

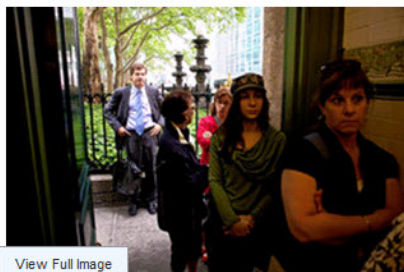
URBAN GARDNER | MAY 25, 2010

Bryant Park's Sex Engineer

If the girl-watching in Bryant Park at lunch hour is the best in New York—and I'm here to attest it ain't bad—that's not by accident, according to Daniel A. Biederman, the president of the Bryant Park Corp.

Standing in the middle of the seriously overcrowded park at lunch hour late last week, Mr. Biederman explained that his mentor, the sociologist and student of public spaces William Holly Whyte, believed that a sure sign of a park's health was how many women it attracted. "Women are more discriminating park users," he said. "They're more likely to pick up disorder. When they feel threatened they'll leave. If you please women you'll please everybody."

So far so good. But Mr. Biederman, 56 years old, believes he can human-engineer the percentage of women in the park by providing amenities such as spotless bathrooms and bussed tables. "If it comes out 50/50 it's a Garden of Eden," he said as he examined the multitudes of both sexes seated along Bryant Park's tree-shaded alleys and across its green lawn. "My guess is it's 52% female." Which would make it, like, Nirvana for some of us.


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Benjamin Norman for The Wall Street Journal

Bryant Park's Dan Biederman, above left, says, "Women are more discriminating park users....If you please women you'll please everybody."

Mr. Biederman even has an employee, Tony Battle, who circulates through the park at lunchtime with clickers in both hands—one for men, the other for women.

It would seem difficult, if not impossible, for one person to get an accurate count of the hordes passing through the park. But Mr. Battle stands by his work. "It can be accurate because I keep walking," he said, "and as I keep watching I'm counting the people coming towards me, people sitting. The people I miss I might catch on the other side of the park."

He admitted the plethora of female pulchritude can present a counting hazard, "especially when you're on the grass," he said. "Some of the girls have their swimsuits on. A brief look and you keep moving."

Mr. Biederman has been doing this for a while—not counting women, but managing urban spaces. He co-founded the Bryant Park Foundation in 1980, turning it from a drug-dealers' Kasbah into today's celebrated urban oasis. He also became the head of both the 34th Street and Grand Central partnerships—two business-improvement districts—and seemed on his way to populating much of the rest of the planet with information kiosks, outdoor furniture and ornamental planters until former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who had a thing about sharing the spotlight, put his foot down. In 1998, he forced Mr. Biederman to relinquish the Grand Central Partnership.

But Mr. Biederman made a comeback in the Bloomberg years, and in addition to the 34th Street Partnership and Bryant Park Corp., he currently runs the Chelsea Improvement Co., where he's trying to bring his talent with artfully designed trash cans, news boxes and pedestrian-friendly crossings to a movie nights and, of course, restaurants, cafes and food stands. It's all intended to contribute to the sense of tumult, or what Mr. Biederman reverently calls "complexity."

"The more people we have the more successful we'll be," he said. "This isn't Yosemite."

He added: "You are looking at the most crowded urban park. You're looking at 700 people per acre."

Mr. Biederman said he even brought in focus groups for the restrooms. Guys will happily go in a hole. The ladies, on the other hand.... "The restroom is the capper," he explained as he led the way toward the ladies room.

"Are we going in?" I asked in alarm.

"Odds are we can't."

Blessedly, he didn't cut in front of the gals, a long line of whom were waiting to relieve themselves, though he suggested I take a gander. "Look to the left." I resisted, flattering the flowers instead.

"Costs us \$5,000 a year," he boasted.

Mr. Biederman emailed me a couple of hours later with the 1 p.m. lunch count: 2,025 males, 2,246 females. Or 53% female. "I was close," he noted.