

The Metro Section

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Town Square Of Midtown

Drug Dealers' Turf Is Now an Office Oasis

By BRUCE WEBER

The young professionals were packed in at the outdoor terrace bar at the Bryant Park Cafe, four, five, six deep, hundreds of 20- and 30-something men with their jackets off and ties loosened, women in linen suits or sleeveless dresses. The temperature was in the 90's, but the socializing was full throttle.

"It's always a madhouse on Thursday," said Nelson Mercado, a park security officer on restaurant detail, standing outside the bar's restraining ropes.

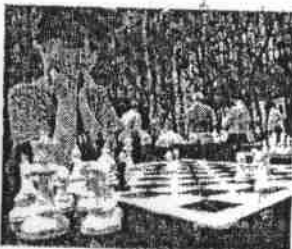
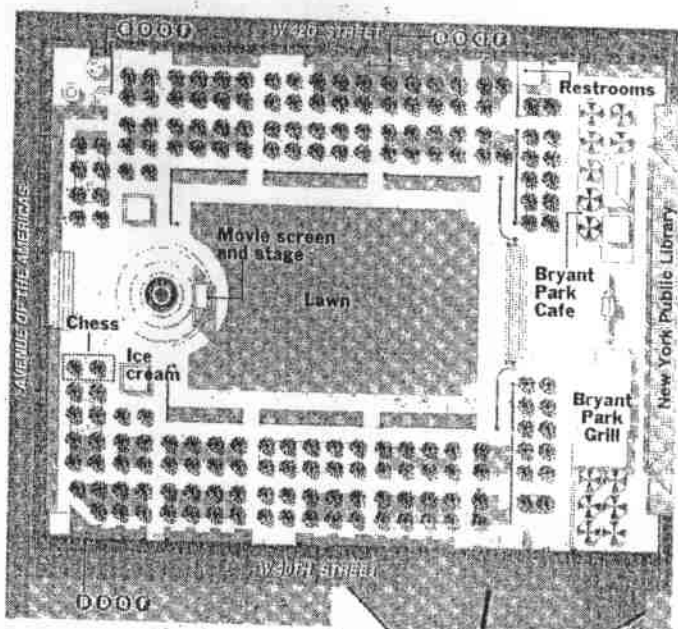
Inside the after-work, anxious-for-the-weekend crowd flirted, drank beers and pastel-colored cocktails out of plastic cups and sang the praises of a place to go in the open air to relax after office hours and perhaps begin an evening of social adventure.

"Do I not go out every Thursday night, and do I not look for the hot spot?" Robert Zeidman, a computer software salesman, asked rhetorically. "China Grill was the hot spot in the spring. Now this is the place."

Bryant Park? Hot?

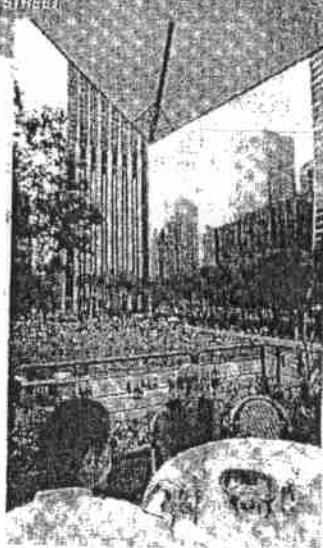
It would be a hard point to argue, given the crowd and its exuberance, though a few scant years ago it would have been the most unlikely of gathering places. The Thursday-night scene at the Bryant Park Cafe (an offshoot of the more formal Bryant Park Grill just south) has accrued its popularity quickly since it opened in May. But it is only the latest exclamation point for the overwhelmingly active scene at Bryant Park, the renovated nine-acre rectangle between 40th and 42d

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ABOVE Chess attracts Rudi Mathers to the section of Bryant Park reserved for chess and backgammon.

RIGHT From the roof of the Bryant Park Grill, the park looks like the front yard of midtown Manhattan.



Bryant Park Has Become Midtown's Town Square

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Streets that, in an odd incarnation of a small-town tradition, has become Manhattan's town square.

"I work downtown, but I come here as often as I can," Larry Johnson, a producer of television commercials, said one recent afternoon. He was smoking a cigar and watching backgammon games behind the park fountain, where the kibitzing was heavy and, at least once, a \$100 bill changed hands.

"It's great for the city," he said. "Kind of like the way it used to be, when people sat with each other more and talked to each other more."

Bryant Park is now a place to which people gravitate. Several news conferences have been staged there recently, including one for the MTV Music Video Awards that featured Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Michael Jackson. On temperate weekdays, business meetings are conducted on the lawn.

From the lunch crowds that swell to 4,000 or more, particularly when free concerts, literary readings or comedy performances are scheduled, to the Monday-night movies sponsored by HBO that attract as many as 10,000 people, to special events like the biannual Seventh on Sixth fashion shows, Bryant Park has, in the three years since its reopening, been transformed from a sequestered haven for drug dealers into one of New York City's busiest

outdoor public spaces.

