

To: The Rockefeller Brothers Fund

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From: William H. Whyte

Revitalization of Bryant Park-Public Library front

Gist: Bryant Park and the front of the Public Library are now dominated by dope dealers. But they are not the cause of the problem. The basic problem is under-use. It has been for a long time. It ante-dated the invasion of the dope dealers and in part induced it.

Access is the nub of the matter. Psychologically, as well as physically, Bryant Park is a hidden place, and so, to a surprising degree, is a large part of the Library's space. Relatively few people use these spaces, nor are they invited to.

It is the thesis of this report that the best way to meet the problem is to promote the widest possible use and enjoyment by people. To this end there is recommended a major program with concurrent action on four components: (1) structural changes to open up access; (2) programming to induce use and build a constituency; (3) A beefed up maintenance effort with supplementary crew; (4) A broadened policing effort, to include supplemental guards and other full time personnel.

There is a great opportunity for action. The situation is bad, yes, but so bad it's good, and from this level even modest actions can have a dramatic effect on these spaces and peoples' perception of them. It's not just a matter of reclamation. Both of these spaces have potentials that have never been realized and there is every reason they should be among the greatest and most enjoyable of spaces.

First, let me document the charge of under-use.

Back in 1971 and 1972 --comparatively good years for Bryant Park-- my group was doing a comparative study of public spaces. At that time the average number of people to be found at Bryant during the noon period on a nice sunny day was about 1,000, with peaks up to about 1400. In 1974, as the very thorough Wentworth-Nager study showed, usage was at about the same level.

The figures are lower today. I have no summer counts but to judge by the sightings over a number of very warm and pleasant days in October, usage is off by a third to a half. Interestingly, so is the proportion of females--always a valuable indicator. In the early and mid seventies it was

about 42%. Now it's about 29%. Conversely, the number of undesirables has risen, but in absolute terms by not so very much. As a very rough estimate, I would put the hard core of regulars at about 100. But they sure look like more. They are the constant and when nobody else is in the park they are very, and menacingly visible.

Let's go back to the comparatively good days. A thousand people sounds like a lot. For a place the size of Bryant it is not. In our comparative study of space use we found that the bottom end of the scale for little used places was about five people per thousand square feet. In Bryant's 237,000 square feet, a thousand people on a good day comes to about that density. While the comparison may be extreme, it is in order to note that Paley Park has a density of about forty per thousand feet, and for a very high quality experience. Were Bryant's space to be put to the same density of use, there would be about 9,500 people at lunchtime. Big spaces, I hasten to note, generally have lower densities than small ones, but the comparisons are worth thought.

Clearly, the carrying capacity of Bryant Park is enormous. To make a rough calculation, I would put 2500 people as the very minimum that should be expected at peak use times on ordinary summer days. As the constituency builds up, the number could easily be doubled, and with no over-crowding.

There has been some concern that easier access would under-cut the sanctuary and refuge quality that people cite as a reason for coming. I see no merit in this charge. In the first place, if people really wanted a walled off sanctuary, Bryant would be a great success. It's a walled off sanctuary. But it isn't a success and there's some fairly obvious evidence that they come, say, to enjoy the lawn because of the lawn, and not because there's a wall and iron fence around the outside.

Well used places accommodate all sorts of use, all sorts of people, and in varying moods. Because of the many good elements in its design, Bryant offers many different kinds of experience; for the rather raffish group of young swingers who brave the place now there is the lawn; for the contemplative, a spot under the plane trees to read a book; for the chess players, the north end of the upper terrace. When the squalid crew that now encircles it is gone, the fountain should function as an activity area much like Grand Army Plaza.

The Library front has had a more consistent use. In 1971-72 the number of people sitting on the steps averaged about 78 at peak use times, sometimes going up to 100--110. Today, the usage is about the same, though there has been a marked drop in the proportion of women. As with Bryant, carrying capacity is much greater. With the kind of improvements recommended, the number of sitters on good days ought to be at least triple the current figures.

