

PARKS AND RE-CREATION

by Mary Shustack
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Dan Biederman was instrumental in the revitalization of Bryant Park, which has become a year-round destination for tourists and New Yorkers alike.

For too many years, Bryant Park was a Manhattan landmark that New Yorkers knew to avoid.

It was a crime-filled hangout where drug deals and other unsavory activities thrived.

But thanks in large part to the efforts of Dan Biederman back in the early 1990s, Bryant Park was restored to a seven-acre gleaming oasis that draws New Yorkers and tourists no matter the season.

And while Bryant Park may be his most visible success, the Chappaqua resident's dedication to managing an array of public spaces with private funds both in New York and beyond has led to his being called the Frederick Law Olmsted of his generation – a nod to the 19th-century landscape architect known for Central Park and his passion for public places.

Biederman, now some 30-plus years into his self-designed career, takes it all in stride.

"I started this as a half-government, half-business person," he says, soon adding real estate to the mix.

He didn't have a clear path to follow.



"I kind of pioneered a different route. I manage these public spaces with private funding."

It's been quite a ride for the 1971 graduate of Scarsdale High School who spent his days there as a member of the track team, as a writer for the local newspaper and not surprisingly, as a devoted history and government student.

Biederman went on to graduate, magna cum laude, from Princeton with an A.B. from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in 1975. He earned an M.B.A. with Distinction from Harvard University's Graduate School of Business Administration two years later.

He got his start in New York City government with an internship with the City Council. It was when he was active in the city's community boards that he became involved in his signature work, Bryant Park, which the Rockefeller family was interested in revamping.

"They said 'Let's hire someone,'" Biederman recalls. "I got the job out of nowhere and it turned out to be the perfect fit."

Already, Biederman knew he wasn't suited to the 9-to-5, behind-a-desk-all-day life or the straight-ahead arena of government. He was intrigued by the idea of using his business skills to create a model in which public spaces could thrive without burdening the taxpayer.

Biederman knew he'd need more skills so he began to study real estate then moved on to architecture and design.

"I said 'I've got to train my eye,' so I started going to lectures."

Even with the major success of Bryant Park, a project that was under way for more than a decade, Biederman didn't realize he had begun the work that would fill his professional life.

"I didn't see any real career path," he says.

In a matter of a few years after the park's unveiling in 1992, though, he certainly recognized he had one.

By the mid-1990s, he could look back as the co-founder of the Grand Central Partnership, the 34th Street Partnership, the Bryant Park Restoration Corp. and the Chelsea Improvement Co., all projects that transformed New York City landmarks and districts into refreshed destinations.

He was making his mark – on his own terms.

"It's exciting to have varied responsibilities."

Over time, his success led to some tussles with city leadership, most notably with then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani. While Biederman would continue to work with New York, he knew it was time to branch out and founded his own firm, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, as the year 2000 approached.

Now, in addition to works throughout the city, Biederman can point to projects that have taken him to cities ranging from Los Angeles to Atlanta, Pittsburgh to Miami, sprucing up their parks, plazas and business improvement districts. The firm also does work around the world.

Right now, he's spending a lot of time in Boston, where the company is working on a series of projects including a revitalization of Boston Common. Closer to home, Biederman is getting involved in the future of Playland in Rye.

It's serious work, to be sure, but Biederman approaches it with an enthusiasm that's more than evident.

"This is not a boring career," he says, noting he now has skills that range from knowing "how to appoint a restroom well" to what type of music or flowers to select for a public space.

"There's nothing I don't have to work on."

With city and state governments feeling the economic pinch, it seems the ideal time for Biederman's public-private partnership ideas to thrive.

No matter where his work has taken him, Biederman says he's long relied on a most trusted adviser, his wife. Susan Duke Biederman is a fine arts lawyer and together they have raised 25-year-old Robert and 19-year-old Brooke.

He can't tell how many times she's listened to him rant about a project.

Or has himself been inspired by a random moment.

"There's no aspect of knowledge that's not useful," he says.

He could see a movie on a Saturday night with his wife and be hit with an idea he'd like to incorporate into a project.

It's an enthusiasm that he is proud of passing on.

"Most of the young people I've trained say they can never look at a city the same again," he says.

For Biederman, he knows the feeling – all too well.

"I do notice every single thing," he says, mentioning lamp posts, for example. "I can't turn it off."

These days, Biederman finds himself in Bryant Park often, sometimes three times a day. He might cut through to go to a meeting or actually pause to do some reading in the Southwest Porch area, watch a game of pingpong or marvel at the carousel.

"I've got to stop myself. The normal tendency is to write things down," he says. "I have to slow myself down and be 'a normal person' and enjoy the park the way (others) would."