



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

Amenities

Making the most of a modest public space

While most revitalization projects take years of planning and implementation, there is another way and a faster way, to create or revitalize public spaces.

In 2007, a group of highly motivated property owners joined forces to form a privately funded and operated downtown development group, which would drive revitalization in the gritty meatpacking area of New York City. A Business Improvement District was considered but the timeframe was too long.

Enter the Chelsea Improvement Company.

The CIC is funded by three principal members owning four buildings in the area, along with some smaller property owners. “The big owners said there was not really any need to burden the smaller owners with any of this. They could pay, and they wanted to pay,” says Ben Donsky, project manager for the CIC.

“In New York City, it takes about 18 months to create a BID. We were able to make capital improvements on a pay-as-you-go basis with a much shorter turn-around time. It was six months from when they said they wanted to do this to having the capital improvement plan and all of our services in place. They really needed to get things going quickly.”

Sanitation, security and beautification in the area are funded by the CIC as well as custom street signs, parking signs, lamp posts, pedestrian lights, trash cans, news boxes and tree pits along the five-block area.



Private investment quickly creates a park that enlivens and beautifies the Chelsea neighborhood.

Private group works well with City

More recently, several community groups have been looking for change in the area as well, particularly to a hazardous intersection. Working with the Department of Transportation, the CIC was able to create a temporary green space on a 2,000 to 2,500-square-foot triangle of land in the intersection.

Until the DOT has time to study the new traffic flow, the newly created Chelsea Triangle is considered temporary. Dan Biederman, head of Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, which manages the CIC, says the DOT does not invest in temporary installations, but does provide relatively inexpensive features such as planters and concrete curbing until the traffic study is done. That combined with lush plantings and the use of moveable furniture and umbrellas proved enough.

A local company offered to surface the Triangle, an estimated \$17,500 expense, for free, in hopes that the DOT and the City would want to use the material in other locations.

Maureen Hackett, the CIC's director of horticulture, says that while some elements in the Chelsea neighborhood are custom-designed, such as the lighting, the furniture in the Triangle is "off the shelf." Movable furniture was selected to keep use of the space flexible. A dozen tables and 48 gray mesh-design chairs were purchased. Umbrellas provide shade and a sense of enclosure. Hackett also selected a mix of tree, evergreen and flower species that lend the space a sense of structure and canopy, and visual interest, year round.

"The initial furniture cost was about \$5,000 for tables and chairs, then we spent another \$8,000 on umbrellas," says Donsky. "They were pretty high-end umbrellas. You could probably do better on these if you went with something less stylish. The planters cost about \$6,500 — we started with about 30, but we've added a few more."

Hackett says with a small space it is more important to really utilize it and arrange it in a certain way.

"I think you need a combination of landscape architect and almost an interior design kind of an eye," she says. "Imagine how people are going to use it. Don't just lay it out like a normal park."

Creating a space to nurture interaction

Furniture at the Chelsea Triangle can be arranged for conversations over coffee, informal outdoor meetings, or moved to the side to make room for large-group activities. Free lessons in Afro-Brazilian dance and Sunset Salsa are offered by local studios, drawing spectators as well as students. Lindsey Boylan, CIC's operations manager, plans to bring back jazz trios and public art installations that were part of the Triangle's programming in its first year.

"The best thing you can take from the Chelsea Triangle story is that you can do this with very little resources," says Hackett. "But probably what makes it successful is that we continue to pay constant attention to it. It's very modest, but really well taken care of."

Efforts are underway to get Wi-Fi at Chelsea Triangle, and to attract food concessions.

"The park is a nice amenity," says Donsky. "We are by no means done. Eventually, it's going to become permanent."

*Contact: Dan Biederman, Ben Donsky, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corporation, (212) 626-6612, dbeiderman@brvcorp.com, bdonsky@brvcorp.com; Maureen Hackett, Hackett Landscape Design, (914) 337-6049, mhackett@urbanmgt.com; Lindsey Boylan, Chelsea Improvement Company, (212) 584-1019, lboylan@urbanmgt.com. **DIX***