STRUCTURAL: PROBLEMS

If there's one lesson to be learned from studying how people use space, it is that the key factor in whether a place is used or not is its relationship to the street. Bryant Park has a very bad relationship.

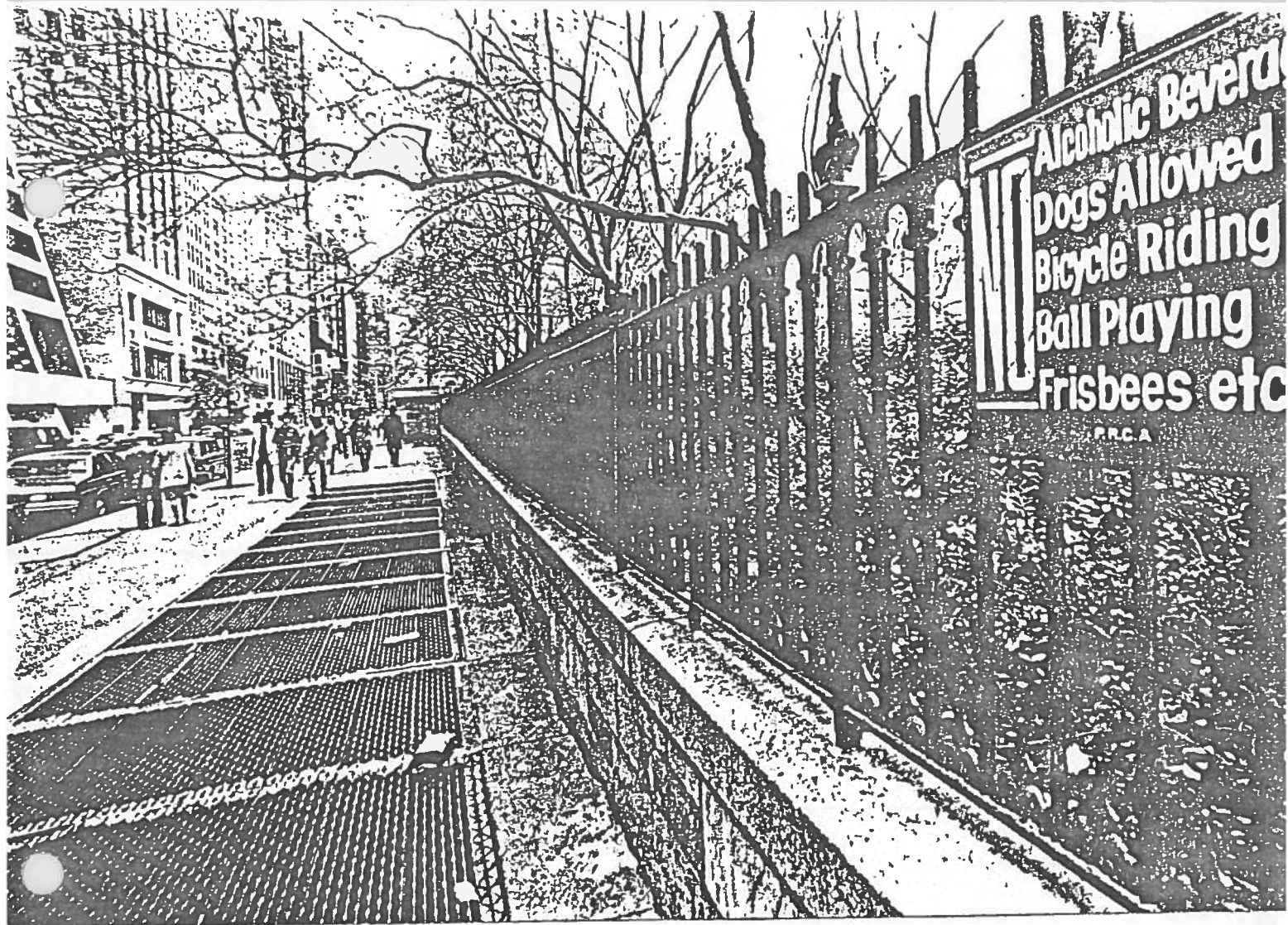
In the first place it is unseen. Here and there across the country there are a number of hidden parks and plazas and without exception they are little used. Most are hidden inadvertently. In the case of Bryant Park, however it was by design. When the plan was drawn up in 1934, it was done so with the idea of walling off the park as a sanctuary. The intentions were of the best and the design was widely praised.

