



From Open Spaces to Vital Places

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Foreword

The Nashville Civic Square is an exciting development that will create a place of beauty and natural respite in the heart of downtown. It has the potential of bringing enormous benefits to the city and its citizens and becoming a place of significant community importance. As well as providing a natural haven from city life, the park could be a community meeting spot, tourist destination, catalyst for redevelopment, and retreat for workers at lunchtime. The careful consideration being put into its design will help make the park accessible and enjoyable to diverse groups of people.

Even a well-designed park will not become a popular destination unless it is well maintained and managed. This is because a great urban park is not a design, it is a *place* – a place that draws people because of its special features and activities, a place that reflects a city’s image and personality. Its success is based on the tangible and intangible values it provides to the community.¹

The secret to a successful urban park is in its management. This paper looks at the management of two of the most successful public spaces in the United States – New York’s Bryant Park and Portland’s Pioneer Courthouse Square – as well as a few others around the nation and explores what makes them work.

Introduction

Throughout history, the fundamental role of a public square or park has been that of meeting place and marketplace. Over the years, many have changed from centers of activity to barren, often unsightly, spaces. More recently, park funds were slashed and parks became havens for drug dealing, prostitution, and other ‘undesirable’ activities. In response, citizens formed ‘friends of the parks’ groups to regain ownership, and several of the groups went on to create substantive partnerships to increase park funding and maintenance. Cash-strapped cities, in partnership with these groups, began taking advantage of private funds.²

A public park can be an asset or a liability. A park that is an asset offers a safe, clean, and attractive environment. It is a place to meet other people, and it provides a variety of things to do. In contrast, parks that are liabilities are empty and underused, poorly maintained, and home to illicit activities. These parks are found not only in cities that lack the funds to maintain their public spaces, but also in wealthy cities. Although money is important, management is the key.

What is needed to address the complex issues of a public space is focused, innovative, ongoing management. Successful parks have dedicated managers who think creatively and listen to the needs of visitors. These managers understand the ‘pulse’ of the park and are so in tune with the use patterns that graffiti is removed immediately and trash receptacles are emptied at just the right time. A well-managed park gives out visible signs that someone is in charge.³

Far too often, how people will use a public space is not taken into consideration until after it is created. As a result, significant retrofitting occurs in failed spaces because appropriate uses were not considered at the outset.⁴ Parks that are planned without social vision turn into parks that people think are boring. When the people stop visiting a park, it becomes a space with no purpose, and then leadership and funding disappear. What is needed to turn a place around – or to create a great park from its inception – is vision, bold leadership, and effective management.

Partnerships

Increasingly, public park agencies are no longer capable of or expected to manage parks. Citizens are becoming more involved in their communities and governments are moving into an age of partnerships where they're working with people, not just for them. This is evidenced in the rise of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), community policing, and private park management.⁵

Many government agencies are finding they can manage programs more effectively in partnerships with nonprofit organizations than they can by themselves. This is ringing true for public parks, with park agencies often discovering they have a vision that goes beyond what they can achieve on their own, and that parks benefit from the energy, expertise, and resources of a variety of partners.

Part of it is financial. Since public funding is often inadequate and inconsistent, successful parks depend on a combination of both public and private money. A non-profit group has the fundraising flexibility to raise money from private sources through a variety of creative avenues, which can, in turn, leverage public sources. Non-profits can also operate more efficiently, as they tend to be more streamlined and are able to act quickly.

Non-profit organizations often garner more community credibility through their associations with diverse constituencies, such as businesses and community groups, and their goal of working on behalf of the public's interest. This credibility with residents and local institutions allows the nonprofit to tap key leaders for support and active engagement in the park.

Organizationally, a non-profit has the flexibility to experiment with new programs, hire consultants, and do whatever else is needed to get a job done. A management group also has more time and focus to produce factual data on user numbers, increased property values, and reduced crime rates, which are useful in securing funding, community support, and media coverage. Because of its concentrated focus on the park or parks it manages, a non-profit can also more efficiently deal with short-term solutions as well as long-term planning and build a lasting support system.

