The Passing of an Exemplary Era

By Andrew M. Manshel

The passing of former New York City Parks Commissioner Gordon Davis has led me to reflect on the changing nature of civic leadership.[1] Gordon was a remarkable person. He was born into a barrier breaking academic, African American family in Chicago. He was educated at Williams and Harvard. As Parks Commissioner (and one the city's first Black's to be appointed Commissioner) Gordon was the city official who green-lighted both the establishment of the Central Park Conservancy and the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (now the Bryant Park Corporation). He was a board member of BPRC (and the New York Public Library) during my entire tenure with BPRC. He also founded Jazz at Lincoln Center and was a long-time board member of the Public Theater.

It is possible that if the current City Hall were presented with a proposal to establish a not-for-profit to administer either Bryant Park or Central Park, or both, the proposals would meet with at least some skepticism. This City Hall if focused on parks in low-income communities. They would analyze the proposal through the lens of suspicion of the public sector. The promotion of possible gentrification of the areas around improved parks would likely engender a good deal of internal discussion.

There are two issues here. One is the passing of a cadre of wise, powerful, public spirited civic leaders. The other is a perception by those born after about 1980 that cities are safe places, and that, if anything, economic activity in downtowns needs to be regulated rather than promoted. No doubt young, progressive elected officials like Chi Ossé, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Tiffany Caban assume that midtown Manhattan has always been safe, busy and clean and can't imagine otherwise.

The Passing of Selfless Civic Leadership[2]

The Bryant Park restoration was led by Gordon, Andrew Heiskell, the retired chair of Time, Inc; Marshall Rose, a real estate entrepreneur (both served as chair of the New York Public Library) and Fred Papert, a preservationist, midtown advocate and one of the original advertising business Mad Men.[3] Like Peter L. Malkin (real estate), Felix Rohayton (finance), Stanley Greyson (finance), Richard D. Parsons (law) and Richard Ravitch (real estate), other outstanding figures in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th Century, they were generally selfless in their public service. They were involved in the civic life of New York City because they thought it was important and necessary, not because they were seeking attention, position or money for themselves. If you asked me to identify people like that of roughly my generation (baby boomers), frankly, I cannot.

While I am not entirely comfortable setting myself up as the arbiter of who is selfless and who isn't – after I reached the age of 70, and spending 40 years in professional life, I

awarded myself that license. But let's start with business leaders. New York's large institutional businesses, particularly in finance and law, have become international. While David Rockefeller (Chemical) and Walter Wriston (Citi) were the CEOs of major money center banks mid-century and were deeply involved in civic affairs, today's New York business elite see themselves as heading global institutions, concerned with global issues. Not to pick on one person, but Jamie Dimon of Chase is generally uninvolved in New York affairs. There are regional presidents to deal with that sort of thing. By contrast, his mentor Sandford Weill, is credited with saving Carnegie Hall. In the not-so-distant past, Dick Parsons, who was deeply involved in New York City affairs (and was the original attorney for BPRC), was CEO of Citi. I had to look up the name of its current leader (Jane Fraser). Jon Corzine of Goldman became governor or New Jersey. Who is David Solomon the current Goldman CEO? Judge Simon Rifkind was a prominent New York City attorney and a name partner at Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison. His partner, Ed Costikyan, was the last boss of Tammany Hall. Brad Karp, the recently departed leader of that firm (who was much in the news for settling a threat from the Federal government)? Not so much.

An anecdote from my Bryant Park experience: The negotiation for the lease for the Bryant Park Grill was both protracted and contentious. It was a high-risk proposition for Ark Restaurants, the proposed tenant. Three prior potential operators had failed to pull the resources together required to get to the lease. In its negotiating position, Ark's goal was, reasonably, to shift as much risk onto BPRC as possible. In a conference room at the Milbank Tweed law firm, at one point we had finally resolved all of the outstanding issues but one. That issue was whether Ark's right to provide food service in the park would be exclusive. We all thought that catering large events in the park might grow to be a significant business. We at BPRC and the Parks Department, wanted to provide event producers with the flexibility to use their own caterers – a significant factor, particularly for socially prominent events. Parks Commissioner Betsy Gottbaum was insistent on this point – and she was right to do so, as granting Ark an exclusive right was highly constraining on management of the park.

