

A Public Restroom Fit for Brooke Astor Gets an Upgrade

By WINNIE HU APRIL 5, 2017



Bryant Park, a six-acre oasis set among Manhattan skyscrapers, packs in the crowds with its winter ice rink and holiday shops, summer movie nights, smorgasbord of artisanal fare and rustic lunch tables and chairs under stately London plane trees.

Yet it is a 315-square-foot Beaux-Arts gem that draws the longest lines: the bathroom.

If there is a **Tiffany's of public restrooms**, this is it. Divided into men's and women's sides, it has self-flushing **toilets lined with sanitary seat covers that rotate between uses**, fresh bouquets of flowers, classical music and two attendants at all times who mop and shine until everything gleams. But even that isn't good enough: For those who have to go, it is about to get a whole lot nicer.

The newly renovated bathrooms at Bryant Park will reopen this month. **The \$280,000 project will bring high-tech toilets,** new artwork on the walls and more. Alex Wroblewski for The New York Times.

The attendants, fresh flowers and **seat covers will all return.** And for the first time, original artwork depicting Bryant Park will be displayed, selected from the park's collection of 225 works by painters-in-residence. The bathroom is one of a pair of compact buildings tucked behind the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue; the other has been converted into a park office and storage area. Designed as a public comfort station as part of the library, which opened in 1911, the bathroom was closed in later decades as the park descended into a blighted eyesore, a place best avoided that was overrun with drug dealers and criminals.

The upkeep of the bathroom runs to \$271,000 annually, which includes \$27,000 for 14,040 industrial-size rolls of single-ply toilet paper and \$14,160 for flower deliveries. The bathroom attendants earn between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year. The city-owned park is supported entirely through private revenue from a variety of sources, including corporate sponsorships.

The bathroom cannot be expanded because the exterior of the building, which has been designated a landmark, has to be preserved, park managers said. Inside, the men's and women's sides were previously flipped to squeeze in a third toilet for women (the men have two). Instead, park managers have sought to make the bathroom experience one worth waiting for. Any change — even to the playlist of classical music — is discussed at length at staff meetings. Park managers have convened focus groups on the bathroom. After **women said they preferred not to have to touch anything**, hands-free faucets and driers and self-flushing toilets were introduced. Park managers have also dispatched scouts to luxury hotels and restaurants, including the St. Regis, the Waldorf Astoria, the Plaza and Morimoto restaurant, to check out the competition.