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Public seating – small important places

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**Introduction**

In late 1972 William Whyte wrote an article ‘Please, just a nice place to sit’ for the *New York Times* lamenting the lack of places to sit down, even in the context of significant increases in public space:

> But there are still few places to sit – and not entirely by accident, either. Some builders genuinely and sincerely mistrust people – noncustomer people, at least – and are almost obsessive on the threat of hippies. They instruct architects to design features that will discourage ‘loitering’ – what a Calvinist tract is in that word – and sometimes there is a show of active hostility.

*(Whyte, 1972)*

Nearly 50 years later there is still a paucity of quality, comfortable, and inviting public seating in urban environments, and the motives and subsequent design response remain similar. This chapter aims to uncover the rationale for limiting public seating and to provide an alternate argument for the increased valuation of seating as the smallest increment of place; an opportunity to enhance urban equality, amenity, and to build social connections and community wellbeing.

Of the myriad definitions of placemaking, the objective seems clear: to turn spaces into places that impact human beings positively and that connect people to a location and to each other. This chapter proposes that the smallest increment of place is the public seat. Seating, specifically in public or shared spaces, is an invitation to people; an invitation to enter, a clear sign that staying is welcomed, and that it is OK because you, as an individual, are welcome to not only look at the space but to also be an active participant. As such, public seating should be a significant concern of placemakers and placemaking generally.

Unfortunately, many spaces designed as public places are not sittable. In some cases, sitting is explicitly restricted by a lack of seating, in others the message is implicit: with seating provided but in such a way that it lacks real invitation. Placemakers, planners, urban designers, landscape architects, and other decision-makers involved with the design and delivery of public spaces should have as their primary goal making places for people. However, a range of factors and external considerations continue to inhibit the realisation of this objective. Specifically creating
environments that are designed for commercial activity, for marketing, for politics, or for managing behaviours has led to a dearth of sittability and the creation of spaces that are not actually designed for use by people. The ability, and the explicit welcome, to sit improves the sociability, safety, and success of the larger environment, essentially transforming it from an open space to a human-centric place.

As noted above, the value of sitting in public spaces was first highlighted by William Whyte in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* (Whyte, 1972) and then later in his seminal book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Whyte, 1980). Since then, there has been minimal interrogation of the role seating plays in successful placemaking (Elet, 2002). The lack of historic or current literature on seating in the public domain can be seen as evidence of the lack of value this key aspect of public space activation holds in current thinking around urban design and planning. The discussions regarding seating that are occurring tend to focus on managing away both undesirable people – whether they be teenagers, non-consumers, or the homeless – and undesirable activity (Schmidt et al., 2011). While public space activation is gaining traction for its economic benefits, there is an equal need for placemakers to consider the role public seating plays in building connections and communities in addition to commerce.

Identified below are four historically established influences that contribute to what may be a professional prejudice against public seating: a cultural bias against sitting; a focus on movement over staying; the primacy of design over usability; and the prevailing value of economic exchange over social connection. The following sections will provide an overview of each of the four influences on the devaluation of public seating before providing a rationale for the prioritisation of places to sit as a key tool of successful placemaking.

### A cultural bias against sitting

When placemakers use images to illustrate successful places, they are full of people, sitting around, talking to each other. Yet when a new design is put forward, places to sit are often the last thing on the agenda. Why is sitting deemed so unimportant?

In *A Cultural History of Gesture*, Bremmer considers walking, standing, and sitting in ancient Greek culture, and in doing so defines an inherent hierarchy that may still influence Western city-making today. While public walking in classical literature is seen as essentially male, powerful, and purposeful (Bremmer, 1991, p. 16), sitting is associated with ‘postures of inferiority’ (Bremmer, 1991, p. 25) or of supplication:

> The presentation of the self in public, then, was often acted out according to the contrast of high (upright carriage) and low (sitting, prostration); the positive side of ‘upright’ in this contrast is also shown by the fact that the Greek word *orthos* (‘upright’) and its cognates frequently carry the meaning ‘prosperity’, ‘uprightness’, or ‘restoration.’

