

NEW YORK PARK EXPERT VISITS PITTSBURGH

Pittsburgh Learns From Bryant Park's Rebirth

There's no one better than Dan Biederman to tell you how badly New York City's Bryant Park had deteriorated over the years. He was, after all, mugged there in 1980. But Biederman was not alone. In the bad old days before the private takeover of the 9-acre park in midtown Manhattan, there were 153 robberies a year — not to mention drug deals, rapes and murders.

Today the park is privately managed by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (until recently headed by Biederman), a group of nearby property owners. After 10 years of negotiations, the group convinced city officials to grant them a lease of the park. With an annual budget of \$2.5 million, the Restoration Corporation has redesigned and restored the park to a popular, relatively crime-free refuge, full of concessions, concerts, corporate events, and comfortable seating.

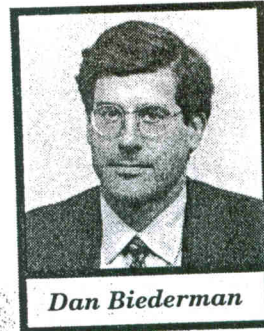
Biederman was the featured speaker at the Pittsburgh Park's Conservancy's second annual fundraising dinner at the Pittsburgh Golf Club in July. He shared his organization's successes with a crowd of more than 200 of Pittsburgh's political, business, legal and community leaders.

While commending Pittsburgh's Public Works Department for its ability to stretch a small budget across four large parks, he emphasized there is great opportunity for improvement by allowing private enterprise in on the action. "We are spending — in a tiny park — half as much money as you are spending on four," he said, referring to Frick, Schenley, Highland and Riverview.

As the PPC and city officials begin the first year of their public-private partnership, the lessons of Bryant Park's transformation and fundraising efforts can be beneficial for us, Biederman says. At its worst, the park became a meeting ground for drug sellers. It suffered from unpruned trees, overgrown hedges, broken lights, ugly oil drum garbage cans, graffiti and filthy restrooms. Today, at its best, it is a colorful, clean, thriving park visited by an average of 10,000 people daily who spend money on food and entertainment.

The restoration corporation launched dramatic design changes, including breaching walls to encourage access and creating pedestrian walkways at Bryant Park. Such changes eliminated dead ends, which made muggings much less likely. The organization hired 23 sanitation staff to clean and two security officers to patrol the park, relieving the city of the job. The addition of five new kinds of lighting, which ranged from functional to extravagant cast bronze fixtures, helped to deter crime, particularly because white light is used rather than yellow, Biederman said. The restrooms, once filthy and smelling of urine, have been transformed into sparkling clean facilities adorned with fresh flowers, thanks to an on-site cleaning person.

But one of the most creative efforts to draw people into the park was the addition of movable chairs, he said. "We learned from the urban space expert William H. White that parks thrive when people control their seating. We introduced 2,200 park chairs from Paris that are extremely light as a way of having people control their seating and increasing attendance in the park. Most people don't like to sit on lawns or stone, especially women in dresses and people in business suits." (Only 80 have been stolen in six years.)



Dan Biederman