Building a World-Class City: Community Connections
Best practices from around the world

Excerpt:
Bryant Park, NYC – The Power of Community



Bringing people together in a safe, welcoming, green space is an effective way to promote social cohesion, trust, and to build strong communities. Social connections are vital to create shared bonds and a vibrant environment. Bryant Park is a perfect example of a place to meet, exchange ideas, and enjoy nature. A 9.6 acre parcel of land in the middle of one of the busiest cities in the world and adjacent to the NYC Public Library, it has a long history and tradition:

- First opened in 1686
- Traversed by George Washington and his troops in their retreat from the Battle of Long Island in 1776
- In the 1840's, the area was converted into a aqueduct and reservoir system that was described as "one of the greatest engineering triumph of 19th century America."[1] An adjacent park was added shortly following.
- In 1853, the Crystal Palace at the park was an exhibition of the latest advances in mechanical and industrial ingenuity. It featured a 315-foot-tall Latting Observatory, the

[1] https://bryantpark.org/the-park/history

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tallest building at the time, and offered patrons unobstructed views of Staten Island, Queens, and New Jersey. "The first of its kind in New York City, the *Crystal Palace Exhibition* set off one of the first major tourism booms in New York with over one million visitors."[2] It was lost in an 1856 fire.

- In 1884, Reservoir Square as it was known, was renamed Bryant Park, to honor the recently deceased Romantic poet, longtime editor of the New York Evening Post, and civic reformer, William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878).
- In 1934, the Park was redesigned and opened again to the Public.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, the park had fallen into disrepair amidst a period of financial crisis and become a center of NYC's drug trade. In a six-month period in 1980, undercover officers made over 400 drug-related arrests in the park. In that same year, a group of concerned citizens joined with the city government and the NYC Public Library to form the Bryant Park Management Corporation. In the words of an Urban Land Institute case study, these key executives "… began experimenting with a series of efforts to bring people back to the park, while also exploring how to generate revenue."[3]

Within a few years, they were able to eradicate the drug trade and convert this community blight into a gathering place for workers, tourists, and NYC residents. Today, there are several thriving restaurants in the park. The evening hours feature events such as outdoor movie nights and group yoga classes in the summer and a family skating rink and Christmas market in the winter.

Bryant Park provides a perfect example of how committed citizens, responsive government, and the public can join to improve their environment, provide safe, beautiful places for people to gather and in the process, promote stronger, healthier communities together.

[2] ibid
[3] ibid

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