

Bryant Park

New York, New York

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996, 2016, 2023-24

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

These photographs illustrate the celebrated transformation of Bryant Park in the late 1980's to one of the most actively used and well-loved public parks in America. It was a highly successful, joint public and private effort, to rehabilitate Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan that set a precedent for subsequent enhancements to other American public spaces. In 1979 William H. (Holly) Whyte proposed adjustments and refinements to the 1934 Beaux Arts design, that established the general direction and program for the rehabilitation. The design updates were led by landscape architect Laurie Olin, who maintained the character of the existing classically-inspired plan, as well as the materials used in the original design, while making much-needed revisions. Olin modified the entrances and planting to enhance access and visibility at the edges of the park (3) and added new entrances on 40th and 42nd Streets. The rehabilitation also included additions to accommodate significant new park programming developed by Daniel Biederman (19-29).* The almost ten-acre site adjacent to the New York Public Library now attracts more than twelve million visitors a year.

I made several visits to Bryant Park, including an initial trip to photograph it for the Spacemaker Press book *The Transformation of Bryant Park*. My intent was to show the updates to the park along with the multitude of people taking advantage of the varied program offerings in all seasons. Two café pavilions with outdoor seating were

added to the upper terrace adjacent to the library, along with food and beverage kiosks in the groves of London plane trees on each side of the fountain terrace along Sixth Avenue. The moveable, metal tables and chairs - inspired by French parks, add a dynamic quality to Bryant Park with users clustering them to respond to the light, views, and make social groupings on the lawn and crushed stone surfaces (5-10). The planting is updated to make perennial borders along the paths flanking the central lawn and new ground covers and shrubs under the mature London plane tree allées along 40th and 42nd Streets (6,9,11).

To depict the seasonal programming in this remarkable park requires working in the spirit of street photographers, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Kertész, who aimed to capture the human drama unfolding in the public spaces of Paris and other European cities.** This approach requires working rapidly while making all hand-held photographs, as well as trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. I was fortunate that one September evening, while on the way to an event in midtown, I passed through Bryant Park when a flamenco dancer and orchestra were performing on the upper terrace with an audience seated on the lawn (25-26). The photographs were done with a small digital camera that fits into a pocket for just such an occasion, but still renders images with sufficient resolution.

List of Photographs

1. Library terrace on Fifth Avenue, 2023
2. Jose Bonifacio de Andrada statue on Sixth Avenue, 2023
3. Entrance from 42nd Street, 2023
4. William Cullen Bryant Memorial on upper terrace, 2023
5. Bluestone paving and moveable chairs, 1996
6. South gravel walk, perennial border, and moveable chairs, 1996
7. Central lawn, 1996
8. North gravel walk, 1996
9. North gravel walk and perennial border, 1996
10. South gravel walk, vending kiosks and fountain, 2023
11. London plane tree allée along 42nd Street, 2016
12. Overlook and balustrade to sunken, 2016
13. View south of central lawn and fountain terrace, 2016
14. View north of central lawn and fountain terrace, 2016
15. Audience seating on central lawn, 2016
16. View south toward library, upper terrace and cafe, 2023
17. View east to Lowell Memorial Fountain and library, 2023
18. London plane tree allée along 40th Street, 2023
19. The chess players, 2023
20. William Earl Dodge statue, 2023
21. North café on upper terrace, 1996
22. View north of walk along south café, 2023
23. View east of south café, 2023
24. North café, 2023
25. View west of orchestra on upper terrace, 2023
26. Flamenco dancer on upper terrace, 2023
27. Carousel in south allée, Winter Market, 2023
28. Seating on upper terrace, 2023
29. Table tennis in north allée, Winter Market, 2023
30. Ice skating, 2024
31. Winter market, 2024































































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Thompson, J. William, *The Rebirth of New York City's Bryant Park*, Spacemaker Press, 1997

Birnbaum, Charles, "The Rebirth of New York City's Bryant Park", Book Review, *Land Forum* 03, 1999

* See *The Rebirth of New York City's Bryant Park*, Spacemaker Press for a more complete history of the site and its rehabilitation.

** André Kertész relocated to New York from Paris in 1936. After working in commercial photography, he returned to his intuitive, photojournalistic style while photographing New York from the 1960s until his death in 1985.