

Designation Report

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 12, 1974, Number 9
LP-0879

BRYANT PARK 40th to 42nd Street from the Avenue of the Americas to the New York Public Library. (The property bounded by the northern curb line of West 40th Street, the eastern curb line of the Avenue of the Americas, the southern curb line of West 42nd Street, and the western property line of the New York Public Library), Manhattan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1257, Lot 2.

On October 8, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Scenic Landmark of Bryant Park, Borough of Manhattan. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Bryant Park is a prime example of the small axial park with a central green and peripheral walks, designed in the French classical tradition. Strategically located, just west of the New York Public Library, it is used by the many people who live and work in midtown Manhattan. In addition, the park also creates a harmonious environment and complementary setting for the library building.

The present landscape design dates from 1934, but the park site has had an illustrious and sometimes controversial history. George Washington and his troops defended themselves against the British on the site during the Revolutionary War. During the 1820s the City used the land as a potters' field.

The vast Croton Reservoir was built in 1842 on the land now occupied by the New York Public Library. In 1846, the Common Council ordered the ground adjoining the reservoir to be "graded, sloped and sodded on the sides bordering upon the avenue and streets, and that the same be enclosed by a neat ornamental wooden fence..., the same to be used as a public park, until required for reservoir or other purposes." The park idea apparently never came to fruition, for in 1853, when the Crystal Palace was under construction there, the site was described as consisting of "vacant lots, strewn with rocks, deep pits and relics of shanties."

The Crystal Palace, used for an international exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, was perhaps the most famous occupant of the site until it burned to the ground in 1858. The Civil War found the site being used for drilling and tenting Union troops.

On May 12, 1884, the name of the site was officially changed from Reservoir Square to Bryant Park, in honor of William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), poet, editor and orator.

Late in the 1890s the Croton Reservoir was removed to enable the New York Public Library to be built on the site. The architects of the library, Carrere & Hastings, carefully planned certain architectural elements that would harmonize the building with the park: the raised terrace at the east end of the park, the stone kiosks, and the handsome archway enclosing the statue of Bryant which was presented to the City by the Century Association in 1911, the same year the library was opened; the Lowell Memorial Fountain was erected the following year.

By the late 1920s the park was sadly neglected, and even further disrupted by the subway construction on Sixth Avenue. A copy of Federal Hall, built in the spring of 1932 and razed the following year, did not help the general state of the park.

Various city groups began to call for the renovation of Bryant Park during this period. In 1928, the Fifth Avenue Association presented a new plan for landscaping the park to the Board of Estimate. Although the plan was not approved, it is interesting to note that it called for a large, depressed central lawn area--very similar to the present landscape scheme.

Finally in 1933 the Architects' Emergency Committee held a competition for a new Bryant Park design open to all unemployed architects and draftsmen registered with the committee. The winning design by Lusby Simpson of Queens was carried out by CWA workers under the supervision of the Parks Department in 1934.

Bryant Park was officially rededicated on September 15, 1934. Dr. John H. Finley, chairman of the ceremonies, compared the new Parks Commissioner Robert Moses to his biblical namesake, "who smote a rock to give his followers water in the desert. Commissioner Moses...smote the rocks of Manhattan Island and brought forth trees, grass, flowers and pools of water." Moses stated: "We are glad to be finished with this particular housekeeping job." The high point of the ceremony was the dedication of the Josephine Shaw Lowell Memorial Fountain by her sister, Frances C. Barlow, and by Elizabeth Love Godwin, a great-granddaughter of William Cullen Bryant.

The plan of the park is a straightforward and symmetrical design. Raised above street level, it is enclosed by a granite retaining wall crowned by balustrades at the raised terrace area and by cast- and wrought-iron railings. The height of the wall varies in accordance with the slope of the site.

The focal point of the park is the depressed central lawn area which is enclosed by balustraded railings. The east-west axis of the park is emphasized by four flagstone-walks, two on each side of the lawn, sheltered by four rows of plane trees. The walks, which are separated by beds of ivy, are bordered by handsome benches.

The central vista of the park is dominated at the western end by the Josephine Shaw Lowell Memorial Fountain. Presented to the City in 1912, it honors the memory of Mrs. Shaw (1843-1905), a pioneer social worker and philanthropist. Designed by architect Charles A. Platt, the fountain is constructed of pink Stoney Creek granite. A shallow contoured basin rests on a handsome sculptured base set in a large pool.

The raised terrace at the eastern end of the park, which dates from the time of the construction of the library building and was designed by architects Carrère & Hastings, is the most "architectural" portion of the park. The terrace is raised in a series of gradual steps from the central lawn and paved with gray flagstones and red brick, providing a contrast in texture, color and pattern. The statue of William Cullen Bryant, by the sculptor Henry Adams, dominates the terrace. The handsome Roman-style arch protecting the statue incorporates a small demi-rotunda with coffered semi-dome. The arch and rotunda are supported on elegant columns and pilasters. Flanking the arch are two stone urns set on the balustraded wall which spans the width of the terrace. The urns are strikingly decorated by a Roman motif of garlanded friezes with central stylized bull's heads.

Adding further sculptural interest to the terrace at the north and south ends are statues of William Earl Dodge by John Quincy Adams Ward and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe by Karl Fischer.

Two stone kiosks set in the outer walls at the western end of the raised terrace are also of Carrère & Hastings' design. These were originally used as comfort stations. The sides of the buildings which face the street are embellished by garlanded bull's-eye windows set beneath segmental arches. A garlanded frieze incorporating the Roman motif of garlands and bull's head decorates all four sides of each building.

A square cut has been made into the park at the northwest corner, facing the Avenue of the Americas, to accommodate a memorial to José Bonifacio de Andrada e Silva (1763-1835), patriarch of Brazilian independence. It is dominated by the statue of Andrada, executed by José Lima in 1889, and presented to the United States by Brazil in 1934.

Mention should be made of the handsome bronze lamps which line the walkways and terraces. A slender fluted shaft placed on a base with crossed laurel motifs supports each lamp.

The landscape and architectural elements of Bryant Park work together to create a contained and orderly open space which encourages repose and leisure strolling. Its natural elements provide a pleasant and welcome enhancement both of the Public Library, immediately adjoining the park, and of the surrounding urban environment. The park is a very necessary and useful part of the urban fabric and is much used and enjoyed by the people of New York City.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, landscape architecture, architecture and other features of this park, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Bryant Park has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Bryant Park is a prime example of a park designed in the French Classical tradition, that it is adorned by fine statues and a graceful fountain, and that the City has set apart this valuable site as an urban amenity worthy of our civic pride.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Scenic Landmark, Bryant Park, Borough of Manhattan, which consists of the property bounded by the northern curb line of West 40th Street, the eastern curb line of the Avenue of the Americas, the southern curb line of West 42nd Street, and the western property line of the New York Public Library and designates as its Landmark Site Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1257, Lot 2.