

Woodruff Park gets reading room, new ambiance

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A homeless man stands guard along the sidewalk on Peachtree Street along Woodruff Park.

He's outsmarted the signs banning panhandling directly behind him. He's surrounded by brightly painted portraits. He tells passers-by that he'll draw their portrait for "a good price." And most importantly, he adds "for some paper."



T. Levette Bagwell/Staff

Jason Wilson (left) and Tripp Collins read in a roped-off area at the north end of Woodruff Park. Park managers have removed the benches that were used by vagrants and have set up the reading room in their effort to build 'an oasis in the very middle of the most urban part of the city.'

He sheepishly confesses he's run out. Some of the portrait examples around him are drawn on the back of boxes. Apparently, there's a run on cardboard there, too.

There is no cardboard, no fast-food wrappers, no newspapers littering Woodruff Park to become this man's canvas.

That's because park managers have started to turn the place around and are trying to attract a new lunch crowd with a variety of improvements and programs, including lunchtime concerts.

Two full-time guardians keep the park at Auburn Avenue and Peachtree Street nearly pristine. They are one part of a bigger plan of Central Atlanta Progress, a downtown business group that helps manage the park. Park leaders want to turn Woodruff's four acres into a destination for downtown professionals and students, rather than just a favorite hangout for the homeless — a nice place to see free concerts, read a book, or eat lunch.

"You need to give people a reason to stop at the park," said Wilma Sothern, Central Atlanta Progress vice president of marketing. "Hoping to get people to stay a little bit longer, we're making it a real draw, rather than just a place to walk through."

Park managers say they base their revival plans on New York's successful Bryant Park. New Yorkers use Bryant Park as a quiet getaway from the hustle and bustle of the city. It has concerts, special events and markets for local artists. "That's our inspiration, it's such a success story — people want to go to Bryant Park."

So park managers decided to better cater to their audience. Downtown comes alive during the day with students and office workers. Why not create a nice quiet place to linger over lunch?

They removed the park benches that the homeless had used to hang out on all day. Instead, there are now 100 new café tables and 350 lightweight chairs in a roped-off area called the "reading room." Park patrons casually leaf through borrowed magazines and library books brought out on carts by park staff. There's free Wi-Fi. And there's sports equipment — Frisbees and chess boards for anyone who wants them.

"Believe me, this place is a lot better that it was," said John Patton, a member of Atlanta's Ambassador Force, who's worked downtown for 10 years. He says he's been watching the progress at Woodruff Park closely.

"My parents lived in the Muse's building right down the block," Patton said. "On hot days we used to bring the kids to swim in the Woodruff Park fountain. Back then they'd be swimming between garbage and puke. Now it's nice and clean. They've done a good job."

As Patton rests on his bike, next to him stands one of the remaining homeless men, screaming at an invisible audience, "You are going straight to hell."

Park regulars say they've nicknamed him the "Preacher." Three nonplussed professionals treat him like elevator music. They chat over lunch at tables set out by the park. They don't even look over their shoulders at him as he damns them all for eternity.

"We're used to him," Roger Derror said.

He and his co-workers, Blair Lisowski and Lee Duke, say they come to Woodruff to eat their lunch about twice a week in the summer.

"That's always a sign to me that something is working — when people like the park enough that they're out eating even in the hot, hot sun," Sothern said.

The three work in the neighboring Sun Trust building. "It's a great place to gossip about your co-workers where you won't be overheard," Derror said, laughing. The co-workers agree that the atmosphere in Woodruff Park has improved significantly over the years. "It's really nice that they've made the effort. You can tell."

The three say they particularly appreciate the live lunchtime concerts.

"Wednesdays in Woodruff" is a weekly series that features performances by local artists. On Fridays, through Sept. 28, there's "Lunch on Broad." Broad Street, which is a block over and runs parallel to the park, closes to traffic and managers put out tables and chairs. Lunchtime diners are treated to another free lunchtime concert series.

"We know we don't have a lot of residents down here, so we created a schedule that will accommodate the people who are here during the day," Sothern said. "As more people move to this area, we'll put even more programs at night and on the weekends."

Starting this month, Saturdays in Woodruff will transform the park into a festive open-air artist market. And the park has played host to an increasing number of special events. In June there was a volleyball tournament and a beer festival.

To get to the park, at one corner one must still walk past the check-cashing business and the stand that sells cheap sunglasses and boxer shorts on the corner. But that is part of why Woodruff Park is touted on its Web site as "an oasis in the very middle of the most urban part of the city."

"We have a number of challenges in this environment, but even the environment around the park is getting better," Sothern said. "But if we start small and we stay consistent, I have a feeling this park will become even more of a major draw to downtown."