

# Bryant Park, New York: Strangers in Public Spaces

**LinDa Saphan,  
Michelle Salas,  
Cathleen Rozario**

## **Abstract**

Urban sociologists have studied how people interact in public spaces, but there has been little study of how changing technology has impacted how people relate to one another in these spaces. We conducted an observational study of people in Bryant Park in New York City to find out how electronic devices impact social contact in a small public park that normally would be conducive to interacting with others. We sought to understand how visitors to this urban park have evolved, how they engage with each other and with personal technology in the park, and how they relate to the surrounding urban space. We found that electronic communication devices can either isolate city dwellers or bring them closer together, depending on personal and environmental factors.

Urban actors such as people who frequent public parks—nannies, street vendors, and many others—are a vital part of the city landscape and the urban fabric, and yet they are often unnoticed. These invisible actors help to keep public spaces truly open and democratic—or as Jane Jacobs puts it in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, safe, active, and vibrant. They are at the core of urban communities, and thus of their beliefs and values. In recent years, efforts have been applied to renovating parks after a period of rising crime and urban decay. City parks have traditionally been places where people interact with friends, neighbors, and strangers. They bring people together for social, cultural, recreational, and political events. But in the last decade, the nature of social relationships in public spaces has changed due to the ubiquitous presence of handheld electronic devices, from smartphones to iPads.

Urban sociologists have studied how people interact in public spaces, and Michael Bull (*Sounding Out the City; Sound Moves*) has analyzed the auditory and interpersonal experience of city dwellers who use personal stereos, but further study is needed to understand how changes in technology are impacting people's relationships to one another in these spaces. We conducted an observational study of people in Bryant Park in New York City to find out how electronic devices impact social contact in a small public park that would normally be conducive to easily interacting with others in an unmediated way. We sought to understand how visitors to this urban park have evolved, how they engage with each other and with personal technology in the park, and how they relate to the surrounding urban space. We found that electronic communication devices can either isolate city dwellers or bring them closer together, depending on personal and environmental factors.

## Background

Miniscule compared to Central Park, nine-acre Bryant Park is located in Midtown Manhattan, directly adjacent to the New York Public Library (in fact the library's stacks are located underground beneath the park). It stretches from 40<sup>th</sup> to 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in the heart of the central tourist district that includes Times Square, Rockefeller Center, Grand Central Terminal, the Empire State Building, and many other landmarks within a few blocks. The park has become iconic in popular culture, appearing in films such as *Sex and the City* (2008) and *Morning Glory* (2010), starring Harrison Ford and Rachel Adams. It is, in short, a highly popular public park. As you can see on the map (Fig. 1), the park offered different activities and services.

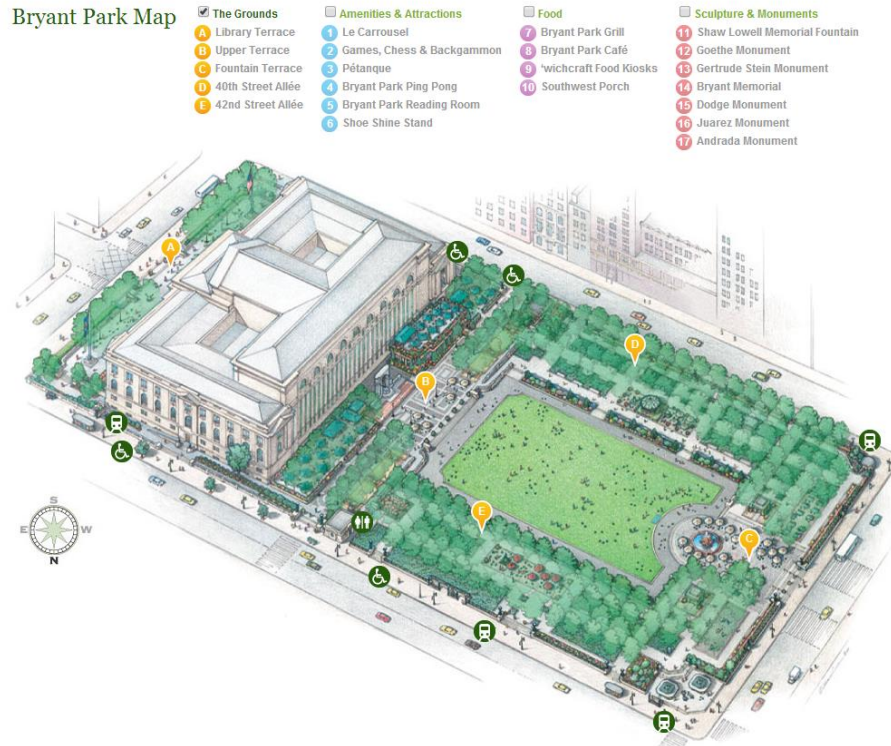


Fig. 1: Map of Bryant Park. Source: Bryant Park Blog.org.