Now we know better. If you were to apply the principal findings of research in reverse and strive to create a park that would be little used you would:

- 1) elevate it four or five feet above street level
- 2) put a wall around it
- 3) put a spiked iron fence atop the wall
- 4) line the fence with thick shrubbery

This was exactly the kind of design Frederick Law Olmsted warned against. He believed the streets around a park should be conceived as an "outer park". When the Commissioners of Central Park asked him to put a wall around it he responded vigorously. "It is not desirable," he said, "that this outer park should be separated by any barrier more than a common stone curb from the adjoining roadways. It is still more undesirable in the interest of those who are to use it that it should be separated more than is necessary from the inner park...The two should be incorporated as one whole, each being part of the other."

At Bryant Park the two are quite separate. So are they at Union Square, and with the same effect. The problem is not merely the walls but the excrescences above: the shrubbery and the iron fences. They block what view there is, and, like the "NO" signs posted on them they do not invite but deflect.



Olmsted hated them. "I consider the iron fence to be unquestionably the ugliest that can be used," he said, "In expression and association it is in the most distinct contradiction and discord with all the sentiment of a park. It belongs to a jail or the residence of a despot who dreads assassination."

What is tantalizing about Bryant is how close it comes to being seeable. Another foot or so of elevation and it would be beyond redemption save at tremendous cost. But it's close. If you are just over six feet tall you can see over the top of the steps on the Avenue of the Americas; if you are five feet eleven inches you can get occasional glimpses along 42d Street. Only for want of a few inches is it hidden from most people.

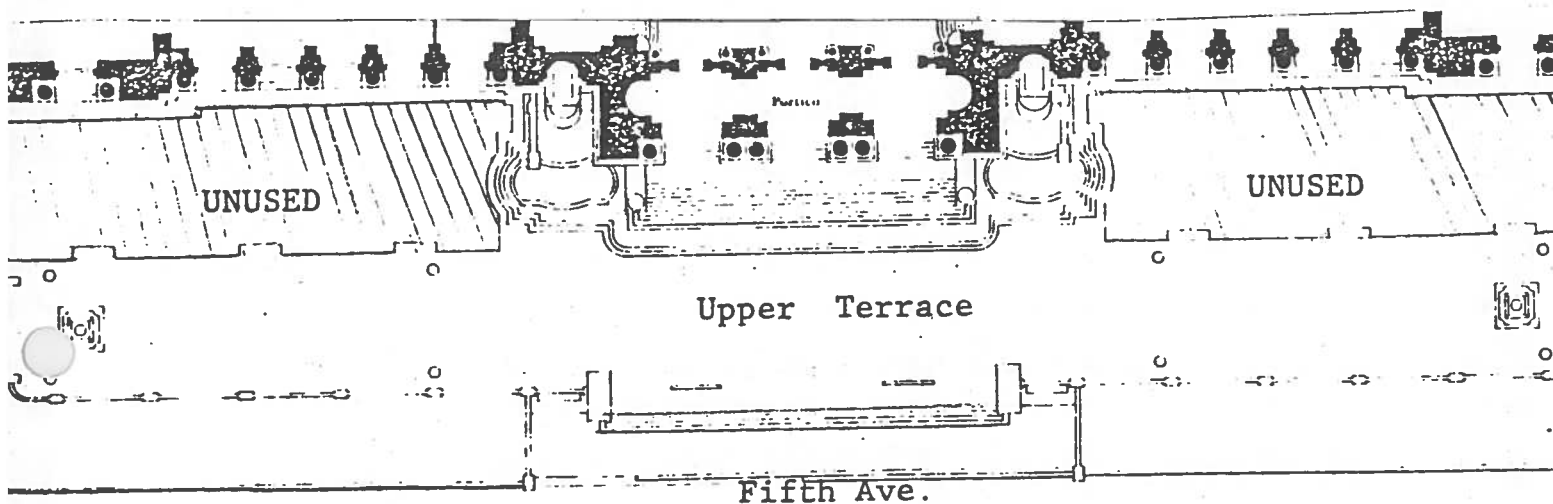
Bryant Park is so cut off from the street as to accentuate another defect. There is a very meager pedestrian flow through the park. The eastern and western steps on 42nd Street, for example, average only 540 and 480 people per hour respectively