Finally, a separate non-profit entity has the capacity for relentless follow-up and accountability.



A mother and child enjoy Bryant Park. *Photo: Urban Place Consulting Group, Inc.*

The Sacramento Downtown Partnership is a good example of a public-private partnership that was essential for an urban park. In the 1980s, Cesar Chavez Park in Sacramento, California, underwent a major redesign to remove ‘undesirable’ activity, but because no emphasis was placed on attracting desirable activity, the effort failed. The downtown BID, whose members include approximately 200 property owners, took over and formed the Sacramento Downtown Partnership, a joint effort between the BID, city, county, and state.

The Partnership transformed the park into a thriving activity center. Most notably, it brought in Café Soleil, which is now the highest revenue-generator per square foot in Sacramento, to attract nearby workers and function as a safety presence. It also introduced hot food vendors, bakeries, and live jazz to the once-struggling farmers market. Downtown employees now frequent the park at lunchtime and community members visit the park for the wide variety of events.⁶

Executive Director Michael Ault said, “We realized very early on the need for a public-private partnership between the BID, the government, businesses, community members, nearby office workers – you name it – in order to turn the park around and make it a focal point and place of constant activity. The success of Cesar Chavez Park would not have been possible without the Partnership making the community realize the importance of bringing the park back.”

Programming

Programming, such as activities and concessions, gives people a reason to go a park and gradually changes their attitude toward the area. Great civic parks have a variety of destinations within them – something for everyone, including cafes, fountains, game areas, and events – that draw people throughout the day. Well thought out and high quality services attract return customers and entice out-of-town visitors. Clustering uses is essential, and a park with plenty of seating and places to buy lunch, coffee, and a newspaper will attract more people than a park with few seats and no vendors.⁷

The presence of activities and concessions increases safe, positive use in a park as every visitor and vendor acts as a ‘set of eyes’ that discourages illicit activity. Jennifer Polver, executive director of Portland’s Pioneer Courthouse Square, said, “The worst thing to do to a public space is take a hands-off approach. You’ll end up with a space that’s taken over by homeless people and drug dealers.” Ideally, programming should occur from early morning to night in order to provide ‘eyes’ all day long.

Events are a great way to add activity to a park and bring in revenue. Renting part of the space to community groups and businesses encourages involvement and creates a sense of communal ownership. Farmers markets, craft fairs, art competitions, children’s Halloween parades, and New Year’s Eve fireworks are just a few examples of events hosted by successful parks. Cultural



A diverse group of people gathering together to play and watch chess is a daily tradition in New York City’s Bryant Park. The Reading Room, in the background, loans books and periodicals to park visitors for free.
Photo: Urban Place Consulting Group, Inc.

groups may want to sponsor events in the park, such as a Cinco de Mayo or Mardi Gras festival. Children's groups may use the space for puppet shows and storytelling. Businesses may rent the space to launch products or hold informational fairs. The possibilities are endless and should incorporate the interests and strengths of the city and its stakeholders.

The most successful urban parks bring in revenue from event and program sponsorships, event rental, and vendor leases. Partnering with businesses to sponsor an event or program is a great way to secure funding and build lasting systems of support. Private companies can pick up the bill for costly events, such as in Austin, Texas, where Dell Computer sponsored the Parks and Recreation Department's \$300,000 Yule Fest in return for publicity and recognition.⁸ The private sector is realizing that parks have positive public values worth associating with. The right sponsors won't want to hang banners around the park. They'll want to tap into the park's assets, which to them, means the people who visit.⁹

Public spaces have always gone hand in hand with commerce, but it's important to avoid excessive commercialization. Corporate sponsorship should supplement, not replace, other forms of fundraising. Events should be open to the public and either free or low cost. The National Mall's NFL Kickoff event and Bryant Park's Fashion Week continue to receive criticism for allowing private groups to take over the space for long periods of time, rendering the space unusable to the public. Examples of events that are kept in balance with public use are Bryant Park's HBO movie nights, the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, and Pioneer Courthouse Square's Fashion Week, which allows the public to vote at the fashion show and present an annual People's Choice award. It is also important to avoid over-commercialization in design. This may mean not permitting retail kiosks or storefronts to display excessive corporate ads, or could call for not allowing large corporate chains, such as Starbucks, to lease kiosks.

