

PARDON HIS PROGRESS

**DANIEL BIEDERMAN SWEATS ALL THE DETAILS
IN A CRUSADE TO MAKE PARKS THAT WORK.**

BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN / PORTRAIT BY PATRICK PANTANO

Daniel Biederman's desire to improve America's parks has him patrolling green spaces from Santa Monica to Boston, issuing complaints about everything from a messy bicycle rack weld ("it looks like Play-Doh") to the quantity of caution barricade tape around an out-of-order bathroom ("people will think it's a crime scene"). When he is in Manhattan, in his office overlooking Bryant Park, he tries to speak with each of his employees daily—he describes it as essential to their professional development. ("I have to build them up so they can interact with clients.") But, as in the business of renovating parks, building up often involves tearing down. During a weekly meeting of his business improvement district minions, Biederman browbeat one employee over how he approached newspaper circulation executives (who, he explained, "are former truck drivers, with IQs of 97"); corrected the grammar of another; and ordered his social media team never to tell him a mention of one of his parks had "gone viral," which he dismissed as a cliché. Instead, he told the team, "Give me real data."

Asked about his tough leadership style, Biederman later said, "I can't have kindergarten."





He also can't achieve his goals alone. James Burnett, FASLA, who has worked with Biederman's consulting firm, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures (BRV), on parks in Dallas and Greensboro, North Carolina, says, "He has some good first lieutenants. They're mini-Dans who know what he would say."

It has been almost a quarter century since Biederman turned Bryant Park, once a haven for criminals and addicts, into a much-imitated "urban backyard," earning the nickname "the Midtown Messiah." And yet he has the air of a young man in a hurry. "I'm annoyed because it takes so long to open a new park," he says during a brisk inspection tour of Military Park, a triangle in Newark, New Jersey, that his consulting firm rebuilt and manages under a contract with that city. "I'm 61 already."

It is, by his count, the seventh park BRV has opened, and he is still trying to prove he knows what he is doing. Bryant Park was funded by the owners of adjacent office towers, who knew park improvements would increase property values. But Manhattan isn't like anyplace else. "People insulted me by saying it wouldn't work without the tall buildings," Biederman recalls, defiantly. Which is why, after establishing two more organizations (the Grand Central Partnership and the 34th Street Partnership, also funded by owners of adjoining properties), and "years of giving free advice," he decided to start a consulting company that would redevelop, and in some cases manage, parks in other cities. Those parks generally depend on corporate

and philanthropic support. "Government money comes with too many strings," says Biederman, who likes strings the way other people like cancer. (He also avoids RFPs, for a simple, Biedermalesque reason: "You don't know if you're going to win.") In its early years, BRV "bumped along for a while with just a few clients at a time," he says. But then his kids grew up and "I got more serious, pushing it." Now, he says, he has 15 projects in 11 states. The timing is right for Biederman: Using private funds to improve public spaces seems less troubling—or simply more necessary—than at any time since he received his Harvard MBA in 1977.

Not everyone approves of Biederman's approach. Honolulu's mayor, Kirk Caldwell, agreed to pay BRV \$1.2 million to orchestrate a renewal of Ala Moana Beach Park. (The fee, Biederman says, "includes a shitload of subs.") But predictably, some of the proposed ideas, including a restaurant and a stand-up surfing school, were controversial. Marti Townsend, the director of the Sierra Club's Hawaii chapter, said, "Any move to try and squeeze more money out of the already overburdened people for commercial park activities is heartbreaking." Biederman replied, "There are people who love Ala Moana the way it is. But our view is that it needs more programming and better equipment and enhanced food and drink options. The homeless are more dominant when there are fewer activities in the park." Of the opposition, Biederman says, "There's great dislike of mainlanders, but we're persisting."

Programming is essential to Biederman's approach to parks. He says he saves clients lots of money by putting in ping-pong tables, not plazas, and rolling bookshelves, not babbling brooks. "I tell them, 'You don't need big capital expenditures. Programming will take you a long way.'"

It's not surprising that he has complex relationships with landscape architects. "They all call here looking for projects," he says. But too many, he believes, focus on abstract design ideas. When he meets a landscape architect for the first time, "I can tell if it's going to be a good relationship if they come in and say, 'Program has to go first. We're not going to try to preempt your program with those squiggly lines we like to draw.'" He adds, "There are some landscape architects I wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole—many of them associated with Harvard."

Biederman's focus is more about making sure litter is picked up than about winning design awards. True, he obsesses about aesthetics, but more the aesthetics of chewing gum on sidewalks than the kind that make magazine covers. He relies largely on one horticulturist, Maureen Hackett, who at Military Park turned a sword-shaped fountain that was too expensive to restore into a bed of flowers. "We didn't have a landscape architect, which saved the client a lot of money," Biederman says.

(Hackett, part of Biederman's inner circle for 25 years—"we talk in shorthand"—works for Bryant Park three days a week, leaving time for private clients, including BRV.)

But he has worked on multiple projects with the Office of James Burnett, Sasaki Associates, and OLIN. Burnett, with whom he helped create the new LeBauer City Park in Greensboro, North Carolina (currently under construction), praises BRV's attention to detail: "They know how many trash pickups you'll need, how often you have to mow. They have the technical side down."