at lunch time. Again, this is the result of a definite design decision. Various recommendations made for paths to encourage pedestrian flow were rejected, it being felt that this would detract from the sanctuary aspect of the place. But we now know that healthy pedestrian flow is a great asset; it enhances the activities and acts as something of a magnet. Characteristically, the most favored places for sitting, reading, shmoozing, are apt to be athwart to the main pedestrian flow, rather than isolated from it.

For lack of openings, the long balustrades confine the walls and bar easy pedestrian flow; they also give the park a labyrinthine quality. It's not an easy place to get out of in a hurry. You get a certain sense of entrapment here, and a shuffling wino coming at you poses a menace that he would not out on the street. On the attached plan note that in certain spots you have to take a very circuitous route to reach the street. This lack of easy exit has had a definite effect on usage, and it is one of the reasons certain areas have been shunned.

Now let's turn to the library. In contrast to Bryant Park, it has a good relation to the street. It is elevated from Fifth Avenue but in easy, inviting stages and the sidewalk functions as part of the over all space. The pedestrian flows on the sidewalk run around 4500 people per hour at lunchtime. As our timelapse studies demonstrate, even on days when the library is closed, any kind of event or attraction will quickly draw a big crowd from the street. On the upper terrace pedestrian flows are fairly meager. One reason is the gauntlet of dope-dealers almost permanently stationed on the northern end of the terrace. Another is the simple fact that access to the terrace from 42nd Street involves a complicated dog-leg.

But the cardinal problem is that half of the upper terrace lies unused, sealed off by the privet hedges in front of the unused flood lights. This now functionless space is dark and gloomy.



STRUCTURAL: Reccomendations

Bryant Park : with top priority to access along 42d. Street

- 1) Remove the iron fences atop the walls.
- 2) Remove the shrubbery.
- 3) Open up access with new steps midway between the existing ones on 42d Street. They should be inviting: broad and of an easy pitch. The broad steps on the Avenue of the Americas are a good model; a step or two too many, yes, but their low risers and long treads seem just right.
- 4) Provide ramps for the handicapped. The new steps should have a ramp, and eventually there should be ramps on all sides of the park. As Andrew Heiskell has suggested, there might be no better way to dramatize the issue of access. The handicapped can be helpful allies. In the campaign for new open space zoning they helped obtain easier steps, ramps, clearer pathways--i.e. easier access for everyone. And ramps are also useful in providing access for special maintenance equipment, such as vacuum trucks and snow plows.
- 5) Open up access to the upper terrace with new steps. This could not only induce more pedestrian use, but provide an avenue vista that the design seems to call for but leaves unresolved. The upper terrace is the best used part of the park and changes here would be building on strength.
- 6) Rehabilitate the restroom structures. There are are several new uses they could be put to, such as a cafe adjunct. Revolutionary as it might seem now, it is possible the undesirables problem can be cleaned up enough that the structures can be considered for another much needed use: restrooms.
- 7) Improve the visual access from the steps on Avenue of the Americas. This is the best, most inviting view of the park, but just out of sight. Bronson Binger wants to explore the possibility of raising the sidewalk level to open up the sight lines.
- 8) Rehabilitate the fountain. When this territory is reclaimed, it should be a fine gathering place -- like Bethesda has and can be, with flows and counter flows.

