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ARCHITECTURE VIEW; Bryant Park, An Out-of-Town Experience

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Correction Appended

Why is it that whenever a moment of genuine joy appears in the physical fabric of New York, the first impulse is to think you must be somewhere else? Are we so used to the notion of New York as harsh, dirty and dangerous -- which it so often is -- that when we encounter something pleasant, we think not of how good this part of New York is but of how it makes us feel transported to a different place?

It says much about our sensibilities toward the city in the gloomy 90's that Bryant Park, in many ways the quintessential New York urban park, now feels like part of another city altogether. This is not because the team of architects and landscape designers who have overseen the \$8.9 million restoration of the park have tried to purge the midtown square of its New York identity. Quite the contrary. They have preserved those physical qualities that make this unusual park feel like the Manhattan landmark it is. Rather, it is the mood of the park -- easy, relaxed, chatty, like the square of a small town -- that makes the new Bryant Park feel as if it has been airlifted out of the West 40's and dropped into some idyllic landscape far, far away. Security guards who smile and say "Good morning"? Maintenance workers who pick up papers as soon as they fall to the ground? This is not the New York I know.

The social transformation of Bryant Park is as astonishing as its architectural evolution, and a great deal less subtle. Many aspects of the park's physical design are almost the same as they have been since the park was elaborately reconstructed under Robert Moses in 1934, though the small changes that have been made are vastly important in their psychological effect. But the change in the park's usage since it reopened last month has been massive. Where once the park was the home of derelicts, drug dealers and drug users, it is now awash with office workers, shoppers, strollers and readers from the New York Public Library next door.

Yet this park has not been gentrified beyond all reason; on a recent lunch hour, when office workers poured in from surrounding buildings, they shared benches with people who were quite obviously not rushing back upstairs to check their faxes. The poor do not appear to have been driven out of the park, but merely to have begun to share it. There was a generous ethnic mix and, in what experts say is a good indication of the public's belief in the safety of a public open space, at least as many women as men.

The redesign of Bryant Park is an experiment in management and politics as much as in design. This square is a city-owned park, but responsibility for both its physical rehabilitation and its upkeep has been ceded to the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, whose funds come from a combination of sources, including the city, private donors, and the property owners and businesses surrounding the park. The shift, which went into effect some years ago as a means of financing a renovation that was beyond the means of the financially strapped city, marks the first time that a private group has been given effective control of a city park.

As a theoretical symbol of our society's shift toward privatization, the move was disturbing. In practical terms, however, it has yielded only good results. Under the city's aegis, Bryant Park was a dilapidated den of drug dealers; under the corporation's enlightened supervision, it has become a more truly public place than at any time in the last generation.

And while the design is restrained -- it had to be, given the park's landmark status and the insistence of the Landmarks Preservation Commission that the basic elements of the park's old design be preserved -- this renovation should not be sold short as a work of architecture. It's in fact rather remarkable: a plethora of small changes in an unworkable design that, taken together, fix what was broken.

At first glance, the park looks almost the same, just a cleaner and fresher version of the old. And many visitors will probably never see it as anything other than that. But the cumulative effect of the small changes is to render it a dramatically different place -- vastly more open than before, much more tied to the street and to the city around it.

In the Robert Moses renovation, Bryant Park was reconstructed on a podium, set several steps above the street, and cut off from the city by a series of plinths, balustrades, high hedges and granite walls. The park could not be seen clearly from the street, and people inside could not see back out to the sidewalk, a set of conditions ideal for drug dealers but of little comfort to anyone else.

The current redesign, by a team led by Hannah/Olin Ltd., landscape architects, opens it all up. A wide new entrance along 42d Street in the

middle of the park has been added to the original entrances on the corners and on the Avenue of the Americas, and the old entrances have been widened and the steps made more gradual to increase visibility. The hedges are gone, and magnificent 300-foot perennial borders, designed by Lynden B. Miller, have appeared. There are kiosks at the corner of 42d Street and the Avenue of the Americas designed by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates that strike a neat balance between playfulness and the Beaux-Arts traditions of the park. A handsome temporary stage has been set up for a series of concerts by young artists that will begin later this month. And the small stone Beaux-Arts buildings at the corner of the park have been renovated into new public restrooms by the architects Kupiec & Koutsomitis. Daniel A. Biederman, the restoration corporation's executive director, and Arthur Rosenblatt, capital projects director, oversaw the whole team.

The Beaux-Arts formality of Bryant Park is still there, for better or for worse, and it has even been enhanced: 14 elaborate lighting stanchions based on those designed by Carrere & Hastings for the New York Public Library next door have been cast in bronze and placed around the park's entrances. The Beaux-Arts layout has never really made much sense except as a means of relating the park to the library, whose dramatic rear facade forms the park's east wall. But since the park couldn't be redesigned from scratch, what we have is an object lesson in how refinements can make an ill-conceived plan function in a completely different way. This is architectural fine-tuning at its best.

For all that the architects, landscape architects and the restoration corporation have achieved here, the true guiding light of this park was William H. Whyte Jr., the distinguished observer of public space. Mr. Whyte's theories about how people use urban space formed the philosophical basis for the redesign and guided all the decisions the designers made. He understood that the problem of Bryant Park was its perception as an enclosure cut off from the city; he knew that, paradoxically, people feel safer when not cut off from the city, and that they feel safer in the kind of public space they think they have some control over. Mr. Whyte's belief that people want a sense of empowerment over their public space extends to such details as seating. He urged the restoration corporation to buy loose seating as well as fixed benches, which resulted in an order for 1,000 movable chairs of the style seen in French parks.

Bryant Park is a triumph for many -- but most of all, it stands as a reminder that William H. Whyte Jr. is our prophet of urban space.

Correction: May 17, 1992, Sunday

An article on May 3 about Bryant Park in Manhattan referred incorrectly to the landscape architectural firm in charge of the redesign. It is Hanna/Olin.

Photo: The entrance to Bryant Park at 42d Street and the Avenue of the Americas -- The new mood is easy, relaxed, chatty. (Jack Manning/The New York Times)

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