

Urban Planning Pioneer Seeks To Upgrade Playland

Dan Biederman has advised major cities across the globe and helped out right here in Westchester.

BY LAURA JOSEPH MOGIL



Dan Biederman is an observer, constantly examining urban settings and thinking about ways they can be upgraded. As owner of Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, he oversees a consulting firm that helps revitalize parks, public spaces, and neighborhood streetscapes in cities across the country. Even as he walks past the nucleus of stores on King Street in his hometown of Chappaqua, he is on the lookout for items that could be improved, pointing out the plastic “peanuts” drifting along the sidewalk and the string of white lights he believes is slowly strangling a curbside tree.

Biederman, 61, began his career by turning around Bryant Park, a formerly crime-ridden and unkempt area of Midtown Manhattan. In 1980, he co-founded the Bryant Park Corporation, followed by the Grand Central Partnership and 34th Street Partnership. His own firm, which he started in 1998, has consulted on projects in Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, and several other US cities. Add to the list Westchester’s very own Playland Park in Rye.

Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino has nothing but praise for Biederman. “He’s able to size up situations quickly, articulate his points clearly, and not be afraid to give you his candid assessment,” says Astorino. “The advice he offered with respect to attendance, attractions, sponsorships, and other areas had the benefit of being innovative, realistic, and focused on what mattered most to the long-term success of Playland: improving the experience for patrons and the bottom line for taxpayers.”

Biederman agrees. “The goal is to upgrade Playland to 21st-century standards. The rides will be better; the design will be better; the food will be better. It’s going to be really good,” he says. At first glance, Biederman says his career path seems to be a far cry from where he imagined he’d be as a young boy growing up in Scarsdale. “I started hiking when I was 9 and spent a lot of time in national parks, mainly in the White Mountains of New Hampshire,” he remarks. “At one point I thought I should be a park or forest ranger.”

Expanding his outdoor hobbies, in his teens he taught himself how to bird from a book and spent countless hours in college learning birdcalls from a record he played over and over again. “Birding is incredibly demanding and challenging,” he says. “I’ve been doing it for the past 43 years, and I’m still an intermediate.”



Biederman answering questions from visitors to Bryant Park

After graduating from Princeton University and receiving an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1977, Biederman landed a job at a large management-consulting firm in Manhattan, with the city of New York as his client. While he found the work interesting, he was soon ready to explore other possibilities. In order to expand his horizons, Biederman went out almost every night to programs of some sort, from lectures on architecture to local community board meetings. He was soon elected to Midtown Manhattan’s Community Board 5 and became its chairman at age 25. An incredible and life-changing experience, the position provided Biederman with the

opportunity to interact with many of the city's real estate impresarios, including presidential-hopeful Donald Trump.

Biederman also became involved with the 42nd Street Development Corporation, quickly assuming the position of treasurer, a post that he's held continuously since 1978. The nonprofit's founder and president, Fred Papert, introduced Biederman to the Rockefeller family. "He told me that they [the Rockefeller Brothers Fund] were looking for someone to 'fix' Bryant Park, which, in their opinion, was ruining The New York Public Library. At that time it was horrible, with crime, drugs, graffiti, urine, and everything that's bad," recalls Biederman.

In 1980, Biederman interviewed for the job and got it. So, while he didn't turn out to be a park ranger, he did get an unexpected and welcome opportunity to turn one of New York City's ugliest parks into a true gem. It took eight years and \$18 million, almost all of it privately raised, to turn the 9.6-acre park around.

Today, with Biederman as its president, Bryant Park is Midtown's social center, attracting more than 6 million people per year. It should come as no surprise that among the hundreds of exhibitions and events held in the park annually, there are twice-weekly birding tours in the spring and fall led by the New York City Audubon Society (Biederman is a former board member).

Even before the Bryant Park venture began to take off, Biederman was going through another major life change. In 1979 he was introduced to his future wife, Susan Duke Biederman, by a mutual friend. The pair married in 1981 and raised two children, Brooke, 23, and Robert, 28. "Beyond our love affair, it's been a real intellectual partnership. Susan's been very influential and is a phenomenal advisor. She's an incredibly bright person and a wonderful mother," Biederman says.

Their love and admiration is mutual. Susan, a fine-arts attorney and author, says, "Dan's got a brilliant mind and a bottomless heart. It's a wonderful combination." In addition, she describes her husband as being an unconventional thinker. "Frequently you think of someone who's unconventional as radical, who's different just to be different. But Dan's unconventional in that he looks for the solution to situations in a fresh fashion, but he does it in a very positive, earnest, and wholesome way," she adds.

The couple lived in Manhattan until 1991, when they decided to move up to Chappaqua with their young son. Their daughter was born shortly thereafter, but that didn't slow them down one bit. They brought the kids with them every summer to Europe, and, according to Biederman, a lot of his business ideas sprang from those trips.

"For example, I was inspired by the way Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen arranged their restaurants around their gardens. Also, the movable chairs in Green Park near Buckingham

Palace in London are fantastic,” he says. Bryant Park has over 4,500 movable chairs, and they are never locked up or taken in. “Everyone gets worried about the chairs being stolen, but that rarely happens,” remarks Biederman.

Biederman’s work now spans the country, with projects ranging from the Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston to the Coconut Grove Business Improvement District in Miami and Holladay Park in Portland, Oregon. He has also served on the advisory board to Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority.

While his work is all-consuming, Biederman still makes time for his hobbies. “I’m not retiring, because I really love what I’m doing, but if I did, I would be busy 40 hours a week.”

As for the future, Biederman's goal is to “run a town or a county or a city completely on a private basis with no tax revenue at all.” Applying his modus operandi for raising private funding and never accepting government money for his revitalization projects, Biederman says he'd target places with no tax base that are “ripe” for his offer. “I’ve got a list of 25 places, and I just need one of them to say ‘yes.’”