- 9) Cut openings in the balustrades for easier pedestrian circulation within the park. Done well, the openings would look part of the original design and would not disturb the axial layout. The point would be to provide choices. People like short cuts. The more choices, the easier the flow.

Library

- 1) Open up the terrace. Remove the privet hedges, the floodlights, and the trees at the rear; plant new trees on the front of the terrace. This is the recommendation of the landscape architects in the Cambridge Seven proposal. To the basics of it; Amen.
- 2) Promote use of the terrace with chairs and tables and an attractive food facility.
- 3) Clean the front of the Library. It would be a grand thing to do in any event, but now there is particular reason. With the cleaning of Grand Central and the new amenities in the area there is going to be a dramatic transformation in the feel of the area. It would be great if the Library could anticipate this, and strengthen it, with its own clean-up. Since it would be part of a larger effort to revitalize the area it would be no cosmetic move, but an act of affirmation.

There are a number of other projects to be considered: for the proposed new entrance to the Library on 42d Street, with provisions for the handicapped.

This is fine, but could not some thought be given to a connection between Bryant Park and the rear of the Library? Obviously, the constraints are enormous now and the location of the stacks would seem to preclude any such entry. But must this always be so? Some imagination seems called for. Even trompe d'oeuil would be better than the present bleak back the Library turns to the park.

The fountains on either side of the steps are splendid. The Cambridge Seven proposal bespeaks the restoration of their "sound, effect, and ambiance, but put in no budget item for this. Is something in the works?

There are other worthwhile projects; cutting additional steps to provide through access from 42d and 40th to the Library terrace; improvements to the constricted defile along the 42d Street side of the Library.

What gives one pause is the enormous differential in costs between many of these projects and the basics that are called for. The basics are relatively inexpensive. Take the terrace. Of the \$415,000 estimated in the Cambridge Seven proposal for the exterior, the basics of the terrace re-do come to \$45,000. It's the paving and the stone work that are the costly items -- some \$155,000 for the terrace re-do. Granite is great, but at \$13 a square foot it does seem deferable.

First things first. A few thousand dollars worth of chairs and tables and food facilities would do more to liven up the front than hundreds of thousands worth of marble and paving. And they can be immediate.

The experience of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is relevant. Its front space is inherently no more attractive than that of the Library, and the pedestrian flows on Fifth are lower there. But usage is much higher. At a time when there will be about a hundred people sitting in front of the Library, there will be three to four hundred or more at the Museum.

They are there because the Museum invited them there. Among other inducements, it puts out up to 200 movable chairs--and leaves them out 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. It finds it cheaper to buy replacements than cart them in and out every day. The Museum welcomes musicians and entertainers. It does not ask cops to shoo away food vendors. It is a most congenial place and there are remarkably few problems of security or vandalism.

It could be argued that Fifth Avenue and 42d is a much more difficult location and that a similarly hospitable approach wouldn't work there. There is evidence quite to the contrary. A block nearer Times Square is the New York Telephone building. For several years after it was built nobody sat on its plaza. They couldn't. There was no place to sit. But bums liked it and there would usually be one or two lying up against the sloping walls. After he became president of the company, the late John Mulhearn decided to liven things up by turning the plaza into an outdoor cafe with movable chairs and tables and a food buffet. It was an immediate success, well used by employees and passersby. But not by the bums. As John Mulhearn was happy to note, the cafe proved the best of security measures. (Thought: it would be fitting indeed if one of the improvements to Bryant were named in his memory. He felt it highly salvageable.)