Safety & Maintenance

Security in a park is absolutely essential, and a single violent incident can eliminate use by the public. Ensuring park safety requires an integrative strategy that starts with design and includes maintenance, programming, and citizen involvement.¹⁰ It also necessitates close management, because a park manager's familiarity with the park will provide greater awareness and sensitivity to potential safety problems.

Urbanologist William H. Whyte once said, "So-called 'undesirables' are not the problem. It is the measures that are taken to combat them that are the problem. ...The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make the place attractive to everyone else."¹¹ When a large number of people are using parks and in a positive way, others feel more secure. A positive image will attract more people, which in turn will increase natural surveillance and perceptions that the area is safe. The Citizens' Taskforce on the Use and Security of Central Park found there was a direct connection between the volume of park use and the feeling of safety: The more people involved in positive activities; the less anti-social behavior that took place.¹²

The issue of perceived risk is particularly prevalent in women's use of public space. Women are more likely to use parks less after dark or avoid them completely due to safety concerns. They are aware of the presence of other women users and tend to use this to gauge an area's safety. Research indicates that creating greater opportunities for park use by women, children, and seniors is an important first step for enhancing safety.

A well-maintained park makes the space more attractive and also enhances the feeling of safety. Litter, graffiti, vandalism, and poorly maintained landscaping suggest that an area is uncared for and has minimal supervision. Promptly removing graffiti, replacing damaged fixtures, and emptying garbage cans greatly reduces the incentive to deface an area. This necessitates a management system that pays keen attention to detail. Creative community projects, such as mural paintings and painted trash receptacles, are also helpful in curbing graffiti and signaling community 'ownership.'

Case Studies

Pioneer Courthouse Square and Bryant Park are considered two of the most successful public spaces in the nation. This is attributed largely to their management systems and programming, which are self-supporting and highly regarded.

Pioneer Courthouse Square

Pioneer Courthouse Square is situated in the heart of Downtown Portland, Oregon, and is the most visited site in the state. The one-acre block features a brick ground, terraced steps that double as seating areas, plentiful public art, a waterfall fountain, restrooms, and several vendors. Amenities are placed throughout the square to spread activity to several areas. Transit surrounds the space on three sides, including the bus mall on the south and light rail on the east and west.

The square's tenants include Starbucks, Powell's Travel Store, Portland Visitor Information Center, Travelex currency exchange, a Bank of America ATM, three food carts, a flower cart, and the only TriMet customer service center in Portland. (TriMet operates the regional light rail, streetcar, and bus service.) The Theatre on the Square, located below ground, seats 75 and shows a short film on Portland and the Northwest region every 30 minutes.

A diverse group of people use the square, including tourists, families, chess players, business people, and commuters. An estimated eight million people touch the space each year, including commuters who use the transit stops. About 750,000 people a year use the Visitor Information Center, TriMet ticket counter, and Powell's bookstore.

Constant activity attracts a large volume of people, which helps with security and maintenance. In the past, sculptures were vandalized and had pieces broken off, but with increased foot traffic and heightened security measures nothing has been damaged in the square in several years. The full range of programming has brought more 'eyes,' and all of the tenants also act as 'eyes and ears' for the square.



Portland Courthouse Square attract an average of 21,000 people a day. *Photo: Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org.*

Management

The square is managed by Pioneer Courthouse Square, Inc. (PCSI), a non-profit organization, which was created by the City of Portland in 1984, the same year the square officially opened. It functions as a quasi-private organization and extension of the city and is organized similar to a board or authority. Its board of trustees is comprised of 24 downtown stakeholders: eight property owners; eight regional representatives, including a person from TriMet and Portland Visitors Association; the City Commissioner in charge of Parks & Recreation; and a community member at large, who currently is a landscape architect leasing a downtown office.

