

## Eye Weekly: Squaring off

**Do public spaces like Nathan Phillips Square need private managers to give them meaning, or should they be defined by the people they serve?**

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It's late February, and the public forum on the governance structure for Nathan Phillips Square is taking place at the Design Exchange, on what used to be the trading floor of the old Toronto stock exchange. Nathan Phillips Square has completed the first stage of its revitalization process — a new design has been chosen for Toronto's public space just outside City Hall. Now it's time for the powers that be — in this case, the city and the Nathan Phillips Square Revitalization Public Advisory Group — to decide how it should be run. According to the press release, this forum has been organized to help shape their thinking by exploring innovative management models from Toronto and other cities. Going in, I have in mind the dictionary definitions of words like “innovative” and “public” and “revitalization.” I don't know yet that, taken together, they can become code for something else.

I arrive in time for the keynote speaker, Dan Biederman, a relentlessly persuasive management consultant credited with the revitalization of New York City's Bryant Park. The New York Times has called Biederman the “mayor of midtown,” and, judging by his talk, the moniker makes sense. Biederman and his people hold a bouquet of municipal responsibilities — the planting of gardens, the design of public washrooms, the placement of lighting, the removal of graffiti, the management of private security. Biederman, through his role as head of both the Bryant Park Corporation (a not-for-profit, private management company working in conjunction with a business improvement district) and the 34th Street Partnership (another business improvement district, one of New York City's largest), seems to be unrivalled in the power he wields over parts of midtown Manhattan. He is also, as far as I can tell, unelected. For about half an hour, Biederman describes a park out of a fairy tale: clean, green, well-trafficked, with portable chairs, library books, outdoor movies and bathrooms with fresh flowers. Thanks to security guards performing what Biederman calls “broken windows” enforcement, there are no loud radios, no spitting, no cursing.

But why is someone who doesn't work for the public running a public park? And why is he here, now, in Toronto, talking to us about our public spaces? Is this what Toronto wants to do with Nathan Phillips Square? Hand it over to what's described on Bryant Park's website as “private management backed by private funding”?

But the afternoon's just begun. Maybe Biederman is just one voice at the table. Maybe the panellists up on the dais, just now being introduced to the audience, will bring a fresh perspective to the discussion. Let's see. There's Ron Soskolne, the development consultant behind Yonge-Dundas Square. Next to him, that's Michael J. Cooper, the developer behind the Distillery District. And there's Geoff Cape, a social entrepreneur and head of Evergreen, a not-for-profit organization that brings green spaces to cities. These are the men who are going to guide us in our discussion on innovative governance in public places. I'm starting

to understand what “innovative” management means in the context of municipal revitalization projects. It means some form of privatization. But panels don’t constitute policy, as I am reminded by Sheila Glazer, the manager of strategic policy and projects for Toronto’s facilities and real estate division. Glazer, who helped organize the panel, tells me that this discussion is just a starting point for the larger process of developing a governance model for the revitalized square. But still, why are all the panellists from the private sector? What were the criteria for choosing speakers? “Those were some approaches to managing public space,” says Glazer. “It was not exhaustive.”

Scott Mullin, a vice-president at TD Bank and the head of the Nathan Phillips Square Revitalization Public Advisory Group (which is charged with, among other things, advising the city on a governance structure for the square), says the panel was organized, in a sense, to play devil’s advocate to the city’s current model of, well, non-management. “You’d sort of think there would be somebody responsible for the square at this point at the city,” says Mullin. “There isn’t. We think that, built into whatever structure there is going forward, there needs to be greater accountability in terms of someone taking the lead. There’s no one that manages Nathan Phillips Square right now. Good design requires good management.” Does that management need to come from the private sector? Could it come from the city? Jury’s out, says Mullin. The point is: someone needs to be in charge.

OK, good. So nothing’s been decided and we have time to ask some questions. For example, is some form of privatization always bad? According to Steven Flusty, associate professor at York University and author of *De-Coca-Colonization: Making the Globe From the Inside Out*, it depends on the arrangement between the city and the private contractor. At the same time, Flusty cautions that privatization tends to create spaces that can be restrictive in terms of how they define “public.” Rules about behaviour in public spaces, for example, can be applied to some people and not others. “Over the course of my research in major cities in Canada, the US, East Asia and the EU,” says Flusty, “I have observed the extremely differential enforcement of what are usually called ‘codes of conduct’ in public space.” These codes of conduct are applied selectively — Flusty says younger, racialized people are usually the target — reinforcing dominant ideas about what it means to be a legitimate citizen of a particular place.

Codes of conduct can also stop us from developing certain societal skills. “One of the key things that happens,” says Flusty, “is the infantilization of the public — they are no longer treated as adults who can negotiate how they’re going to get along. I think these kinds of rules prevent people from having the space to educate themselves as a public on how to be a public. I don’t have to figure out how to get along with people because I am being told.” And, according to Flusty, it’s possible that we might be able to handle some of this on our own. “In spaces where you don’t have a surfeit of regulations and that are a pleasure to be in, people are actually pretty capable — if they’re invested — of taking care of it and managing it themselves.”

Jutta Mason, a “park activist” at Dufferin Grove Park (famous for its dizzying range of programs and amenities, including a year-round farmer’s market and community bread oven) tends to agree. “It’s a wonderful kind of a theatre — that’s what public space is,” says Mason. “You can see all these things being played out. It’s a very long-running plot, and the tensions are a huge part of the treasure. They may have an expression but they may also have some kind of resolution.” The innovative management structure behind Dufferin

Grove Park: it's city-run, complemented by what Mason describes as an, "incredibly close working relationship between frontline city staff and park users and friends."

There is a big difference, of course, between a neighbourhood park and an iconic public space like Nathan Phillips Square. Yonge-Dundas Square, then, might offer a better basis for comparison. The self-proclaimed "heart of the city," Yonge-Dundas is, according to the City of Toronto website, Canada's first public square operated by a public/private partnership. Is it a success? That depends on who you ask. It also depends on what you're looking for in a public space. If you want to check out how Toronto expresses itself within the limits of the law, go elsewhere. Yonge-Dundas Square is monitored by a private security company and governed by its own special set of rules (ones that don't apply on sidewalks but do, by the way, apply in the current Nathan Phillips Square).

So what's the goal for what Scott Mullin calls City Hall's "front door"? Since, as Steven Flusty points out, the word "public" is not always used to mean "everyone," who is it for? And what are we meant to be doing — or not doing — there? As far as I can tell, the matter is still open for discussion, which brings us back to our panel, as it draws to a close. Geoff Cape from Evergreen is talking about "digging up some meaning" in public spaces. People are looking for meaning, he says; you have to unearth something real about a place and they will respond. I think he's right; we are looking for meaning, many of us are desperate for it. But you can't manufacture meaning for other people. And you can't passively consume meaning, even in the form of a really great park delivered, with maximum efficiency, by a management consultant. If we want real meaning in our shared spaces, no amount of "innovative" management is going to make it for us. Let's hope the new Nathan Phillips Square gives us the ownership and the room we need to make it for ourselves.

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