

IDA Submission: Bryant Park Amenities

What do we mean by Amenity?

The traditional public park offers simple amenities that meet basic human needs, like a refreshing water fountain, convenient WiFi, or a comfortable public restroom. Bryant Park expands on these offerings, deepening the visitor experience with its free “Amenity” areas, a set of staffed activity “rooms” that are open nearly all day during the warm season. We call them “Amenities” because of their dependability: they are open for at least nine hours each day from April through October. We host Amenities to draw visitors into the park, since we believe that busier parks create a safer environment. To do that, we provide activities for a wide variety of different interests. We can also keep the park busier by encouraging people to spend a longer amount of time in it. Amenities are the backbone of this goal. In fact, a visitor could entertain themselves for an entire day in Bryant Park without ever taking out their wallet.

Activities

The Amenities form a ring of comfortable niches around the park’s lawn, and hundreds of visitors can be seen enjoying them each day: catching up on the news at the Reading Room; engaging in a fierce match at Ping Pong; executing a precise shot at Pétanque; contemplating a tricky move at Chess + Backgammon; honing a putting stroke; learning the Scandinavian game of Kubbe; transferring inspiration onto paper at Art Cart; or playing one of more than 50 tabletop and board games at Games. This assemblage of free amenities is unmatched in any park in the United States, and is the result of planning and serendipity; hard work and joyful participation; neighborhood partnerships and dedicated BPC staff involvement.

While one of the real strengths of the Amenities is that they can be depended on to deliver similar experiences daily, they also shine when hosting special events and workshops. Live models pose for artists at Art Cart, and patrons compete in intense mixed-doubles tournaments at Ping Pong. Friends catch up over Mah Jongg Socials at Games, and coworkers get tips during golf clinics at Putting. Each year, more than 100 literary events take place at Reading Room. All of these events and workshops are free and open to all, drawing crowds of regulars and curious passersby alike.

People

A successful Amenity creates its own community. Bryant Park’s Amenities are staffed by a host – friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable. The host serves as eyes and ears, for the organization as well as for participant. Hosts welcomes new visitors and enforce rules with regulars, setting a tone that is both inviting and respectful. Participants, drawn by the opportunity to engage in a favorite pastime, find the atmosphere warm and inviting, and often stay much longer than planned. Each Amenity has a loyal group of adherents who come often and form friendships, but are quick to welcome newcomers. Shared passions create fascinating social juxtapositions: bike messengers facing off against bankers in Ping Pong; Mah Jongg players from 18 years of age to 80; skilled artists and newcomers side-by-side at Art Cart. The Amenities create a communal atmosphere that is hard to find in Midtown, in a neighborhood with few residential buildings.

Building an Amenity from the Ground Up

The physical look and layout for each Amenity is the result of collaboration between BPC’s design, capital, and operations teams. The current menu of Amenities is the result of both planning and improvisation. The Reading Room was an attempt to revive a once-famous feature of the park, the open-air library of the 1930’s and 1940’s. Conversely, Ping Pong came about after it was discovered that a flower bed had been destroyed when New Year’s Eve revelers trampled it beyond repair. Rather than replace the flower bed, and risk it being destroyed again, BPC decided to place two state-of-the-art Ping Pong tables there. The vastly different provenance of these two successful Amenities indicates how both careful planning and contingency can play a positive role in improving a public space. Chess + Backgammon has evolved, from spontaneous matches shortly after the park reopened in 1992, to becoming a formal program with nominal fees to participate, to becoming completely free in 2014 when BPC took over all Chess + Backgammon

operations. Kubb began as part of Games and was originally played on a patch of the lawn adjacent to the Games area. That proved to be damaging to the lawn, but the game's quick popularity convinced BPC staff that a dedicated Kubb area was needed. The next year, Putting + Kubb opened on two patches of sturdy astroturf that have been busy ever since.

Walking the park, a visitor will feel the difference between the look and feel of each Amenity. The Pétanque courts, in relation to the park's formal gardens and architecture, might very well be in France. The Games area is colorful and upbeat, with comfortable chairs for lingering players. The Art Cart's tabletop decals include straight edges and circles to help align drawings. Ping Pong was planned as both a playing arena and viewing gallery, showcasing the infectious camaraderie and spirit of its daily matchups. Indeed, a filmmaker once happened to walk by the area and, transfixed by the atmosphere, made the area the subject of a documentary film shown at film festivals around the country. Whatever the Amenity, in each, a participant or spectator should feel at home.

Financial Impact

A crucial aspect of Bryant Park's Amenities is that they are all free and open to everyone, and that they will always remain so. Bryant Park is fortunate in that it is funded by various revenue streams (though neither public funds nor charitable contributions play any role), but much of the power of the park's Amenities derives from the fact that they are neither expensive to operate nor difficult to maintain. Construction is minimal, and staffing and partnerships are essential. A short list of partners donating invaluable endorsements, materials and/or time include Material for the Arts and Grand Central Atelier (Art Cart); Marshall Chess Club (Chess + Backgammon); La Boule New Yorkaise (Pétanque); and HSBC (Reading Room.)

These partnerships are beneficial to every party involved: BPC receives expertise, materials, and cache from reputable brands; donors receive exposure for their brand in the busy heart of America's largest city.

Room to Grow

These Amenities are a comfort to their many fans, and a source of pride for BPC staff. They are essential to the park's continued success. However, one thing can be certain: they will not look the same year-to-year. Constant improvement, even for successful Amenities, is always the goal. BPC endeavors to constantly improve the experience for visitors. Amenities, like other park features, are subject to changes, large- and small-scale, and may be joined by new ones in the future.

The bottom-line criteria for nearly everything BPC does is simple: does it help bring people to Bryant Park? With that in mind, these Amenities pass the test. In 2017, they drew more than 200,000 visitors from April through September – nearly 900 per day. That ensures that, even on days when there are no large-scale events, Bryant Park can depend on a steady daily attendance of the most passionate type.