* (Bremmer, 1991, p. 26)

Sitting down is by definition a lowering of the body into a fixed location. It is a static state, where a person is more vulnerable and less ready to act. Doing ‘nothing’, whether that be resting, enjoying the sunshine, reading a book, people watching, waiting for someone, thinking, listening to music, or other quiet, passive, and independent activities are seen to be less valuable, even potentially risky behaviours. Inversely, vibrancy, movement, and liveliness are all seen as successful outcomes of placemaking and urban design projects. With such an embedded prejudice against passive and sedentary behaviours and inclination towards active and upright activity,
Public seating – small important places

It is not surprising to see how a cultural bias against sitting and public seating could be influencing projects today; by purposefully not making places that are seen to encourage purposeless activity. This preference for activity over passivity may also be the foundation for the second influence on placemakers: the inequitable allocation of space and resources for movement over places to stay.

A focus on movement over staying

The prejudice against inactivity has been further supported by the increasing focus on planning for movement in city-making. Over the hundreds of years leading to the eighteenth century, a philosophical shift was occurring in the way that people connected to their environments. Prior to this time the medieval world prioritised place over the spaces between – the ‘not’ places (Foucault, 2006). These places worked as a hierarchy of dichotomies; ‘sacred places and profane places, protected places and, on the contrary, places that were open and defenceless, urban places and country places,’ what Foucault calls the ‘space of localisation’ (Foucault, 2006, p. 176), suggesting that this changed with the rediscovery that the earth’s place was not the centre of the universe, but rather only one point in infinite space.

This knowledge diminished place to merely a point defining the connections or movement between two points. The space between these points supplanted the places themselves in importance – ‘extension supplanted localisation’ (Foucault, 2006, p. 176). Casey (1997) supports this argument in his book *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. The central theme is the increasing neglect of place in favour of space. The philosophic shift described by these authors has dominated spatial planning to the present day with its focus on transportation networks over destinations, cars over people (Tibbalds, 1992). This is apparent at the scale of the city, at the street, and within open space. In much of our city planning, roads, then streets, then paths are used to define and organise space. The space is further classified to prioritise commercial land use, then open space, and lastly places where people might be invited to sit and spend time in their city for free. Movement and the associated allocation of space and resources is clearly dominant, while the humble public seat, a place for pause, is the lowest priority.

The primacy of design over usability

The third influence on public seating is the primacy of design outcomes over the potential for positive social impact. In a world where imagery and creating Instagrammable moments impact design decisions, the look of a place can take precedence over planning for its actual use. The contemporary preferencing of the visual has roots in early-twentieth-century architecture, where there was a move away from the transitory in design due to its perceived irrelevance in the designation of space. The original idea had its proponents in Frank Lloyd Wright and Rudolph Schindler who believed that the furniture of a place was inseparable from the architecture (Leatherbarrow, 2002). As such, non-permanent objects, or those that did not define the architecture or space, were seen as ‘transparent,’ or essentially irrelevant. Interestingly, furnishing was acknowledged as the ‘background for human activity,’ but that activity was seen as subservient to the characterisation of space itself (Leatherbarrow, 2002, p. 283). This modernist approach to the furnishing of the public realm is supported by Tibbalds (1992) who propounds uncluttered and simple spaces to generally be more successful, particularly if the ‘scale and integrity of the street or space as a whole’ (Tibbalds, 1992, p. 47) is maintained.

These architectural theories, added to the romanticisation of the ancient and mostly empty European plaza, has led to a design culture that favours the image of a grand public space over its
actual use. Human-centric design features that encourage day-to-day use are often limited and the activation of the space is envisaged to be delivered via commercial activity or often costly programming by placemakers or ‘activators’ after the design is built. In these types of projects, the objectives of placemaking are subsumed by the desired design outcomes with the result being seating provided in locations and in a format that appear to purposefully limit usability. The location might be determined to make an architectural drawing look more symmetrical rather than providing a seat where a tree will provide shade or where the view towards interesting activity is promised. Materiality and detailing are chosen to fulfil the design ideal rather than being comfortable and climatically appropriate. The outcome is that people do not sit on these benches and we end up with a community asset that must be maintained but is not actually used. Francis, Koo, and Ramirez (2010) call this out as bad design where the result is a kind of ‘bench museum’ where you can look but are not really invited to sit.

