



3 lessons for downtown Grand Rapids from New York city's busiest urban park

By Jim Harger, February 25, 2015



Dan Biederman, co-founder of Grand Central Partnership, 34th Street Partnership, and Bryant Park Corporation, in New York, will speak on Thursday, March 12, 6 p.m. at Kendall College of Art and Design, 17 Fountain Street NE. (Photo courtesy of BRV Corp.)

GRAND RAPIDS, MI - Dan Biederman, the co-founder of the Bryant Park Partnership in New York city, manages what has been described as the busiest park in the U.S. with millions of visitors each year.

[Bryant Park](#), a 6-acre park in the middle of Manhattan, went from being a gathering spot for drug dealers in the late 1970s to an vibrant urban oasis today, thanks to the partnership's innovative approach.

Biederman, who has consulted with 30 other cities about managing and developing public spaces, will bring lessons he has learned to Grand Rapids on Thursday, March 12, as part of [GRForward's](#) "Forward Thinking Speakers Series."

According to his website, Biederman and his consulting group, BRV, are experts in the "art and science of place-making and downtown management to public space projects and neighborhood redevelopments."

In a telephone interview with MLive and The Grand Rapids Press, Biederman outlined three key points he will share at his presentation, scheduled for 6 p.m. at Kendall College of Art and Design, 17 Fountain St. NE.

Pay attention to women

"If you want to know the success of a public space, go in and count the first 100 people you see. The more females you see, the more successful the space is," said Biederman.

"Everything we do is designed to attract women to the spaces and make them comfortable," Biederman said. "They are much more concerned about security and cleanliness."

That approach dictates food served, seating provided and plantings installed.

Large budgets are completely unnecessary

"One of the secrets is that you don't have to spend a lot of money," said Biederman, whose six-acre Bryant Park caters to visitors 12 months a year and is among the most actively used parks in the world. The park hosts square dancing, fly fishing, 35 tabletop board games and ping pong tournaments.

That said, Biederman notes Bryant Park now operates on an \$11 million a year budget, all of it privately raised from foundations and corporate sponsors such as HBO, which hosts an outdoor film series.

Avoid government funding

"Budgets from governments come with strings," Biederman said. "Bryant Park has had no public funding since 1997. It's been a key part of our success."

"We are experts at making dollars stretch and, secondly, we figure out ways to bring money in from private sources to match public money," said Biederman, who added that programming trumps fancy designs.

"Very often, the less famous architect is superior," said Biederman, who chuckled when he was informed that Alexander Calder and Maya Lin had designed two of downtown Grand Rapids' signature parks.