

# The Sun

## The Fall and Rise of Bryant Park

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Editorial & Opinion

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Shrewd developers often name their buildings for their neighborhood's most attractive asset. In this tradition, the Durst Organization recently announced that it was conferring the address of One Bryant Park on its flashy new Midtown tower, whose major tenant will be the Bank of America. On an average day in good weather, lovely, crime-free Bryant Park is wildly popular, drawing some 5,300 visitors at midday, or 900 people an acre. It is almost surely the most used urban open space in the world, exceeding even St. Mark's in Venice. The New York Times calls it "Manhattan's town square."

Yet associating any new building with Bryant Park would have been unthinkable just 20 years ago — akin to naming a building One Needle Park, which would pretty well summarize the drug den that was then Bryant Park. I remember this well because the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, my former employer, had offices on West 40th Street, Bryant Park's southern boundary. We had ringside seats for the sordid dealing and using that went on openly in the park, nestled behind the New York Public Library.

Entrepreneur Michael Fuchs, who was the first chairman of HBO, which was headquartered across the

park on West 42nd Street, also remembers those days well. "It was the Wild West down there," he recalled recently. We had all come from uptown — Rockefeller Center, a good neighborhood. The Bryant Park area was so bad that people had no reason to go out. We developed a philosophy that we would make the HBO building self-sufficient, with a great cafeteria, gym, screenings, whatever people needed."

In retrospect, it may be hard to grasp that city government actually permitted the ongoing, daily degradation of such a magnificent asset. After all, the city-owned Bryant Park wasn't hidden in some obscure corner, far away from official eyes. It's been right there since the mid-19th century. It sits squarely in the middle of Midtown, surrounded by world-renowned landmarks. For example, the gorgeous Beaux-Arts New York Public Library, which opened in 1911 and uses two acres of Bryant Park, was designed by Carrère & Hastings. Raymond Hood's 1924 neo-Gothic American Radiator building, on West 40th Street, now the Bryant Park Hotel, is regarded by many architects as the finest building in New York.

The Beaux-Arts Bryant Park Studios Building, which opened in 1901, was built for a New York artist who had just returned from Paris, bringing with him the French emphasis on natural northern light. He commissioned lavish double-height workshop/residential studios with huge windows to capture the unobstructed light from Bryant Park. Yet in 1979, things were such a mess that the eminent urbanist, William Whyte, wrote about Bryant Park, "If you went out and hired the dope dealers, you couldn't get a more villainous crew to show the urgency of the situation."

Bryant Park had 150 reported robberies and 10 rapes annually, countless auto break-ins on the periphery, and a murder every other year. As a public park it was so mismanaged that it held down the property values of the surrounding neighborhood.

Today Bryant Park pumps up property values. Bank of America Senior Vice President John Saclarides says about the new tower, "Because of Bryant Park, we anticipate great employee happiness with our site. We think our employees will use the park for visitation, for reading, and for a remote office at lunch time." (The park now has free wireless fidelity Web access, known as "wi fi.") What happened?

In 1980 a group of civic-minded New Yorkers, property owners, and neighbors decided to rescue the park, and set up the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation. They spent seven years negotiating with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation before they succeeded in getting a 15-year lease, which began in 1988. (The lease was subsequently renewed for another five years.) The BPRC immediately closed the park for five years of rebuilding.

The old design — a formal French garden — had dated from 1934, when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, New York's master of public works, decided to elevate and isolate the park above the sidewalk. Instead of making Bryant Park an elegant respite from the congestion of midtown as intended, the isolationist design deterred desirable users while attracting undesirable users.

The new BPRC design aimed to re-people the park while raising revenues to pay for the expensive planned maintenance of several million dollars annually — far more than the city spent. The designers cut new entrances, tore down the iron fencing, ripped out high hedges, restored the fixtures, and added neoclassical kiosks for concessions.

Fixed benches were replaced with some 3,200 movable, pretty French chairs and 500 tables, providing what Mr. Biederman calls "freemarket seating." The park's Upper Terrace, which had been its most active drug market, was leased to the trendy Bryant Park Grill, which became an instant hot spot.

High standards of behavior are enforced by the security officers, whom Mr. Biederman calls "friendly but firm." They deter "little pieces of disorder," as Mr. Biederman calls misdemeanors. The old laissez-faire attitude toward disruptive behavior is gone. Neighboring business people and property owners are overjoyed.

The chairman of Mountain Development Corporation, which owns the now-landmarked Bryant Park Studios, Robert Lieb, recalled that crime was so bad in 1980 that his building could only be marketed by promising strong private security." The park should have been a positive for us, but the drug dealing and crime made it a negative," he said.

Today, he says, his company doesn't even have to work to rent space. "Our tenants, boutique designers, and manufacturers who specialize in sales to stores like Barney's and Nordstrom's, want to be on the park." Tenants include hip designers like Theory and Angel Zimick.

Bryant Park proves that if you build something beautiful that people can enjoy," Mr. Lieb said. "They will pay a premium price to be there." And, indeed, rents soared to the mid-50s today from \$14 a square foot in 1980.

Perhaps best of all, taxpayers aren't footing the bill for the park's \$4 million annual budget, which is all privately raised. While \$5 million of the \$18 million spent on capital improvements came from public funds, no public money has been spent on the park since 1996. It may well be the only urban park in the world supported by neither government nor charitable funds.

Because this park is integral to the functioning of Midtown, we ask commercial interests and users to pay for it," Mr. Biederman said.

Bryant Park's successful privatization is a tribute to a selfless innovation by the public sector — permitting the private sector to step in with resources and operational skills to restore and manage a splendid public space. Most public officials wouldn't have had the courage to let the private sector take over.

New York taxpayers owe heartfelt thanks to the four mayors, beginning with Edward Koch, and the four parks commissioners, finishing with Adrian Benepe, who made this happen.