Bad design that focuses on the image versus human use is one thing, but a more insidious rationale for limiting seating is managing users and their behaviours. Removing existing seating, providing no seating, or designing for purposeful discomfort has since the 1960s been an active measure for discouraging staying – particularly for the so-called “undesirables” such as the homeless, teens and beggars (White, 1988, as cited in Martin, 2006). A variety of ‘hard and soft controls’ (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998) are actively used in planning and urban design, all with reasonable rationales – to reduce crime, to manage homelessness, to improve the perception of safety. The problem for placemakers is that taking away the invitation for one group affects every potential user, changing the culture of the place from one of welcome to one of rejection; from being a place for people, to a non-useable space that is only activated through resource heavy programming rather than through self-sustaining community activity. An extreme example from 1988 was the Sausalito downtown park that was fenced and gated with a sign reading ‘This park is for your viewing pleasure. Do not enter’ (Francis, 1998). These influences on placemakers and designers, whether theoretical, romantic, or social, have had a direct impact on the amount of inviting, quality, and comfortable public seating in the urban open spaces, and therefore on the number of places generally. Not including spaces to spend time is the antithesis of good placemaking that should put the human experience and the opportunity for connection at the centre of decision-making.

The prevailing value of economic exchange over social connection

The final influence on decisions regarding public seating is fundamentally economic. The management of public space users and their behaviours does not only have social concerns as its foundations. Rather, the economics of place are increasingly the rationale behind public space design and the integration, or not, of public seating. More new public spaces in cities are being delivered as part of private development, either required for public benefit as a developer contribution or utilised as a marketing tool for selling a product – whether that be housing, office space, or retail. In addition, many government-owned open space assets such as urban parklands, national parks, and botanic gardens are seen as economic drains on the public purse and face pressure to become financially self-sufficient. Together, these shifts provide reduced incentive for the free use and extended staying in public spaces that public seating invites. In these cases, placemakers are engaged not to create places but to curate experiences for those audiences deemed acceptable for commercial activity.

In private development particularly, a fear of non-consumer-based staying and the itinerant or the loiterer (someone with no purpose as either a producer or a consumer) results in the design of public spaces, while often high-quality and edged by engaging retailers, being fundamentally
Public seating – small important places

exclusionary. Often these urban plazas are designed as ‘front yards, signs of status but not for use’ (Carr et al., 1992, p. 15). In the worst cases, seating is limited to commercial operations only – if you cannot pay you cannot stay. This also means that the people associated with the place are the same as those that it is being ‘sold to.’ Thus, with no space for the undesirables, the place become increasingly homogenous and reinforces the segregation of those who cannot afford it.

In these economically driven places, public seating may be incorporated but in such a way as to de-incentivise actual use – particularly for those that do not fit into the dominant culture.

Understanding these four key influences on public space design, and specifically the inclusion or not of public seating helps to set a new baseline for placemakers to consider why this prejudice against public seating should be reversed. The rationale for the considered inclusion of inviting, quality, and comfortable public seating can be summarised into three arguments that should help refine the placemakers’ arguments for increased sittability in our public spaces: the public seat as the smallest increment of place; equity in access through an invitation to all; and the public seat as social infrastructure.

The public seat as the smallest increment of place

Defining ‘place’ is a fundamental challenge for most placemakers and therefore for their clients. It is this author’s position that space is an environment that holds no meaning for people, and place inversely is one in which meaning is embedded through a connection between those people and the location; this meaning could be historic, cultural, social, personal, or communal.

It could be stated that phenomenologically, a public seat is a place because it is space designated and available specifically for use by a person (Lexico, 2020). Its place-ness is further heightened by the experience it offers the user – an invitation to literally and figuratively connect to a location in the form of a personal investment of time and trust. By sitting we are committing our body and its associated experiences to the specific location. By putting ourselves in a more vulnerable position we are putting our trust in the location. This simple connection satisfies an important human need to make ties to a specific location (Relph, 2016) and is the basic premise of place over space. The invitation to engage physically with the public realm allows for the possible generation of meaningful connections between people and their places. By participating in the life or activity of the place an authentic relationship can be developed and sustained. The lack of these opportunities creates an environment that precludes human engagement – a not-place. Just like the living room of a house, streets and cities must be comfortable and provide a ‘home’ for the city’s inhabitants (Schindler, 1921 in Leatherbarrow, 2002, p. 280) otherwise they simply become storage rooms for cars, trees, play equipment, or just that awkward corner that no one knows what to do with.

