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Parks and Re-creation

How private citizens saved New York's public spaces

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Bryant Park, once home to panhandlers, pushers, and punks, is now an urban oasis.

Central Park in spring may be the most glorious public space on Earth. Flowering dogwoods and lilacs scent the air as children, sprung from being cooped up all winter, pack the playgrounds. Bicyclists and runners swirl around the six-mile grand loop, battling through the steep hills of Harlem to take in the skyline views farther south. High-end food carts sell waffles and organic fare. It's hard to believe that 30 years ago, tourists would stand on 59th Street staring north, afraid to venture into the park. New York City's green spaces are "certainly at a modern high point," says Adrian Benepe, commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation (who started his career in 1979 as a park ranger and thus "worked in the parks system at its low point," too).

But perhaps the most amazing thing about Central Park is how little tax money goes into maintaining it. Though it is still ultimately the city's responsibility, the park has been managed since the 1980s by the nonprofit Central Park Conservancy, and it relies on private donations for most of its budget. The marriage between the city and the Conservancy has been a fruitful one. Can this model, known as a public-private partnership, restore and invigorate all of New York's green spaces, including neighborhood parks in less affluent

areas? It's an important question, not only as the city faces tough fiscal times but as urban planners increasingly view parks as tools of economic development and public health.

New York has always been innovative with its green spaces. Looking north from a high floor in midtown, a visitor might think that city planners carved Central Park out of the skyscrapers. But the park was there first, opening in the 1850s. As architect and urbanist Witold Rybczynski once put it, Central Park was “out of scale with the needs of the time,” but Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed it and other city parks as well, was “looking ahead and seeing that the city’s going to grow around them and they’re really going to be necessary.” The same went for playgrounds. Seeing that children needed safe spaces for exercise and imagination in an era when child labor was still widespread, New York City opened the country’s first municipally built playground in Seward Park in 1903. The city now maintains more than 1,000 playgrounds.

These parks and playgrounds were once generously staffed. Steven Cohen, now executive director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute, grew up in Brooklyn in the 1950s and 1960s and remembers that “every park of any size had a building with a ‘parkie’ in it to give out equipment” and function as “the eyes and ears of the place.” That changed during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, as the city went broke and cut its payroll. What happened next was a textbook case of the Broken Windows theory of crime: fewer “eyes and ears” and reduced park maintenance sent vandals, other criminals, and the homeless the message that no one would care if they populated the parks. At the same time, of course, New York was suffering a massive crime epidemic.

People who lived in New York in the 1970s and early 1980s still remember how forbidding the parks were in those dark days. Douglas Blonsky, now head of the Central Park Conservancy and thus Central Park’s administrator, recalls that when he started working there in 1985, most of the benches were broken and most surfaces sported layers of graffiti. “The Great Lawn was a dust bowl,” he says, at least when the weather was dry; when it rained, seas of mud meant that “you could barely walk through the park for days.” Benepe recalls landmarks like Belvedere Castle as “burned-out shells.”

Of course, Central Park wasn’t the total nightmare of popular imagination, with muggers around every corner. On sunny days, sunbathers used the meadows. David Beld, a competitive runner who moved to New York City in 1981 and now leads tours of Central Park, would jog around the loops. But he knew people whose bicycles had been stolen—and not in the usual way; rather, a thief would “knock a person off his bike and then steal the bike.” And this in a park that stretched through some of the country’s richest zip codes. Other parks, like those in Harlem and parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx, fared even worse, becoming so crime-ridden and overgrown that sensible parents figured that their children were better off inside watching TV.

But where “government had given up,” Benepe says, citizens stepped in. In 1980, landscape designer Elizabeth Barlow Rogers and others founded the Central Park Conservancy, whose original purpose was to raise money, stop the park’s decline, and restore several of its major landmarks. The city eventually gave the Conservancy the lion’s share of day-to-day control of the park. Because its workers weren’t organized into public-sector unions, the Conservancy had a great deal of freedom to institute private management practices—above all, emphasizing accountability. The park is now divided into 49 sections, with a master gardener responsible for the condition of each. About 85 percent of the Conservancy’s annual budget comes from private donations, mostly from people who live within a ten-minute walk of the park. “Obviously, it’s an incredible backyard, and look what it does to your real-estate values,” says Blonsky.