PROGRAMMING:

The Parks Council has drawn up an excellent set of proposals and is ready to provide the supervision to carry them out. They propose an upgrading of the present food concession, the possible addition of a cafe concession, flower and plant stalls, book carts and stalls, information and ticket booths. They plan to develop a schedule of entertainments, with particular attention to afternoon and evening performances to broaden the hours of use. They propose a full-scale marketing and promotion campaign to build a large constituency for the park in the surrounding area.

They also propose an activity that is generally left out of programming projects -- evaluation. They want to have the changes and activities monitored to find out which work, which don't, and what the lessons are for the next steps. Such evaluation will be equally important for the structural changes. Since they will be incremental there's a great opportunity to learn from each step. People are very quick to show what works for them; through such techniques as time lapse photography, and direct, systematic observation the lessons can be quickly learned. If I may stick in a commercial for my colleagues, a group well qualified for such a task is the Project for Public Spaces.

There has been some apprehension that the structural work recommended may undercut and dilute support for the programming effort. It is more likely that it will strengthen it. While there has been no programming effort of the breadth the Parks Council is recommending, there have been some excellent programs in Bryant Park in the past. But they haven't taken. The effect on park use has been transitory. While the band is playing, splendid. Lots of people. Few undesirables. Twenty minutes after the band has packed its instruments, they're all back. The place reverts. And it will continue to unless basic changes are made.

The improved access and stronger pedestrian flows that structural changes can bring about are crucial to the programming attractions recommended. Bookstalls, for example. Who's going to buy the books? As the experience at Grand Army Plaza has demonstrated, it takes time to build a market and strong pedestrian flows are vital. True, amenities like bookstalls and food kiosks help induce pedestrian flows. But there's no need to get hung up on the chicken-or-egg argument. The structural improvements and the programming efforts should be concurrent, and they should be mutually supporting.

A good word is in order for the job being done by the Park Department people. Considering the odds they are working against, it is a very creditable one. But there are not enough of them; they lack first rate equipment. The addition of a small supplemental force would lead to significant improvement and there is an excellent precedent at hand.

At Madison Square Park Donald Simon has set up, with Ford Foundation backing, a revitalization program. Operating as Urban Parks Plaza, his group has enlisted the support of the neighboring business community in a program to make the park a safe, comfortable, and enjoyable place. One of the components is a small supplemental force to work with the park people and provide them specialized equipment and supplies. The program works and the park people are enthusiastic supporters.

For Bryant Park Simon proposes two additional service employees to work on weekdays from March to November; one man on weekends from April through October. The estimated budget includes \$47,000 for personnel; \$2,000 for supplies; \$5,000 for overhead, and \$12,000 for management and supervision.

There are economies of scale in a program which embraces several parks; availability of special equipment on a rotation basis, for example, such as vacuum trucks and motorized snow plows. Most important, management and supervision should be more effective on a joint basis. This would be all the more so if, as recommended below, a supplemental guard force is also included.

POLICING

It is clear that there is a severe policing problem. But it is also clear that the police alone will not resolve it.

If a strong police presence were the answer, there would be no problem in front of us. Right now the police are all over the place. They walk up and down the pathways in Bryant. They stand at the entrances. They walk up and down in front of the Library. And so, just as obviously, do the dope dealers. In the films I've been taking of the activity you can usually see in the same scene both the cops and the dealers, the latter often openly soliciting trade as they go from person to person. Time lapse coverage of entrances indicates that dealers will move away when cops stand there, but as soon as they leave, it's only a matter of minutes before the dealers are back.

To say this is not to denigrate the importance of police; they have plenty of problems of their own-in the courts, the cumbersome processes of bringing anyone to book, and the like. Certainly they are necessary. There is a truly vicious element in the park and night will pose special dangers for a long time to come.

It is in order, then, to press for stronger police efforts and undoubtedly when a joint program is announced there will be a great flurry of police activity, vows to really crack down, and so on. These seem to come along in two or three year cycles and it's time for another go.