For placemaking, perhaps most importantly, public spaces without quality seating opportunities risk never becoming the third places we need for social connection and community wellbeing. The seat can be the generator of place across a wider area, an opportunity to build relationships through repeated sharing of the same location. Inviting, comfortable and well-located public seating encapsulates the characteristics of Oldenburg’s third places; they are on neutral ground, are not connected to a person’s status, are open and readily accessible, low profile, and support communal ownership and social connections (Oldenburg, 1989). Public spaces that are uninviting and actually unsittable may be attractive to look at, meet quotas for open space allowance or tree planting, but cannot become places if there are no opportunities for people to connect with them. A public seat, considered as a small place for meaningful human experience, can become the seed that generates community, and as such a significant and powerful tool for placemaking.
Equity in access through an invitation to all

The second argument for more high quality, comfortable, and inviting seating is founded on the principle of equity, of ensuring that the public realm really is for everyone. While there are many reasons that a person may choose to sit or not sit in a public space, not actually including inviting, quality, and comfortable public seating will obviously act as a deterrent. However, understanding what constitutes ‘invitation’ requires an empathetic consideration of the potential users, of all the users – not just the ideal audiences. Public seating plays an important role as a legible encouragement to the community to participate in the life of the place; it reflects the culture of that community, of what behaviours are not allowed and which are encouraged. It can be, and has been, used to implicitly or explicitly limit the invitation to potential users, specifically: rough sleepers, skateboarders, groups of youth, and non-consumers. However, when a place is designed to not be inviting for one group, it is likely to read as unattractive to many more.

The need for unbiased and openly welcoming places to sit reflects a wider need for more inclusive cities where the public realm or shared spaces can be part of the solution ‘for addressing and preventing some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary urban life: countering social isolation, negotiating difference, and creating places for all – regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, or income’ (Latham and Layton, 2019). Equity in the access and use of public space is an important and essential asset for all members of the community, but perhaps most specifically for those with the least choices, and therefore should be a key consideration in any placemaking process. For placemakers working on commercial projects it should be noted that while paramount, the benefits for public spaces that both attract and retain people are not just social. Whyte’s much quoted adage ‘What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people’ (Whyte, 1980) talks to the community desire for vibrant places that are interesting and engaging. Local economies benefit from places where people pause, stop, and spend time, because people who don’t slow down enough to see what businesses have to offer cannot spend their money there.

So how do you make more inclusive public spaces through inviting public seating? While substantive inroads are being made, the dominant design influencers remain male (Fairs, 2017), formally trained with significant delivery experience but perhaps with lesser insights into the values, needs, and aspirations of others not like themselves. Gender, age, personal preference, background, and many other factors play a role in how people read public space. The less diverse the design team, the less likely they will achieve diversity in users and uses. We need placemaking processes and design teams that act as open and empathetic facilitators of places that attract a range of users through ‘deep listening’ (Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing, n.d.) and concentrated observation. The people of the place should be valued not only as activators of a finished space or purchasers of the finished product, but also as learned participants in the process of making place. Through a truly collaborative process and an openness to accepting and understanding what makes us all different, we can create places that in turn, accept and welcome the diverse and are an authentic reflection of their local community.

The public seat as social infrastructure

The last argument for placemakers in their quest for more sittable public spaces is in regard to seating as essential social infrastructure:

Social infrastructure is a set of physical places and organisations that shape our interactions. When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters all kinds of social interactions,
helps build relationships, and turns community from a vague, fuzzy concept into a lived experience.

(Florida, 2018)

Historically urban centres were seeded as spaces for exchange – both economic and social; of goods and information. As discussed earlier in this chapter, a more recent focus on economic exchange by both professional placemakers and designers has dominated to such an extent that other forms, such as social exchange, have become limited or perceived as less valuable. Yet even developers such as Australia’s Delfin Lend Lease acknowledge that ‘for a place to function as a community, people have to come together’ (Delfin Lend Lease, 2004). Public seating provides the basis for the creation of third places that encourage use and connection between people and their places. For placemakers, public space and its design should focus on its role as social infrastructure – a shared investment with the focus of connecting community to their environment and to each other. Seating in public open spaces provides the location for meetings, both planned and unplanned, and the potential for conversation. Placemakers have the power to influence behaviours – to invite connection or support isolation. Sommer (1969) explains that the placement of seating can be designed to enhance interaction between strangers. This is called sociopetal (arrangement allowing people to see and interact with each other) planning as opposed to sociofugal (arrangement allowing privacy of people), which tends to discourage human interaction (Your Dictionary, n.d.).

Human connectedness in our communities is an increasing focus for many concerned with growing trends towards urban loneliness and mental health concerns associated with social isolation. The Grattan Institute’s Social Cities report summarises the important value of social connections on community wellbeing and why city-makers need to consider a wider spectrum of community needs:

These needs are both material and psychological. In policy and political terms, material needs tend to be prioritised – in part because they are easier to measure and influence. But psychological needs such as social connection are just as important, and cities play a role in whether they are met.

