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A Small Plan

right: The park is active year round. Photo: Bryant Park Restoration Corporation

Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer's self-assertive little food kiosks and their first of a planned two restaurant pavilions have now brought the design for the new Bryant Park nearly to completion. Some ten years in the making, under the direction of the Philadelphia-based landscape architects the Olin Partnership, the park has attracted wide and favorable critical attention, and it is easy to see why. What the designers did still looks good, and it is well maintained and well used. It is a success.

In planning the renovation, they had a host of things to consider, both stimulating and daunting. The site itself, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and 40th and 42nd Streets, is smack in the middle of midtown Manhattan, and it is also rich in New-York lore. An amazing receiving reservoir, in the Egyptian-revival taste, once stood on the eastern side of the block, and on the rest of the site was New York's version of the Crystal Palace, which, emulating the English original, burned in 1858.

Bryant Park, along with many of New York's other public spaces—Washington Square, Lincoln Square, Columbus Circle—is named for a real person. And not just a real person, but also an artist, William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), who, in addition to being a distinguished New York journalist, wrote "Thanatopsis," everybody's great-grandmother's favorite long poem:

*To him who in the love of Nature holds Communion
with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language . . .*

On the other hand, the Bryant Park site also has a few notable disadvantages. For one thing, it is effectively walled off from Fifth, the decidedly tonier avenue, by Carrère and Hastings's 1911 New York Public Library. It is tantalizing to imagine how nice it would be if the main entrance to the library were also somehow an entrance through the building and into the park. The other side of the site, until only about fifty years ago, opened quite unpropitiously onto—or, more accurately, under—the Sixth Avenue elevated train track, the one that King Kong stomped around on in the movie.

The landscape design that the Olin Partnership was asked to renovate was done in 1934 as a part of Robert Moses's marathon rebuilding of New York City's parks.



It conceived of the place as an oasis set apart and somewhat secluded from the city. This was a strategy the design shared with New York's very much larger and heavily admired Central Park. And, very much like its more famous relation, Bryant Park had become the scene not just of pleasant pastoral musings, but also of some more aggressively un-social behavior. In the mid 1970s the AIA guide to New York listed among the park's features "a convention of drug dealers."

From a horticultural standpoint the park's most prominent feature was a formal planting of large sycamore trees (*Platanus occidentalis*) that were relentlessly admired by Moses's designers, and which have lately become almost as reviled as Moses himself, trees being as subject to fashion as anything else. "If native to an area, do not remove the tree," counsels contemporary plant guru Michael Dirr, "however, do not plant it."

So, with all these challenges, and all these rich resonances, what did the Olin Partnership actually do in Bryant Park?

In terms of design they did—in two words—almost nothing. They added more entrances. They removed plantings that screened the park from the street. They added places for people to sit. They kept the sycamore trees.

Having said that, one should also note that between the decision to do these relatively straightforward things and the ability to do them well lies a very wide gulf. The Olin Partnership knows how to do these things really well, and with a meticulous but still unflashy attention to detail.

It is also important to note that, on the management front, several eminently duckable issues were squarely faced: security guards were provided to create the feeling as well as the fact of public safety. Clean-up crews, à la Disney, kept the place tidy. And teams of horticulturists were hired in acknowledgment of the ineluctable fact that landscapes require regular, ongoing attention.

All of this was very much in the spirit of William H. Whyte, who collaborated on the project. Whyte, who published *The Organization Man*, a classic tract on American corporate culture, in 1956, subsequently spent several decades painstakingly observing and describing the features that help—and that do not help—make public spaces user-friendly. His conclusions? First, that people tend to use a public space if there is something there for them to sit on—a bench, for instance. Further, he deduced that people feel more comfortable sitting on that bench, and that they therefore sit on it longer and more frequently, if it is in an environment that feels secure—because of the presence of formal security personnel, perhaps, but also because of the presence of other people.

Heady stuff. Partly because it is so obvious. And, too, because it obviously is not obvious to some of the people who design our public places.

It is tempting to wonder whether or not this kind of design approach—relaxed in the part, rigorous in the details—doesn't have general utility in a world where students of landscape and architecture are trained, at least implicitly, to strive for subtlety and originality. When was the last time someone got praised for figuring out how simple the solution to a design problem could actually be and still be right?

By not encouraging originality, of course, we would run the risk of actively discouraging it. But still there must

be some kind of calculus whereby we can evaluate the socio-cultural benefits of genius on the one hand and something that is merely sensible on the other. How many church steeples by Wren or Hawksmore, for instance, might we be willing to sacrifice in order to get rid of a whole slew of the fiberglass versions that dot the landscape? How many fine houses by Wright or Neutra would we trade in for neighborhoods where all the houses take modest care in their relationship to the street, to each other, and the communities they help create?

The answers to questions like these are unclear. But one thing is very clear indeed: the design approach that the Olin Partnership took in their renovation of Bryant Park is as teachable as it is admirable, and so it is also repeatable, almost infinitely.

Oh yes, and by the bye: Who ever said that Americans feel uncomfortable sitting in a square? The droves of people sitting in Bryant Park every day look very com-

bottom: The great lawn's greenery. *Photo:* Bryant Park Restoration Corporation



fortable. But then there are those who still maintain that New Yorkers, even in this current era of civility and good feelings, don't really act like Americans.