Annual Operating Budget

\$1,400,000

Revenue

Square Rental: Rental of the square is PCSI's biggest revenue source, and there are approximately 350 events a year. Some of the annual events include the Festival of Flowers, Senior Prom (for senior citizens), High Noon Tunes, and the holiday Tree Lighting. The elevated speaker's podium attracts presidential hopefuls and other political speakers, and the underground theatre is often rented out for product launches, meetings, and lectures.

Commercial Leases: Collectively, tenant leases bring in almost \$300,000 a year.

City of Portland: The square receives a \$300,000 annual subsidy from the city to cover security and janitorial expenses.

Community Bricks: The ground of the square is made of bricks, and community members can sponsor a brick for \$100 a piece. It was the revenue from the brick sponsorships that allowed the square to be built initially. Currently, there are about 69,000 personalized bricks.

Sponsorships and Advertising: Businesses sponsor annual events in exchange for recognition in marketing materials and media coverage. Paid advertising opportunities exist on the Preview Wall, located next to Theatre on the Square and featuring three flat-screen monitors that accommodate audio/visual media, and the Media Wall, located behind the Informational Center and offering 100 square feet of monitors with cycling still images and live video.

Expenses

Office Space: PCSI rents an office space across from the square, as well as a storage area for everything from barricades to light bulbs.

Security (\$250,000/year): Security is contracted out through the Portland Business Alliance, the downtown BID, and a uniformed and armed security guard is on duty every day between 8:00 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. (The square closes at midnight.) Polver said the renovations of the public restrooms did wonders for security. Before the marble floors were installed and security officers were hired, heroin users and dealers frequented the restrooms, and Polver had to ask them herself to take their business elsewhere. “Peoples’ behavior rises to the occasion of those around them,” she said. “Heroin addicts are less likely to shoot up on marble floors.”

Janitorial (\$50,000/year): Janitorial workers, also contracted through the BID, perform daily cleaning services such as pressure washing and bathroom cleaning. The city maintains flowerbeds and trees along the border of the square, and hanging flower baskets are funded by the tenants.

Marketing: Attracting media to the area is easy since it is the epicenter of downtown. PCSI’s marketing expenses are minimal because it trades resources as much as possible. For example, TriMet gives PCSI free ads on the sides of its buses, and in return receives ad space at events. Television stations are given exclusivity if the square receives airtime. PCSI distributes to visitors a quarterly brochure that lists that season’s events and the sponsors that make them possible.

Staff

There are five full-time staff members. The executive director handles staff and organizational management, board interface, business proposals for revenue and efficiency, annual schedules, daily finances, legal contracting, and media sponsorships. The event director manages all events and client relations. The facility and production manager is in charge of everything that is stored, brought onto, and used on the premises and oversees equipment for events, HVAC, security, and the daily repairs. The marketing director publicizes events, produces marketing materials, and secures media coverage. The receptionist greets visitors, answers the phone, and performs administrative duties. PCSI outsources for its accounting (annual audit and monthly statements), security, janitorial team, and event vendors (for such elements as lighting, flowers, and sound).

What Works

PCSI trained the tenants to work cooperatively and encourage visitors to use multiple services in the square. For example, the Information Center encourages visitors to take mass transit (and utilize the TriMet ticket office), buy a coffee (at Starbucks), purchase a travel book or memento (at Powell's), and watch the Portland film in the Theatre on the Square. TriMet tries not to be too quick to send people off on buses and instead encourages visitors to utilize the square's services and vendors. What also works particularly well is how the square is surrounded on three sides by transit, how it was well designed to accommodate events, and that it attracts tourists with the Visitor Information Center and Powell's bookstore.