A different kind of public-private partnership was born in the early 1980s in Bryant Park, located on eight acres behind the New York Public Library in midtown. At the time, Bryant Park was a scary “needle park” that logged 500 felonies per year. Part of the problem was that it was raised above street level, so pedestrians couldn’t see much of the space as they walked by, which made it a great hiding spot for criminals. Dan Biederman, a newly minted Harvard MBA, cofounded the Bryant Park Corporation to rescue the space. With the city’s consent, Biederman took control of the park, closed it for several years to renovate it and make it more visible from the street, and then reopened it. These days, “there’s no serious crime to speak of,” Biederman says.

The Bryant Park that Biederman created is, like Central Park, a privately funded public space—in Bryant Park’s case, completely so—but its funding comes more from earned income than from donations. In fact, the park is a multimillion-dollar business and runs like one. On a recent Thursday, Biederman and his staff of more than two dozen people sat around a table hammering out financial and operational details. Did extending the leases for some of the stores that populated the park’s annual outdoor Christmas market boost those merchants’ sales? (Answer: not really.) An inspection team showed photos snapped over the previous weekend, and Biederman cringed at a tableau featuring an ugly tarp. Later in the meeting, a few staffers who had visited Europe for family vacations showed slides, so that colleagues could see how things were done in the parks there.

All this takes serious money—roughly \$7 million a year—which Biederman raises through events, concessions, and sponsorships like Citi Pond, the ice-skating rink that occupies the main lawn during winter months. Not only does this level of funding keep Bryant Park immaculate; it allows the kind of programming that keeps the park full year-round. “Even in the worst weather, we’re going to have a clientele that defends the park against the bad guys,” says Biederman.

Over the years, the city has expanded the public-private partnership model to other, lesser-known parks. The Southern Queens Park Association actually predates the Central Park Conservancy, and since the late 1970s, it has operated the 54-acre Roy Wilkins Park. In the

1980s, Peter Wright started a partnership that renovated Riverside Park, which runs along the Hudson River. “I spent the summer of 1986 going up and down Riverside Drive, the wealthy part,” he says. He’d solicit co-op presidents, telling “Wall Street yuppies” that “if you don’t fix your front yard, who will?” He raised \$400,000 quickly, and “with that money, we were able to bypass the then-not-very vibrant parks department bureaucracy and address the things the neighborhood wanted fixed.” Wright is now head of Friends of Museum Park, which supports Theodore Roosevelt Park, near the American Museum of Natural History.

In northern Manhattan, singer Bette Midler founded the New York Restoration Project in 1995, after discovering that people were using Fort Washington Park and Fort Tryon Park as garbage dumps. Her staff raises money from an A-list group that includes Nicole Kidman, Sting, and Candice Bergen. With a \$10.1 million operating budget, NYRP has upgraded several parks, including Swindler Cove Park on the Harlem River (which it now manages) and Highbridge Park (a portion of which it also operates).

Over in Chelsea, the Friends of the High Line oversaw the conversion of an old rail line into one of New York’s hottest parks and continues to provide 70 percent of the budget. Part of Staten Island’s Greenbelt, a 2,800-acre near-wilderness, is run by the Greenbelt Conservancy, which funds and operates the popular Carousel for All Children. The rationale, according to conservancy president Kathleen Vorwick, is that the park will thrive “outside of the budget process.” No matter what the economic pressures in the rest of the city are, “the city knows the carousel will be maintained at the highest level.”

The public-private model is a godsend for a parks system that needs money. It’s no secret that the recent recession has pushed the city into a new fiscal crisis and that the parks department’s operating budget, like everything else, is facing the knife. Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s PlaNYC, a long-term plan proposed in 2007, envisions a city with pleasant, usable green spaces within a half-mile walk of 99 percent of New Yorkers. Private money may be the only way to bridge the gap between such ambitious plans and fiscal reality.

Many existing parks could use the financial help now, though people differ politically on whether the public-private partnership is the right model to provide the funding. In 2005, New York Times reporter Timothy Williams counted 18 abandoned cars in Pugsley Creek Park in the Bronx. In July 2010, the *Daily News* published photos of condom wrappers and hypodermic needles scattered along a path not far from a playground in northern Manhattan’s Highbridge Park. The bridge for which the park is named, linking northern Manhattan and the Bronx, has been closed for decades (though renovation plans are under way and the bridge is scheduled to reopen in 2013).