(Kelly et al., 2012)

With quality, comfortable, and inviting seating options, placemakers can deliver on both the physical and psychological requirements for community wellbeing. However public seating design must change its focus to one that aims to maximise use; not bench seating stranded at equal intervals along a road and facing traffic, or ledges designed too high or too low for comfortable sitting, or the thousands of other public seats provided for community amenity that are designed or located in such a way to almost guarantee they will never be sat on. This is a huge waste of public funds both in terms of the cost of delivery and ongoing management of assets that have limited community benefit. Placemakers should consider public seating as a tool for connecting people and as important social infrastructure. A public seat provides the physical space as well as the less tangible but equally important provocation for potential social exchange to occur – the opportunity to connect with other members of the community either directly through a conversation, a nod, a smile of recognition, or indirectly through the simple act of sharing a space.

Creating a more sittable city – a city of small people places

Placemaking is fundamentally about people and building their connection to a location and to each other. This chapter has set out the rationale for and the value of, quality, comfortable,
and inviting seating as an important tool for placemakers. This last section provides direction on how improved public seating can be delivered in our cities to help turn public space into community places. Over the last five decades there have been handful of important researchers (Whyte, 1972; Mumcu et al., 2010; Carr et al., 1992; Francis, 1998) who have undertaken studies and provided recommendations for public seating design that both attracts people to use it and provides encouragement for the longer stays that precipitate potential social connection.

This chapter is an attempt to synthesise these works into three key considerations for placemakers to support the delivery of quality, comfortable, and inviting public seating – psychological comfort, physical comfort, and pleasure. Psychological comfort aims to capture the need to consider the diversity of people who may use the space and not only what will attract them to take a seat but also what the barriers to entry may be. Consideration should be given to gender, age, background, and any other factors that may contribute to whether a place is welcoming and perceived to be safe, legible, and inviting for that person. A choice of seating options and location should be provided that offer both refuge (a sense of security) but also prospect (good sight lines) (Mumcu et al., 2010). Physical comfort captures considerations regarding how seating is designed to meet the needs of all types of human bodies in all types of climatic conditions. Here choice is paramount; we need places to sit in the sun or the shade, out of cold winds in winter but with access to cooling breezes in summer. We need ergonomic designs that consider not only the able-bodied adults but people of all ages and abilities; people sitting alone as well as those sitting in groups. Pleasure in public space should focus on creating positive experiences for the users and consider all the senses. The created vista should be visually engaging and diverse. Nature should play an important role in this, providing areas of light and shade and a changing landscape as the seasons change. But more than just the visual experience should be considered. Paley Park in New York is well known for its water wall creating an aural blanket to the busy street noise just outside. The smell of flowering plants, and the ability to touch and interact, can all bring pleasure to the user and should be located with seats where people can sit and enjoy them.

Our objective as placemakers is to make places, to transform space into locations that hold a meaningful connection with the people who use them. Creating places to sit can help deliver that objective. To create a more sittable city, a city of small human places, placemakers, designers, and other decision-makers should prioritise the creation of more places to stay rather than places to spend, or to move through. Designing for sittability is not as simple as providing park benches. Creating places that people will invest both their time and their trust at the most personal level needs the same level of consideration as designing cities at the systems level. A successful public seat is one that a range of people want to and actually do use, that encourages connections between people, and that contributes in its own small way to the making of place at the micro and macro levels.

References


Further reading in this volume

Chapter 15: Un/safety as placemaking; disabled people’s socio-spatial negotiation of fear of violent crime
Claire Edwards

Chapter 19: Placemaking in the ecology of the human habitat
Graham Marshall

Preface: The radical potential of placemaking
Cara Courage

Chapter 20: Displacemaking 2015 and 2020
Catherine Fennell and Daniel Tucker

Chapter 24: Artists, creativity, and the heart of city planning
Tom Borrup
Chapter 32: The Hollywood Forest Story: Placemaking for the Symbiocene  
*Cathy Fitzgerald*

Chapter 39: Translating Outcomes: Laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking  
*Jamie Hand*

Chapter 40: Transforming community development through arts and culture: a developmental approach to documentation and research  
*Victor Rubin*

Chapter 44: Creative placemaking and comprehensive community development: rethinking neighborhood change and evaluation  
*Maria Rosario Jackson*

Chapter 45: How the city speaks to us and how we speak back: rewriting the relationship between people and place  
*Rosanna Vitiello and Marcus Willcocks*