Challenges

The most challenging aspect is the workload. There is an event almost every day of the year, and the biggest events are on holidays. The organization is understaffed and hopes to add two staff members in the areas of long-term planning and long-term fundraising and development (to get long-term sponsorships). Also, in the past, it was difficult to get the city to promptly fix the daily amenities – from toilets to the freight elevator – but now, after having built a relationship with each service provider (the plumber, et al), repairs are made quickly. PCSI makes the city's life easier by handling these daily issues, and it provides a better service to the square's visitors and tenants by addressing these needs more promptly than the city is able to do on its own.¹³

Bryant Park



Nearby workers flock to Bryant Park during lunch hours, especially in warm weather months. Photo: Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org.

Bryant Park sits on six acres in the middle of Midtown New York City. It is one of the most crowded urban spaces in the world. The park features a large lawn framed by flowers and tree-lined walkways. Among its amenities are benches, movable chairs, a historic fountain, a carousel, and game areas for chess, backgammon, and the French game of pétanque. Eight coffee, snack, and newspaper kiosks bracket the park entrances, providing a welcoming, yet watchful eye. The upscale Bryant Park Grill shares the New York Public Library's rear wall and turns what was once a dead space into an important destination.

The park serves as a haven for office workers who are attracted to its lawn and convenient movable chairs. During lunch hours in warm weather months, the park accommodates over 5,000 business people and 20,000 total visitors a day. Free yoga classes are offered twice a week after work to help people unwind. In 2002, Bryant Park became a WiFi 'Hot Spot,' bringing the Internet free to users of laptops and handheld devices with 802.11b Ethernet cards.

The park holds frequent events that are free and open to the public, including festivals, concerts, and movie nights, and has even hosted a temporary bowling alley. The group establishes partnerships with adjacent corporations, such as HBO, which provides a large-screen television for sporting events and a summer Monday night movie series. Bryant Park can also be rented for public and private events, including its carousel, which is a popular rental for birthday parties.

Management

What makes Bryant Park most unique is that it is managed, programmed, and funded by a private entity. It is the largest effort in the nation to apply private management backed by private funding to a public park. The park is run by Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC), a non-profit, private management company and property-based BID. It was established in 1980 by Daniel Biederman, a business systems consultant, and Andrew Heiskell, former Chairman of Time Inc. and the New York Public Library, with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. BPRC was created to help restore the area, which had become known as “needle park” because of the prevalence of heroine users. The partnership and its forming of a BID to finance park upkeep and attract an on-site restaurant was groundbreaking at the time.

The park was developed in stages, and by 1987, after securing supplementary park maintenance, temporary kiosks, and public events, crime was reduced by 92 percent. Rents for office space around the park reportedly increased as much as 60 percent within two years after its reopening.¹⁴ In 1988, a 15-year lease agreement was signed, entrusting management and improvements to the BPRC. After four more years of renovation, the park reopened in 1992 with a budget six times the level under prior city management.

BPRC pays close attention to the park’s details, including trimming the hedges so pedestrians can see into the park, choosing the right size gravel for the promenades, and designing the trash bins, kiosks, and other structures. It has also undertaken the task of improving sidewalks, paths, and balustrades.



Kiosks bracket two corners of Bryant Park, creating safe and friendly meeting spots. *Photo: Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org.*

Annual Operating Budget

The fiscal 2003 operating budget is \$4 million.¹⁵ The fiscal 2000 operating budget was just under \$2.9 million and broke down as follows:¹⁶

Revenues

33.0%	BID Assessments
28.6%	Bryant Park Grill Rent
28.6%	Park Usage Fees
3.6%	Other Concession Rents
3.1%	Sponsorships and Grants
2.4%	Other Revenues
1.2%	Interest

Expenses

22.1%	Sanitation
20.3%	Public Events
16.6%	Security
15.4%	General Administration
14.5%	Promotion & Retail Management
6.5%	Capital Maintenance
2.5%	Horticulture
1.4%	News Rack Maintenance
0.7%	Social Services

Like other property-based BIDs, BPRC is financed by a tax assessment on neighboring properties, and about \$750,000 of its income in 2003 came from the BID.¹⁷ It also brings in money through concessions, event rental, and sponsorships. Sponsorships greatly help pay for its heavy programming, including everything from the Wireless Network to the ragtime piano player. BPRC also recently began offering chair dedications to community members for \$125.

