with the private sector. Urban spaces, he insists, lend themselves to negotiated sponsorships. And Dan Biederman sees his role as one of steering sponsorships and other revenue enhancements to complement the spirit of the individual city and park.

In the case of Boston Common, the next year will tell the tale of how Biederman can help a public square with deep roots in the nation's history harmonize its new partnerships with its heritage. ●

—Interview by Maureen Hannan