Bryant Park has been a public space for more than 300 years and has served, in the course of its history, as a graveyard, military drill field, and encampment during the Civil War, industrial exhibition space, and park. Called “Reservoir Square” in 1847 for the adjacent water supply, it was renamed “Bryant Park” in 1884, after poet and newspaper editor William Cullen Bryant. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reservoir was closed, the library was built, and the park began to take shape as gardens and a fountain were installed. In the 1920s the park deteriorated while it was being used to store debris from subway construction.

Bryant Park underwent major renovations in 1934 when a formal French classical design of formal pathways, lawns, and trees was put in place. The entire park was constructed on a raised podium above the street level, surrounded by hedges and balustrades, clearly separating it from the surrounding streets. Seating was in the form of traditional fixed stone and wooden benches. Park goers were expected to fit into the park’s established structure and design rather than having an opportunity to create a personal space within the public domain. The park did not encourage strangers to connect with each other—no activities were offered that would have allowed people to interact.

By the 1970s, amid urban decay and rising criminality, New Yorkers had given up on public spaces and perceived parks as dangerous places to be avoided. Bryant Park became the habitat of drug dealers—in part because the raised podium and hedges concealed illegal activities. But once again the park

was brought back to life in the 1980s, this time by concerned citizens Daniel Biederman and Andrew Heiskell, who formed the nonprofit Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (now called the Bryant Park Corporation) with the intention of transforming the park into a space of beauty connected to the surrounding community that would draw more visitors with a variety of activities. Renovations took place in stages over the next eighteen years. The French garden style was preserved and refined, new entrances were built, and restaurant pavilions and concession kiosks were installed.

The new park was designed around a different understanding of the function of parks. The park was lowered to street level and the tall hedges were removed to facilitate foot traffic into the park and connect the park to the street. The new entrances made the park more visible. One of the goals of the renovation was to counteract the fear of strangers that is natural in a large city. Sociologist William H. Whyte, well known for his 1980 study *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, was included in the project to ensure that the new design would create a lively and welcoming space for strangers to mingle. Architecture critic Paul Goldberger described the vital importance of Whyte's understanding of how city dwellers relate to the space around them in his New York Times article, "Bryant Park, An Out-of-Town Experience." Goldberger noted that Whyte's interest in urban dynamics and the behaviors of city dwellers stemmed from his own direct observation: "He understood that the problem of Bryant Park was its perception as an enclosure cut off from the city; he knew that, paradoxically, people feel safer when not cut off from the city, and that they feel safer in the kind of public space they think they have some control over." Whyte advocated for a bottom-up model of designing public spaces that would empower park goers to take control of how they used the park, reflected, for example, in the decision of the Bryant Park Corporation, inspired by French parks, to purchase a thousand movable chairs.

With support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund the park finally reopened with a fresh new look in 1991. With the renovation of Bryant Park, a dangerous space that harbored criminals by its very design, was transformed into a public space that attracts thousands of people each day. The mission from the very beginning was an ambitious one: to transformed the park into "the greatest public space in the world" as the park's website states.

Visitors don't just sit on benches in Bryant Park; they are invited to participate in a wide variety of activities, from concerts to bowling, ping-pong, chess, and yoga classes, with all equipment provided by the park. Children enjoy the French carousel with its imaginative galloping animals. The outdoor Reading Room—with separate sections for adults (Fig. 2) and children (Fig. 3)—shaded by umbrellas, offers free books, newspapers, and magazines. The Reading Room was first opened in 1935 to provide a place where the large number of jobless people could spend the day during the Great Depression. It was closed during World War II when job opportunities increased and then recreated for the reopening of the park in 1991. Several vendors offer refreshments. All these activities are designed to encourage people to come together and interact with each other. The park was restored to its early function of drawing visitors into intimate conversations with added shared activities that create opportunities

for urban social mingling, luring passersby to take a break from their routine and suspend their fear of strangers.