Staff

Administrative costs are helped kept low because BPRC shares its management team with the 34th Street Partnership BID. Both entities are run by Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corporation. In addition to the president and support staff, there are seven directors that oversee security, capital projects, retail services, horticulture, events, park operations, and sanitation.

Marketing

According to Biederman, Bryant Park is so popular that it basically markets itself. The few marketing costs that do exist are largely paid for by business and media sponsors.

Security and Hospitality

The park has 24-hour security, and two uniformed BPRC officers are present at all times. Crime has dropped dramatically since the BPRC was formed, and the four New York City police officers originally assigned to the park have since been relocated. The park is also made safer by posted signs that state the park hours and rules of conduct.

Maintenance

During the summer, the park employs about 60 people for security, sanitation, gardening, and special events. As many as 20 sanitation workers are employed during the summer, while 12 work in the winter.

What Works

Perhaps most impressive is BPRC's ability to think up innovative programs and secure the necessary funding for them. Biederman said, "We work very hard to keep the park crowded. We are always conniving up new ways to bring more people to the park." As popular as Bryant Park is with nearby workers, the park's programming also attracts other people, of all ages and backgrounds. While the work crowd relaxes, children ride the French-style carousel and frequent the Ben & Jerry's ice cream kiosk, and senior citizens enjoy the game areas. The BPRC's ability to keep administrative costs low by sharing staff with another BID goes a long way toward organizational efficiency.

Challenges

The BPRC's biggest challenge is deciding which events to host since there are more requests than can be accommodated. Another problem is the criticism BPRC receives for its annual Mercedes-Benz New York Fashion Week, which makes the entire lawn unavailable to the public for several weeks. It has also fielded complaints for allowing Starbucks to lease the previously local-run coffee kiosk.¹⁸

Case Studies At A Glance

The **Central Park Conservancy**, established in 1980, is a nonprofit in partnership with the New York City Parks and Recreation Department. It employs nearly 200 people for responsibilities that normally fall to the city's parks department, such as maintenance and landscaping. This allows the parks department to allocate funds and staff to other neighborhood parks in need of help. The Conservancy raised more than \$110 million in its first fifteen years and is visited more than 16 million times a year.¹⁹

In Hartford, Connecticut, the **Bushnell Park Foundation**, founded in 1981, has successfully leveraged private and public sources. It has raised more than \$6 million, and almost \$3 million of the public amount came from the Hartford Trust Fund, a restricted municipal fund. The private funding came from philanthropic sources, corporations, and community members. Its diverse programming includes jazz concerts, art shows, a carousel, and a children's learning center.²⁰

A non-profit in Cleveland, Ohio, called '**ParkWorks**' brought an innovative program to the city's public parks. 'Story Time in the Park' was created in 1998 to help combat low reading proficiency in local youth. The program brings in local celebrities, citizens, and seniors to read with youth twice a week throughout the summer. A donation from Scholastic Books allows youth to take books home, and stories are brought to life with complementary craft projects and activities. The structured outdoor activity draws both children and their parents to the park, adding to the community's 'ownership' of the space.²¹

Conclusion

For decades, citizens and park bureaus have assumed that public spaces must be funded and managed entirely by the government. It was thought that if the designs were attractive and the lawns were mowed, parks would be popular destinations. However, a successful park cannot be sustained through design and maintenance alone. Parks need social nourishment in order to become – and remain – safe, social, and pleasant places.

The public sector is no longer able to run urban park systems by itself, and there is no reason why it should do so. It makes sense to call on the creativity, energy, and skills of private partners to ensure the long-term value and usefulness of parks. Public-private partnerships are sprouting up across the country, and the main reason is because they work.

Nashville Civic Square has the opportunity to become a community anchor and provide many benefits to the city. What is needed is strategic vision, an excellent management system, and committed follow-through. Citizens, visitors, businesses, and government entities must all view the park as an important community resource worth maintaining. The best way to do this is to involve all of them in the funding, management, and enjoyment of the park.

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