But improvement of the policing of the park--in the broad sense of the term-- will most likely be achieved by an increase in the number of full time regulars in the park. Most successful places have "mayors"; they can be building guards, maintenance people, people who run food concessions. They are familiar faces, a point in one's journey, reassuringly there.

The most effective would be supplemental guards. They would operate much as do the uniformed guards of Rockefeller Center: friendly types who like to keep everything normal but who are in walkie-talkie communication with a security base and thence to the police. At Bryant Park it might be possible to tie in with the security set-ups of New York Telephone and the City University Graduate Center.

Initially, there could be two on duty for the March-November period; with, perhaps, additional guards for special occasions. Personnel cost would probably be in the range of \$60-65,000. Management and supervision costs would be integrated with those for the supplemental maintenance people.

Choice of personnel for the various installations planned will be important. Their job is not fighting crime, but along with the guards and the maintenance men they will greatly affect peoples perception of crime --and that's a big part of the battle.

LANDMARK STATUS

Bryant Park has been declared a landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. It has been assumed by a number of people that the Commission would consider structural changes such as we contemplate a violation and would not grant the necessary permit. I made an informal presentation of the possible changes to Commission Chairman Kent Barwick. He was most sympathetic; indeed, enthusiastic. It happens he has been a long time user of the park himself and is well aware of the isolation problem. He feels the changes proposed are a case of making a landmark more accessible. He believes the other members of the commission might be positively disposed also, but emphasizes that it will be important to present the changes in the context of the full programming, maintenance, and policing effort.

Preservation groups should be sought as allies. The board of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the leading private group, has been briefed on the proposals and responded affirmatively. Testimony by the members at the hearings should be most helpful.

The Case for Immediate Action

The funds needed for launching a broad program are relatively modest, and, indeed, could be justified as a hard-headed business investment that will be repaid many times over in a better employee environment, property values, and human values. The programming effort is estimated at about ; the maintenance, security and supervision component, about \$150,000. These efforts will probably stimulate the provision of many additional services in kind by the various sponsoring organizations.

The largest costs will be those of the physical rehabilitation of the park. But government funds should be available for this. Within several weeks it is likely that the Park Department will announce that it is embarking on a major capital improvement program for the revitalization of Bryant Park. The funds to be committed will be upwards of \$ million dollars over a three year period. In addition to the changes discussed here, many other projects are under consideration for the long term. (Among them; a glass walled cafe proposed by Robert Zion for the fountain area.)

Cranking up such a program will take time. In the meanwhile, there are high priority projects that do not require large sums and which ought to be undertaken now.

To recapitulate:

Library: Clean out the upper terrace and
liven it up with amenities

Bryant Park: Remove the iron fences and shrubbery
Cut a new set of steps on 42d St.

The Park Department has had a budget of \$400,000 for 1979-80 improvements for Bryant Park. Until recently, all of this was earmarked for rehabilitation work on existing features. As an earnest of its long range plans, the Park Department should consider allocating some of its current funds to the removal of the fences and shrubbery, along 42d Street at least,

There is another possibility for immediate action. Why not go the permit route? If the design is in consonance with the Park Department's plans, a donor can give a project directly: hire the designer, hire the contractor, and set his own deadlines. This procedure has cut the usual project time by a half or more and has been successfully used for the Delacorte sculpture in Central Park, fountains and the like.

If a corporation of the community or a consortium of them wanted to get things going a set of steps would be a high leverage gift. They don't have to cost a great deal; the important thing is that they be broad and easy and they can be made this way in concrete as well as granite. And they can be made soon; if a good head of steam is built up, by June first.

So many things are in place. Even the dope dealers are helping. If you went out and hired them you couldn't get a more villainous crew to show the urgency of the situation. Most importantly, by a fortuitous set of circumstances some very good people are in most of the key spots -- a constellation that was not in place several years ago. They understand the breadth of the problem and they are keen for action. It is a great moment to be seized.