I left the conference room and set up a call with Andrew and Marshall. They agreed that this wasn't an important enough point on which to lose the deal. Marshall agreed to call Mayor David Dinkins to persuade him to overrule Commissioner Gottbaum. He did so and was successful. Commissioner Gottbaum folded – to her great consternation—and the deal got done.

What's significant here was that neither Andrew nor Marshall had a personal interest in the outcome of any kind – they used their considerable influence and spent personal political capital to accomplish a publicly beneficial outcome. I don't see this happening today under similar circumstances.

Collapse of the Civics

More evidence of this change in leadership style is the collapse of New York City's civic organizations as a force to be reckoned with.

New York City once had an array of non-profit organizations that vigorously promoted what their boards of elite New Yorkers regarded as the public interest. These included the City Club, the Municipal Art Society, the Citizens Budget Commission, The Parks Council, Citizen's Union and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Municipal Arts Society was particularly aggressive in advancing its policy positions through litigation against the city and State. All are either defunct or a pale shade of their former selves.

Some of this has to do with the changing nature of New York's elite and their lack of interest in local affairs, but a lot has to do with the impact of Michael Bloomberg's mayoralty. Some of the members of the boards of the civics, particularly of MAS, were Bloomberg's friends and peers. They were loath to criticize, forget sue, the administration of their friend, who they trusted and whose civic values they generally shared. The civics have never recovered from twelve years of this state of affairs.

At the CBC and the Regional Plan Association a startling number of their board members are (like me) lobbyists. CBC's board was once investment bankers and attorneys – many in the municipal finance business – and so had a direct interest in the stability of local government. The outgoing chair of the CBC is a lobbyist (and daughter of a lobbyist). Lobbyists are invested in the status quo and cannot be seen as challenging government officials. They are the wrong people to be put in charge of government watch dogs.

Important non-partisan, technocratic players in local affairs has essentially gone silent.

Generational Change

It has become difficult for many people to imagine downtowns as perceived to be deserted and unsafe. Or even Brooklyn and Astoria to be seen as uncool. This drives a good deal of the policy coming out of the current City Hall. The mayor and his senior staff have proven themselves to be honest, serious, intelligent, with a sincere concern about lower income people. But, at the same time, they don't seem to be focused on higher profile, legacy public spaces and institutions. There are certainly counter examples over the last ten months of the Mamdani Administration, like the holding of City Hall media events in the Conservatory Garden in Central Park, the Mayor's high profile early voting at the Metropolitan Museum and the recent Metropolitan Opera ticket give-away. But these examples, while worthy, tend to be exceptions.

When we moved to the Upper West Side in 1989, every weekend I removed crack vials from the tree pits around our building. Riverside Park had no flowers anywhere, and broken infrastructure everywhere. This is not the UWS in which Mamdani grew up on Riverside Drive. Younger folks assume and take for granted that the streets and public transit all over the city are safe, and that public spaces in upscale neighborhoods are well maintained. Most progressives believe that there is something called gentrification that makes the Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods where they would prefer to live like Williamsburg (formerly industrial), Bed Stuy (formerly low income) and Astoria (formerly working class, ethnic) expensive. However, the

economic reality is that those places are expensive to newcomers because people with high incomes want to live there. Making them appealing was a huge, risky project and an important success story.

When I came to New York for graduate school in 1978, there was virtually no residential construction under way in New York City. Market rate rents were not enough to cover the costs of construction and operation of residential property. Why? Because demand was low. Central cities were perceived to be unsafe and dirty well past the 70's fiscal disaster and continuing across the 1987 stock and real estate market meltdown, and on into the early 90's. As someone who was involved in the revitalization of midtown Manhattan in the 90's, I can attest that reversing that situation took thoughtful, sustained hard work. That reversal wasn't "natural" or market driven. It was the result of changed government urban policy. This is not part of the collective memory. I recently saw a chart that indicated that only 25% of the current population of New York City lived here in 1989! It's not that they don't remember – it's that they weren't here or weren't born yet!

