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METROPOLITAN DESK

A Resplendent Park Respite, Mosaic Tiles Included

By **GLENN COLLINS (NYT)** 909 words

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To call it a bathroom, perhaps, gives insufficient respect to a landmarked 95-year-old building that reopens today in Bryant Park after two months and \$200,000 of renovations.

"It is, in every way, a comfort station," the parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, said about the new interior of the building on 42nd Street that, he said, was the best-known and most-used public bathroom in any city park. "No, it's sort of like the Oyster Bar -- transplanted into a park."

The free bathroom, which closed on Jan. 15, will reopen without fanfare -- no speeches, politicians or even a ceremonial toilet-paper-cutting.

"Look, it's a just a restroom," said Daniel A. Biederman, executive director of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation.

But as the grandest of the park system's 600 bathrooms, "it is an inspiration for us," Mr. Benepe said. Its renovation was completed not by his department, but rather by the nonprofit restoration corporation that operates the park for the city. "It sets the gold standard for park comfort stations."

The Baths of Caracalla it is not, but the new interior has grand 10-foot coffered ceilings, mosaic tiles, a crown molding of painted wood, illumination from brushed stainless-steel wall sconces, indirect cove lighting, a wainscoting of mosaic vines and flowers, mirrors framed in cherry wood and, yes, sinks and a baby-changing table capped with Bianco Verde marble from India.

Last year the bathroom, which is in the backyard of the New York Public Library, had 612,683 visitors and was used by 300 patrons an hour on peak afternoons. Studies have shown that about two-thirds of those using the bathroom are not park users.

So far, its lavishness has drawn little condemnation. Even members of Community Board 5, who in the past have harassed the restoration corporation over such issues as crowd control at its movie nights and music volume during events -- and who most recently took exception to commercialism and corporate sponsorship in the park -- have not put the bathroom in their cross hairs.

David Diamond, the community board's chairman, said there was no record of deliberations about the restroom by the board, adding that he thought "it's good that it's there."

But is a \$200,000 bathroom, well, too too? "It seems like a lot of money," Mr. Biederman said, "but when you'll be having more than three million visitors over five years -- when it'll need restoration again -- that's only 6 cents per use. That's not unwarranted, I think."

Bryant Park "has consistently pushed the envelope as to how refined a park can be," Mr. Benepe said, adding that the Department of Parks and Recreation "can aspire to this level in our bathrooms, although we probably won't go as far as the cut flowers."

Indeed, a large coppery urn of fresh flowers will decorate the entry vestibule of the bathroom.

Mr. Benepe said that his department has embarked on a campaign to restore its bathrooms and retrofit them to increase accessibility for the disabled. "We're making a concerted effort to make sure park comfort stations are open, decent and clean," he said. "You know, we have an informal motto -- we actually say this in our meetings -- it's our business to help New Yorkers do theirs."

The commissioner gave high marks to the Central Park Conservancy for refurbishing bathrooms in that park. Some park restrooms have especially high usage -- such as "the one by the Delacorte Theater in Shakespeare season, and the one in Battery Park near the tour boats," he said -- but the Bryant Park building "is on 42nd Street, the crossroads of the world," he added. "People use it day-in, day-out, fair weather or foul."

The 25-foot-long, 18-foot-wide building was designed by the architects John Merven Carrère and Thomas Hastings when they created the public library on Fifth Avenue. The inspiration for the bathroom's new interior was "the facilities in luxury hotels like the Regency, the

Plaza, the Waldorf and the St. Regis," Mr. Biederman said.

Given the building's Beaux Arts exterior, it was decided not to renovate the interior in a contemporary way, "since we wanted a more traditional look of rich materials, mosaics, marble and woods," Mr. Biederman said.

The bathroom has had, and will continue to have, a full-time attendant and a security guard nearby. It has been a mainstay of Midtown for about 15 years, since the restoration corporation opened it in the early 1990's after seeking to banish drug dealers, bellicose inebriates and homeless habitués from the park. Mr. Biederman said the bathroom had been continuously open from its initial construction until the mid-1960's, when disrepair brought about its closing for some 25 years.

In the 1990's "it had to be reopened, because there was no way we could invite thousands of people into our park and not have a bathroom for them," Mr. Biederman said. "But soon we realized we were taking on the burden of all the people in mid-Manhattan who needed a bathroom."

Thanks to overuse, the restroom's contemporary black-and-white tiles had become grayish, its facilities were worn, "and it felt grim," Mr. Biederman said. The roof needed to be replaced and its exterior mortar needed repointing.

In the final stages of the renovation, even construction workers expressed surprise at the building.

"There's so much attention to detail," said Joe Brescher, who was inspecting the tiles on a recent afternoon. "It's the nicest restroom I've ever worked on."

He pointed proudly to the wainscoting cap of green tile. "This is high end."

Photos: Andres Vazquez, left, and Joe Brescher, part of the Bryant Park restroom's interior renovation project, checked their handiwork. (Photographs by John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times)