The innovative design features of Bryant Park and the busy schedule of activities offered each day, from art workshops to Tai Chi lessons to musical performances, are part of the mission of the Bryant Park Corporation, described at its website:

The ongoing mission of the BPC is: to create a rich and dynamic visual, cultural and intellectual outdoor experience for New Yorkers and visitors alike; to enhance the real estate values of its neighbors by continuously improving the park; to burnish the park's status as a prime NYC tourist destination by presenting a meticulously maintained venue for free entertainment events; and to help prevent crime and disorder in the park by attracting thousands of patrons, at all hours, thus fostering a safe environment.

This comprehensive mission sets Bryant Park apart from other New York City parks as most do not have a continuous schedule of activities and entertainment nor activity spaces that encourage people to interact. Washington Square Park relies mainly on buskers for entertainment while Tompkins Square Park offers occasional events and performances.



Fig. 2. Bryant Park adult section of the Reading Room, June 28, 2016, 6:00 p.m. Book and magazine carts and moveable tables and chairs invite visitors to linger in the park rather than merely passing through. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.



Fig. 3. Bryant Park children's section of the Reading Room, July 8, 2016, 1:00 p.m., with its child-sized tables and chairs. Activities, films, musicians, magicians, and jugglers provide further family entertainment.

### Study Design

New technologies, especially smartphones, have changed the way that people engage or avoid engagement with each other in public spaces. People appear more distant from each other than ever and social interaction often seems unwanted as we hesitate to interrupt someone who is interacting intently with an electronic device. The redesign of Bryant Park was intended to facilitate social interaction prior to the age of smartphones, and we wondered whether and how ever-present electronic devices were impacting these interactions. Is the park still fulfilling its mission of promoting interaction among strangers, or are electronic devices more alluring for visitors than the park itself and the possibility of meaningful communication with strangers?

In the spring and summer of 2015, we conducted observations in Bryant Park and collected data on the number of people who visited the park, the duration of their stay, their activities, whether they were alone or with others, and whether they were using personal electronic devices (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). We repeated our observations every Friday afternoon for one hour, between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m.



Fig. 4. Bryant Park, central lawn, June 28, 2016, 6:00 p.m. The French design influence is seen in the individual chairs that allow users to take ownership of the public space by moving them to a preferred spot and to gather in small or large groups. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.



Fig. 5. Bryant Park, carousel, July 8 2016, 1:00 p.m. Also inspired by the French style are the carousel and rows of London plane trees, also found in the Jardin des Tuileries and the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

## Findings and Discussion

During this study we found that there was less activity in Bryant Park during the colder months of March and April. Each year a Winter Village sponsored by Bank of America is set up from October through March, including a skating rink with rentals and lessons, a restaurant, holiday shops, and special events. In March and April the ongoing demolition of the ice rink lessened the appeal of the park and may have influenced the number or activities of park visitors. Many people walked through the park on their way to the subway and trains at Grand Central Station or Penn Station, without engaging with the park other than as a walkway. Among those who spent time in the park, slightly fewer people were using an electronic device than were not. Cell-phone users typically sat on benches immersed in their calls, appearing unaware of the park itself. If they were passing through the park they wove their way around people on the crowded sidewalk without stopping to observe what was happening in the park.

On March 6, 2015, the first day of the study, the park's fountain was completely frozen over. The temperature was about 30 degrees. We counted 53 people in the park in the first hour. Most of them were business people trying to get to the nearby train station. Twenty-one people (40%) were walking alone in the park and 32 people (60%) were in groups of two or more. Twenty-three people (43%) were using handheld electronic devices, either taking photos or engaged in a phone call. The 30 people (57%) who were not using any electronic device were reading a book, newspaper, or magazine, or eating lunch. Only 10 people (19%) were sitting down enjoying the environment—the park was more of a transit route between two destinations than the destination itself.

Results on our second day of observation, on March 20, were similar, with a total of 77 people. Forty-two people (55%) walked alone through the deconstruction of the winter village while 35 people (46%) were with others. Only two people (3%) sat down to watch the workers; the remainder did not linger in the park. Thirty-eight people (49%) were using an electronic device. Those who had no device did not interact with other people.