Many current policy makers of this generation seem not to understand that the hard-won base-line conditions are unlikely to continue by themselves. Safe and attractive public spaces need to be supported by maintaining the perception of public safety, by continuing to invest in civic infrastructure in the center city and by supporting the economic integration of residential neighborhoods (otherwise known as gentrification). The current focus is on policy initiatives set to make the areas outside of midtown "affordable," and to provide support for "community-based" initiatives. These may have their merits, but they don't go the heart of what drives city economies.

Street Vending – Scourge or Blessing

A revealing policy issue for progressivism is street vending. To sophisticated urbanists, chaotic street vending on commercial corridors signals a lack of social order, which implies the absence of public safety to many people. Vendors can make sidewalks more congested and difficult to navigate. Street vendors don't pay rent or sales taxes, and food vendors generally leave a mess behind their carts. On occasion vendors fight over locations. There is also a sleazy, exploitive commercial cottage industry of people in the middle who allocate spaces and supply of licenses, carts and materials.

To the new urban progressives, street vending is an indication of urban vitality and vendors are disadvantaged "working people." Importantly, vending provides a source of income to undocumented people, who catastrophically can't legally find work. Vendors, both licensed and unlicensed, are seen as low-income people just trying to earn a living. They are small scale entrepreneurs attempting to live out the American dream, selling things other people want to buy. Food trucks have become indicia of hip urban neighborhoods, essential elements of a vibrant food culture, with a range of often creative, unique offerings. In New York City, food trucks fall between the regulatory cracks – and there isn't a structure for them.

There is a good deal of mythology involved in this deregulatory point of view. Most street vendors are being exploited by well-heeled middlemen. Their places aren't secure and are often the result of violence or money changing hands. They don't have accessible commissaries for food preparation, and they don't have sanitary facilities for themselves. To another segment of the population, street vendors seem to be part of a frayed social fabric. But, it is nearly impossible to make the case for expanded regulation of street vending to elected officials and so vending mostly remains problematic for the viability of commercial corridors across the city.

I would guess that most advocates for street vendors might see the wildly successful Queens Night Market as the ideal situation for vendors – and it is. It is also closely regulated and carefully curated. John Wang, the amazing, thoughtful entrepreneur behind the Night Market works to control a wide range of variables in the market, including the prices that vendors can charge, the layout and placements of their stalls, the mix of cuisines available, even the entertainment that takes place during the market. It is an excellent model for vending more broadly – because it works so well. And it demonstrates the value of rules and organization for street vending. It produces an outstanding result for both patrons and vendors. The Queens Night Market is a model both critics and advocates for street vending can agree on.

There is a way forward in there somewhere. Meanwhile, those of us who have been around a while need to continue to work to persuade millennials and younger of the efficacy of high-quality management of public spaces, particularly in the city's economic core. I have photos of a broken-down, empty Bryant Park in the 70's that I am able to share.

We are faced with a young group of progressive urban elected officials, without knowledgeable public spirited civic leadership to support them, who have some misconceptions about the challenges facing downtowns, public spaces and commercial corridors. People younger than I am, who care about cities and downtowns, need to seriously think about innovative policy approaches to keeping urban centers vital. Downtowns drive cities' success. Residential neighborhoods don't exist in an economic vacuum. Unfortunately, current public servants don't have Marshall or Gordon to call to ask for advice. Without some new ideas from the current generation of policy makers and a commitment to downtowns, with the next economic downturn we may once again face an even more precipitous decline in commercial centers as the movement of knowledge workers, operating from far flung homes and away from the urban core, accelerates. That won't be good for anyone in the city, no matter their income or neighborhood. It would also be good for recently minted billionaires and centimillionaires to think about the greater good and pitch in without calculating what's in it for them or putting their name on it.

Endnotes

1. https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/the-lack-of-selfless-leadership
2. ttps://www.nytimes.com/2026/10/05/arts/gordon-j-davis-dead.html
3. For more on this, See my, "Learning from Bryant Park" (Rutgers 2020)