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But Biederman's greatest strength, Burnett says, is in coming up with ways to draw people into his parks. When they worked together on Dallas's Klyde Warren Park, which decks

the Woodall Rodgers Freeway, "we were apprehensive. Some of the ideas seemed a little peculiar, like the outdoor reading rooms. We were curious: Are people really going to want to sit and read a newspaper over a freeway in Dallas?" But Biederman was right—the reading rooms are very popular. "He's seen it before, and he knows what works," says Burnett, adding that with Biederman, "You build it, and they do come."

Alan Ward, FASLA, a principal at Sasaki, is working with BRV on a plan to improve the public spaces around Boston's Faneuil

Hall Marketplace, a collaboration, he says, in which “they propose ideas for programming, and we respond with design ideas.” (The project is in the approvals phase.) The two firms had previously worked together on Pittsburgh’s Schenley Park, which, he says, is regarded as an “enormous success,” thanks in part to Biederman’s involvement. Since Sasaki tends to bid on projects where programming is an important element, Ward adds, BRV is a natural partner.

On a warm May day, Biederman was inspecting Military Park, a favorite project not just because it’s a quick train ride from Manhattan but because it gives him a chance to prove that he can repeat the Bryant Park formula in a setting that couldn’t be more different from Midtown Manhattan. (And it is one of a small number of parks that BRV renovated and continues to manage.)

For almost 50 years, since the Newark riots of 1967, the park—half a mile from the city’s Penn Station—had been allowed to molder. Biederman was invited by Ray Chambers, a billionaire philanthropist who was raised in Newark, to work his magic on the park. He spent more than \$3 million on capital improvements, including disguising vents leading from an underground garage, adding a restaurant pavilion and an administration building (he loves showing off the tilework in the public restroom). But he had to accept “cast-in-place

concrete for the sidewalks—there are so many things we didn’t have money for,” he says. (He blames that on “over-market labor deals which are endemic in northeastern cities.”) He also didn’t have enough money to completely eradicate clover. All he can do on Newark’s budget is reseed the lawns—“at Bryant Park, we resod,” he explains. But the Newark lawns look great, even if Biederman won’t be happy until they

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look like lawns in Chappaqua (the northern New York City suburb where he and his wife, Susan Duke Biederman, an attorney and author, raised two children).

“I hope they don’t trample the grass,” he says as a couple of college students make their way toward a ping-pong table. As he waits, he notes that, at last count, 212 of the 214 café chairs placed in the park re-

main. (Biederman insists that chairs be untethered, even at night—treating people as thieves, he says, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.) Then he approached Jessica Sechrist, who is the park’s program coordinator, which she described as a 24/7 responsibility. “If anything happens on a weekend, the guys are trained to call me,” she says, with a Biederman-like suggestion that a wayward piece of litter would be important enough to interrupt her downtime.

Soon Biederman was peppering Sechrist with questions, part of a style he calls “management by walking around.” First up, what

was the head count on a recent afternoon? Sechrist told him 350. Biederman was thrilled; though Bryant Park's lunchtime head count reaches 4,000, Military Park is smaller. Indeed, 350 people divided by its four acres, he explains, is almost 100 an acre—and "100 people an acre looks busy." Next he asked what percent of the 350 were female, explaining that women won't go where they don't feel safe. And then he asked how many of the 350 were black, a question, he later explained, he asked because it's important to him that the park reflect the surrounding community. At Bryant Park, he says, his critics thought that with a private company running the park, "it would be all white people." His critics, he is happy to point out, were wrong.

Biederman began his rise during the Ed Koch administration (1978 to 1989), with the founding of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (now the Bryant Park Corporation) and the Grand Central Partnership; he added the 34th Street Partnership under Mayor David Dinkins. But things didn't go well for Biederman under the next mayor, Rudy Giuliani, who appeared to resent his power (and probably the fact that he was drawing three salaries of more than \$200,000 each). In 1999, Giuliani forced him out of one of his kingdoms, the Grand Central Partnership, leaving him to run Bryant Park Corporation and the 34th Street Partnership, each of which pays him more than \$300,000 a year. (He refused to disclose what he earns from BRV, saying clients would then start "hondling" him on fees.)

But he gained as much as he lost from the fight with Giuliani. "By surviving Giuliani, I became a good guy of the left, because they hate Giuliani so much," he says. Luckily for him, the left may include many big-city mayors.

It was around the time Giuliani shrank Biederman's domain that he launched his consulting firm. He expected the triple-dipping could raise eyebrows. "I anticipated criticism, but it hasn't come. It's the one advantage of aging. When I was in my 40s everyone resented everything I did. Now nobody resents anything I do."

And though he won't say how he divides his time among his various operations, it's clear he is still hands-on at Bryant Park and the 34th Street Partnership. At a recent meeting with the employees of his business improvement districts—one of the weekly get-togethers he insists on—he proposed expanding the hours that Bryant Park's putting green and ping-pong tables are open, he says, "as a defense against crazy homeless people exposing themselves." Then he looked at an employee's photos of overflowing trash pails on 34th Street, time- and date-stamped so that Biederman can order changes to routes and shifts to ensure that specific pails are emptied when they need to be. "We can't fall into the bad habit of managing for the convenience of our staff," he tells them.

No one would ever accuse Biederman of that. ●

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