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Paradise Lost, Again

By Fred Kent

If you want to take your lunch out in Bryant Park and sit in the sun over the next few weeks, you can just forget about it. That goes for the rest of the month, the entire holiday season, and much of February, too.

Bryant Park, one of Manhattan's most remarkable, best-loved places, and one of the best examples of civic improvement, is effectively closed to the public for most of this fall and winter. The park's whole center lawn has been sublet to commercial entities for private events limited to ticket holders. These include the semiannual 7th on Sixth fashion show, which began on Monday and will be up again for about two weeks in February, and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which will open in the park in late November and run through Christmas.

Twenty years ago, when Project for Public Spaces was hired to figure out why the public underused Bryant Park, we came to a conclusion that sounds remarkably familiar now: the park was monopolized by private commercial interests -- in those days, drug dealers. Fear of the dealers, and a design that included high hedges and few entrances, kept people away.

When we asked the drug dealers how they felt about making the park more open to the public, they said they had no problem with people using the park, as long as it didn't interfere with their business. What answer would we get if we put the same question to the companies now sponsoring events like 7th on Sixth?

The situation is truly a shame, because Bryant Park could very well be the best civic square in America. The whole point of the redesign plan -- which we helped conceive with our mentor, the late William H. Whyte, in 1981 -- was to invite the public in and provide activities everyone could enjoy. This formula was followed and executed wonderfully. Today, thousands of people use the park every day, and the portable chairs let them control how they use the green space.

Why the city would rely so heavily on private activities in a public park is a mystery, even when winter drives the bench-sitters and sunbathers inside. Imagine instead a skating rink or a Christmas market like the one in Union Square -- activities that are truly public. Or picture the city's aspiring artists creating ice sculptures in a public competition. Bryant Park has re-established itself as enough of a destination so that it could pioneer its own traditions, similar to the lighting of the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center.

For years, many New Yorkers stayed away from Bryant Park, Central Park and other public spaces out of fear of crime. These places have been turned around by dedicated volunteers and leaders who understand how to attract people and keep a park safe and clean. The example they set for New York has inspired other cities to reclaim their parks and downtowns through public-private management partnerships.

But we need to remember that it is still our responsibility to insist that our city parks are open to everyone all the time. Otherwise, we will get used to being shut out of them, and they will become the same empty, useless spaces they were 20 years ago.

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