April saw the number of park users rise. On April 10, the weather was clear and the fountain had thawed. We counted 115 people in the park. Seventy-nine people (69%) were in groups of two or more and 36 people (31%) were alone, possibly indicating that the warm weather made people want to be with others. Approximately half of the park visitors were using electronic devices, some of them taking photos.

On April 24, the number of people in Bryant Park more than doubled, to 267 people. Again, the number of people in groups increased compared to the colder days, to 205 (77%), versus 62 (23%) people alone. They were congregating around the lawn; the park's reading areas were fully occupied; many people waited in line to play ping pong and chess; and customers from the nearby McDonald's and Chipotle restaurants brought their food into the park. We counted 107 device users (40%). Most of those with devices were not talking on their phone; they were either taking photos or charging their phone with the provided outlets. This was a clear change from previous months and it

can be hypothesized that the change was due to the weather: in the warmer months, people were more obviously enjoying the park and engaged in conversation with friends. They appeared drawn to the park itself, rather than the opportunity to sit on a bench to interact with their devices.

From May through August the number of visitors to Bryant Park increased significantly and the park came back to life. The day of highest use was May 15, when we counted 500 people in the park between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. In the summer, Bryant Park hosts numerous classes and events that attract more visitors. We noted that people who came to the park alone in the warmer months typically interacted more with others, whether to ask for directions or while participating in these activities. We observed this pattern (Fig. 6) on June 19 with 450 people in the park (66% with electronic devices), July 17 with 475 visitors (68% with electronic devices), and August 21 with 300 people (52% electronic devices).

Date	Total of users in Bryant Park	Using electronic device	Not using electronic device
March 6	53	23	30
March 20	77	38	39
April 10	115	57	58
April 24	267	107	160
May 15	500	155	345
June 19	450	297	153
July 17	475	323	152
August 21	300	156	144

Fig. 6 Number of people using electronic devices on Fridays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. in 2015  
Source: Data collected by Cathleen Rozario and Michelle Salas.

Bryant Park is especially “tech-friendly.” The Bryant Park Corporation announced in its blog (April 20, 2012) the installation of forty-two power outlets throughout the park to recharge devices and give people “more reasons to stay in the park longer. Free wifi is also available. In June and July during our study people with electronic devices outnumbered those without them by about two to one. Among park visitors with handheld devices were many people in business attire holding conversations on their cell phones during their lunch break. Others found quiet areas in the park suitable for video calls.

Summertime park visitors with no electronic device in hand played games in the activity areas located throughout the park and also watched others play, which would lead to conversations (Fig. 7). We often found people alone in the park reading, eating, and drinking on the benches as they enjoyed the warm weather and activities around them. Groups of two or more people engaged in conversation over lunch and “people watched.”



Fig. 7. Bryant Park, ping pong table. A multitude of activities offered by the park, complete with equipment, bring strangers together to play board games, ping pong, and pétanque and to watch others at play, July 8 2016, 1:00 p.m. Photo: LinDa Saphan.

In the cold months, handheld devices appeared to hinder interaction and to isolate individuals. A significant change occurred when warmer weather arrived and we noted that electronic devices were sometimes used as part of direct interaction. Instead of using their phones to make calls, people took selfies with friends, filmed themselves and their friends, watched videos together, laughed, and seemed to be enjoying each other's company, confirming that technology can also be used to bring people together in person.

But we also frequently observed the phenomenon of "co-mingling," whereby two people are together and acknowledge each other's presence, but meaningful interaction is absent. In these cases, often a cell phone disconnected the two people. For example, we observed two female friends sitting together at a table. One was eating and telling the other a story. But the other person was simultaneously talking on her cell phone and responding to her friend's story with nonmeaningful token comments like "Uh huh. Yeah. Okay. Mhmm." The two friends behaved more like strangers, both relatively uninvolved in their immediate personal interaction.

Brant Park serves as an oasis of beauty and pleasure in the midst of the stress and noise of New York City. Even though the park itself is often crowded,

it still provides people with a momentary escape into private time, social connections, and shared activities. We concluded that both the design of Bryant Park and the weather impacted social relationships and the use of handheld electronic devices in the park. Our study confirmed the suspected negative social repercussions of these devices in creating a barrier between people as they block each other out and relate only to their electronics, missing opportunities to relate to people around them. The devices become surrogate friends, keeping people occupied when they prefer to avoid others. Peering intently at one's smartphone sends a clear message to others to not approach. This preference for isolation may be characteristic of the electronic age, in contrast to previous eras when people interacted more frequently and more naturally.

