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STREETSCAPES/Bryant Park

An Enduring Strip of Green In an Ever-Evolving City

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE little patch of Bryant Park, which runs along the Avenue of the Americas from 40th to 42nd Streets, just behind the New York Public Library, is now surrounded by its own mini-building-boom.

The old Verizon Building, directly across the avenue, is getting a new green glass skin. Last year, a new Marriott Residence Inn was completed at 39th and the Avenue of the Americas. Then there is the new 54-story Bank of America tower at the northwest corner of 42nd, designed by the architectural firm of Cook & Fox with a 1,200-foot-tall spire.

Together, they dwarf the park, which dates to 1823, when it was acquired by the city for \$8,449. It was first used as a potter's field, according to Charles Haswell's 1897 "Reminiscences of an Octogenarian."

By 1842, the new Croton Reservoir occupied the eastern third of the park, facing Fifth Avenue. The remaining land, named Reservoir Square, was by 1853 the site of the huge glass exposition hall called the Crystal Palace, which burned down five years later.

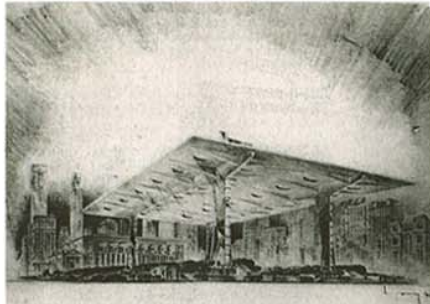
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as a landing pad.

The little park then became a magnet for grandiose proposals: a new Seventh Regiment armory, in 1872; a grand opera house, in 1880; the New-York Historical Society, in 1881; the relocation of City Hall, in 1893; a new General Post Office, in 1903. None were carried out, though in 1884 Reservoir Square was renamed to honor William Cullen Bryant, the poet and editor of *The Evening Post*, who had recently died.

Public discipline was an issue in the park in 1895, according to *The New York Times*, which reported the eruption of a brawl after a policeman ordered a man to leave. The man resisted, and "about 50 park loungers" joined in the fray, severely injuring the policeman, according to the account.

It was in the 1890s that the New York Public Library decided to fill in the reservoir and build on that site without encroaching on the park itself. Its civilizing influence perhaps promised a higher class of park

E-mail: streetscapes@nytimes.com



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denizen, but a letter to *The Times* in 1905, signed only Observer, complained about finding "papers strewn over the grass, loafers fast asleep and sprawled out over the benches."

In 1910, with the public library a year from completion, the National Academy of Design retained the library's architects, Carrère & Hastings, to design a three-story building, 50 feet wide, along the entire west-

ern edge of the park. It was to serve as an art gallery and barrier to block the view and noise of the elevated train. But open space trumped those potential assets, saving a large chunk of Bryant Park.

Only in 1911 was a statue of Bryant unveiled, followed in 1912 by a monument to Josephine Shaw Lowell, a social worker. In 1921, *The Times* noted that on any given night 400 to 600 men camped in what was



Hiroko Masuiko for The New York Times

AS THE YEARS SLIP BY

The Verizon and Bank of America buildings tower over the west end of Bryant Park, above. The plantings had become quite elaborate by 1936, left, two years after the park's renovation. In 1941, Raymond Loewy suggested that the space be outfitted with a 10-story-high landing deck for autogiros.

called "the Bryant Park Hotel," singing, playing poker and drinking, and in the morning it "looks like a junkman's cellar after a flood."

To mark the bicentennial, in 1932, of the birth of George Washington, a temporary stucco copy of Federal Hall — the long-gone structure on Wall Street where Washington took his first oath of office — was placed in the park. The celebration, coupled perhaps with preceding neglect, left the park a dusty mess, for a letter to *The Times* in 1933 from Utilitarian called it a "barren waste" and suggested it be used for baseball fields.

That year, Lusby Simpson, an architect, won a competition for what, after revisions, became the park of the present day, replacing the original iron fence with a stone balustrade, raising the entire level four feet and creating a simple patch of turf in the middle, two steps down. Working with him on the design were Gilmore D. Clarke, a landscape architect, and Aymar Embury, another architect.

The 1934 reconstruction had been a long time coming. Most of the credit went to the energetic new parks commissioner, Robert Moses, who rejected a proposal by World War I veterans to rename the space Lost Battalion Park, after the American forces

that met a tragic fate in the Argonne Forest in France in October 1918.

At the reopening, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia was asked if the park would again be allowed to deteriorate. *The Times* reported his reply: "Oh, we can keep it like this as long as we keep Moses."

But the critic Lewis Mumford, writing in 1934 in his *Skyline* column in *The New Yorker*, let go with both barrels, saying the design should have been thrown "into the wastebasket" and objecting to the sweeping vista across the new western steps to the elevated train tracks.

In the fall of 1941, Raymond Loewy suggested that the space be outfitted with a 10-story-high landing deck for autogiros (aircraft soon superseded by the helicopter), set on slim steel pylons. He said that it could serve a double purpose as a bomb shelter.

In the 1970s, Bryant Park again became a haven for those with nowhere else to go. In 1980 the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation was organized to transform the park — a task accomplished by 1992, with a few minor changes designed by Hanna/Olin Ltd., like the wide new entrance at the 42nd Street corner.

Now, 15 years later, the transformation of Bryant Park — the restaurant behind the library, the poetry readings, summer movies and winter ice skating — is old news.

And so it is not surprising that Bryant Park, once synonymous with the worst of New York City, has become a brand name. The Marriott building has adopted the name Bryant Park Tower, and the Bank of America building has taken the address of 1 Bryant Park, a strange but wonderful turnabout for what was an epithet not so long ago.