"It's a success that surprised a lot of us," said Alexander Garvin, a professor of urban planning at Yale who is a newly appointed member of New York's City Planning Commission. "If you had asked me two years before they opened, could you eliminate the population that used the park by redesigning it, I'd have laughed in your face. And I'd have been wrong. Totally wrong."

Today, the park may have the city's cleanest free-standing restroom. It has its own 24-hour security force and maintenance crew, which to a large extent are responsible for the sense that life in the park is under control.

Though city owned, the park is privately managed by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, a nonprofit entity founded in 1980 by Andrew Heiskell, former chairman of the New York Public Library. More than half of its \$1.7 million maintenance budget comes from businesses in the neighborhood, the rest from the City Parks Department, private donors and, lately, concession and event revenues.

The Restoration Corporation is run by Daniel A. Biederman, who is also president of the Grand Central Partnership and who has had easier years. His plans to create a similar business improvement district in New Jersey had to be scuttled after questions arose about its financing. Then came reports that partnership workers had harassed the homeless at automated teller machines.

For Mr. Biederman, Bryant Park seems an unequivocal coup.

Mr. Biederman spent a recent lunch hour the way he frequently does, touring the park, pointing out favorite features, like the movable, lightweight green chairs ("You can pick one up with one finger," Mr. Biederman said, "so an old lady who wants to control her space can move it") and niggling flaws (the mid-block entrance on 42d Street is

Beer, bands and bikinis where drugs once ruled.

underused), and picking up the occasional bottle or newspaper the maintenance people overlooked.

The activity in the park on this day was impressive. Many of the lightweight chairs (there are 1,151 of them) had been commandeered by lunchers and sunbathers.

"Bikinis in Manhattan always surprise me," Mr. Biederman said.

On the edge of the lawn, Nelson Foy, a maintenance man, was counting heads. It was a little early yet — not quite 12:30 P.M. — for the biggest crowds, which, Mr. Foy said, generally make it to 4,000 at peak time, about 1:30. He estimated that 10,000 people visit the park on a sunny weekday between noon and 2:30 P.M.

"We count men and women," Mr. Biederman said, "because the ratio is the best indication of safety. Women vote for safety with their feet. We're still a little over 50-50, a few more men than women."

An informal survey of park users at lunchtime and through the afternoon turned up a plethora of regular visitors and enthusiasts. The crowd swelled, as predicted, between 1 and 2 P.M. Empty chairs, particularly in the shade of the London plane trees, grew scarce. A young woman walked the lawn, passing out free hardcover copies of "High Fidelity," a new novel by Nick Hornby. She turned out to be Wendy Carlton, the book's editor at Riverhead Books, who said the park at lunch time, with its business people flooding the place from nearby offices, was a veritable coral of target readers, a promotional gold mine.

As lunch hour turned to midafternoon, the population dwindled a bit. But the action on the chess and backgammon boards remained heavy.

"Business is terrific," said Bernhard Vennekohl, the manager of the park concession for New York Chess and Backgammon, whose storefront is on West 41st Street. "The heat has had a diminishing effect, but the players, as you can see, are resolute."

Mr. Vennekohl said he stays open till dark, and later on some nights, when there are movies or music.

"I get couples here before dinner," he said, "and I put candles on the tables during the movies. It makes for a romantic atmosphere."

As afternoon gave way to evening, balloon men arrived and began festooning the bandstand with clusters of blue and white helium balloons in preparation for a salsa and meringue concert. After 5, neighborhood offices began disgorging their workers and lassitude gave way again to a large crowd's kineticism. At the Bryant Park Cafe, the singles began arriving in droves.

"You can get culture, comedy and a drink, all in one place," said Scott Saber, an investment banker. "The crowd is upbeat and classy and everybody's looking to have fun."

Susan Murach, a fashion merchandiser who has worked in the neighborhood for six years, said: "This area needed a place like this. There's never been a place for people who work here to go out after work." The only problem, she said, was that maybe it had become too popular. "You have to get here before 5:30 in order not to stand in line."

At that moment, 7 P.M., the line stretched for 100 yards across the stone terrace behind the New York Public Library. On the stage across the greensward, the band, La Banda Loca, was rocking. On the lawn itself, people were lolling, dancing, swaying, making out or just listening; behind the stage, tourists tossed coins in the fountain pool where children raced toy boats.

Last-minute bargain hunters waited impatiently at the half-price tickets booth, hoping to make it to performances of dance and music events around town. The ice-cream kiosk was doing a brisk business. The chess players concentrated, oblivious amid the hoopla.

All this was going on as the sun went down behind the skyscrapers along the Avenue of the Americas. It was festive, like a carnival on Main



Source: DeChillo/The New York Times

Thursday night is singles night in Bryant Park, the midtown park that has become a hot spot after a major renovation changed it from a gathering spot for drug dealers to a place to see and be seen for nearby office workers and others.