Geoffrey Croft, president of New York City Park Advocates and a longtime critic of the parks department, has inspected all of the city’s 1,700 parks. He can tick off myriad woes in the lesser-known ones, from invasive species like Japanese knotwood and porcelain-berry to

bathrooms with no toilet paper. He reports that some of the cars in Pugsley Creek Park had been there for 15 years. “We have money to build parks but not to take care of them, which is outrageous,” he says, maintaining that the extra funding should come primarily through tax money.

In a time of budget cuts, it’s not clear that that will happen, though Croft does raise a good objection to the public-private model: neglected parks aren’t generally in wealthy neighborhoods with ready donors nearby. Can the public-private model save parks without rich neighbors? Take the 1,100-acre Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, whose city budget is under \$5 million—smaller than tiny Bryant Park’s. “We have some grand plans,” says the chairman of the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy, Tony Cassino—from the Cross Country Hall of Fame, which inducted its first members early this year, to a new ice rink. The problem, of course, is that “we don’t have Fifth Avenue. We’re working with a very solid population of people in the borough, but we don’t have rows and rows of multimillionaires living right on the park.” But friends of the park and a few nearby private schools will contribute enough for some projects, and Cassino is raising money from golf tournaments and other events.

Outright partnerships with nonprofits aren’t the only way to bring private money into parks. Concessions—like hot-dog stands, restaurants, and even surprising sponsorships like NBC’s recent promotion of its short-lived show *The Cape*, which involved draping capes on statues in the parks—could potentially be another. Even parking spaces can generate revenue: Hudson River Park, on the west side of Manhattan, gets some of its operating income from a garage on Pier 40. (A few parks in other cities, such as Post Office Square in Boston, derive income from *subterranean* garages, which confer the additional advantage of moving cars away from curbs, where they make streets less pedestrian-friendly and tie up traffic.)

In New York, city policy generally requires that money from concessions goes not to individual parks or even to the parks department, but to the city’s general fund—“off in a Brink’s truck to City Hall,” as Wright puts it. But many groups have managed to maneuver around the requirement. The Central Park Conservancy, the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy, and NYRP have won the right to keep some proceeds to fund their own activities. NYRP, for instance, is using profits from the New Leaf Café in Fort Tryon Park to renovate bathrooms. The Bryant Park Corporation gets to keep all concession fees. And New York’s parks could tolerate many more dues-paying concessions than the city has currently licensed. Despite strips of green space running along Manhattan’s entire East River waterfront, for instance, there’s almost nowhere, except the South Street Seaport, where you can get a cup of coffee and watch the boats go by.

New York City and State demonstrated another way to tap private money a few years ago, when they created Brooklyn Bridge Park along the gentrifying Brooklyn waterfront. The plan for the park called for a few residential buildings to be built within the park’s footprint

and for the property taxes from those buildings to go directly to fund the park's operations. The approach is controversial, since it devotes property taxes to something that benefits primarily the locals; further, it may result in the park's being treated like a backyard for luxury condos rather than a truly welcoming public space. But there's no denying that it can be effective. The taxes, combined with concessions, will make the new park a self-financed operation. Meanwhile, a nonprofit called the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy has started raising funds for free movie nights, fitness classes, and kayaking.

Cities around the country are trying to replicate the success that New York's public-private partnerships have achieved. In San Francisco, Phil Ginsburg, the park system's general manager, has called on the parks to be "much more entrepreneurial, much more self-sufficient," citing New York as a model. San Francisco has negotiated deals with private groups such as Friends of Dolores Park to allow them to raise money privately and then keep control over how the money is spent. Chicago's Millennium Park suffered from huge delays and cost overruns, but it also collected millions in private donations in exchange for naming rights: the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, the McCormick Tribune Ice Skating Rink, and so on.

But it's important to note that as nonprofit organizations have assumed more and more control over New York's parks, they haven't just raised money; they have also taught the city's parks department ways to maintain parks that people want to visit. "We never pretend that we know everything," says Commissioner Benepe. As private groups have "pioneered innovative management techniques, we in the city have emulated them because we think it's a good idea." For instance, the city has begun an inspection program for all parks similar to Biederman's in Bryant Park.

Prior to the private groups' involvement, Benepe continues, "the government monopoly did a good job or did not." If it did a bad job, "there was no recourse for citizens to improve things." His surprising conclusion: public-private partnerships make parks "even more public." It's a model that all of the city's parks could try.

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