However, our study also shows that electronic devices can bring people closer together if people choose to use them for that purpose. Here again, the design of Bryant Park supports this positive use of technology by providing a comfortable, safe, and attractive space for people to congregate along with specific items (tables, chairs, benches, gaming equipment, and so on) that give people control over the nature and quality of their experience in the park. The people we observed using their smartphones in socially connecting ways were actively interacting with their human environment and the park—in other words, participating in urban life, a desirable outcome of urban design.

Like electronic devices, the weather in some Northern cities can either enhance or impede social interaction in public spaces. We found that cold weather pushed people further into isolation with their “electronic friend” while warm weather encouraged much more meaningful interaction, leading to either less use or more sociable use of electronic devices as people paid more attention to each other. Many of these interactions were taking place between strangers, confirming the success of William H. Whyte's social vision for Bryant Park. This indicates that intentional design of urban spaces can in fact overcome the tendency toward isolation and loss of social skills that are associated with handheld electronic devices as well as fear of strangers.

The constant presence of personal communication devices in public spaces is changing the very notion of “private” versus “public.” Prior to the electronic age, the privacy of telephone conversations was highly valued and calls were made in private homes and offices. Today, these conversations happen literally in the street and can easily be heard by others. Do people have the illusion of not being listened to as they conduct their personal and work business in the presence of strangers? Do they no longer care so much about privacy, or is the urge to make and answer calls so pressing that privacy is sacrificed? Whatever the explanation, the boundaries of private and public have blurred, and here too Bryant Park's conscious social design—planned with users in mind from the park layout to the activities offered—brings a new form of engagement among strangers and with the public space as people feel comfortable performing private activities in public places.

For people who don't carry electronic devices or don't use them in public, the design of Bryant Park and activities offered by the BPC are clearly conducive to co-mingling and positive interaction with strangers. But we found

that technology does not necessarily hinder interaction among strangers in public spaces such as Bryant Park and can actually promote it. New forms of interaction are emerging as people combine their need for outdoor spaces with their need for electronic communication. They may use these spaces either for virtual interaction with an absent person via phone calls, video calls, texting, online chatting, or social media; or they may co-mingle with friends, coworkers, or strangers by using their electronic devices for sharing photos or videos.

Undoubtedly this is not precisely what William H. Whyte had in mind for Bryant Park. But he intended to empower people to use the park according to their social needs, and this is what users of electronic devices are doing. Underlying all communicative device usage is a desire to connect with others, and new ways of using public spaces will inevitably arise as how we communicate changes.

### Works Cited

*Bryant Park*. <http://www.bryantpark.org/>

*Bryant Park Blog*. <http://blog.bryantpark.org/>

Bull, Michael. *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*. Routledge, 2008.

Goldberger, Paul. "Bryant Park, An Out-of-Town Experience." *New York Times*, May 3, 1992. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/03/arts/architecture-view-bryant-park-an-out-of-town-experience.html>.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. 1961. Vintage, 1992.

"Reading Room." *Bryant Park*. [http://www.bryantpark.org/things-to-do/reading\\_room.html](http://www.bryantpark.org/things-to-do/reading_room.html)

Whyte, William. *City: Rediscovering the Center*. 1988. U of Pennsylvania P., 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Edwards Brothers, 1980.

### About the authors

LinDa Saphan was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Fleeing the Khmer Rouge regime, she lived for more than two decades in Canada and France. Saphan earned a Ph.D. in Urban Sociology from the Sorbonne, Paris in 2007. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, NYC. Email: [linda.saphan@mountsaintvincent.edu](mailto:linda.saphan@mountsaintvincent.edu)

Michelle Salas is a Senior at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in pursuit of a Bachelor's degree in sociology. Throughout the duration of her college career, she has found interest in qualitative research which leads to her dedication to ethnographic research within urban culture. Email: [michellexsalas@gmail.com](mailto:michellexsalas@gmail.com)

Cathleen Rozario is a senior student attending the College of Mount Saint Vincent, NYC. As a sociology major with a concentration in Social Work, Cathleen seeks to learn and provide services to people. Email: [crozario.student@mountssaintvincent.edu](mailto:crozario.student@mountssaintvincent.edu)