1.   The Role of Furniture in Outdoor Spaces

What do we mean when we talk about site and street furniture? For the purposes of this book we mean elements introduced into outdoor spaces to provide comfort and convenience for the people who use them. In general, we do not include elements more properly considered aspects of infrastructure. In cases where there's a fine line between the two, we come down on the side of what we know. So we will talk about seating in its many forms—benches, chairs, stools, and lounges, both primary and secondary (the latter being additional built-in or movable seating for peak times)—as well as tables, both with and without attached seating. We will consider litter receptacles and ash urns, shade structures, bollards and bike racks, and planters. We will touch on lighting and signage. We will not include elements such as fire hydrants and water features. In our discussion of spaces, we include streets, plazas, parks, courtyards, campuses (both corporate and institutional), trails, retail centers, health care settings, rooftops, and education. We do not include pool and patio or residential.

How Do We Measure the Success of a Space?

William H. ("Holly") Whyte assumed the number of people using a space to be the first measure of its success. Many design professionals and owners of public spaces agree. Whyte began the research that culminated in his watershed book, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, in order to understand "why some [city spaces] work for people, and some do not."[1] He noted that "the tightest-knit CBD (central business district) anywhere contained a surprising amount of open space that was relatively empty and unused."[2] His assumption was that a better understanding of how and why people use outdoor spaces would lead to more densely used, and thus more successful, spaces.

Whyte's assessment of use as the major determinant of success has been endorsed by other thinkers and practitioners. Landscape architect Mark Francis writes: "Recently it has become more commonly understood that successful parks and open spaces such as plazas, streets, and public gardens are ones that are lively and well-used by people." He notes that the works of William Whyte, Clare Cooper Marcus, Kevin Lynch, Jan Gehl, Louise Mozingo, and Lyn Lofland, among others, "have shown definitely that use is a requirement for good public landscapes."[3]

1.1 A comfortable bench provides the perfect place for ladies who lunch. Photo: Mark Bugnaski, used with permission of the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, copyright 2008, all rights reserved
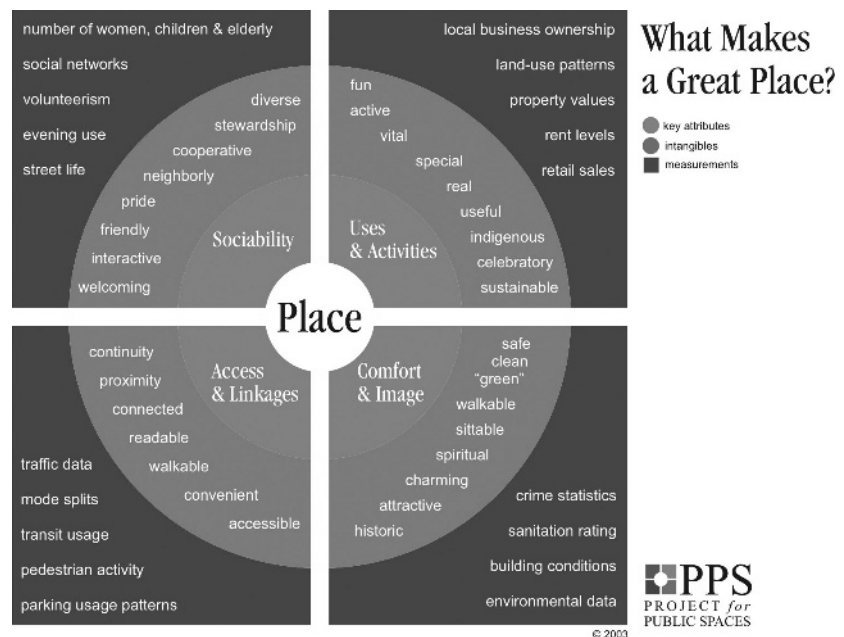
1.2 What makes a great place? Furniture can contribute to many of the intangibles supporting all of the key attributes. Credit: copyright 2002 Project for Public Spaces

The Project for Public Spaces is renowned for its insistence upon use as the key measure of success, and for its programming and advocacy designed to increase public use of outdoor spaces. "In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has found that successful ones have four key qualities: they are *accessible*; people are engaged in *activities* there; the space is *comfortable* and has a good image; and finally,

it is a *sociable* place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit."[4]

Density of use is not the only yardstick for measuring the success of outdoor public spaces. The people who design, commission, or enjoy those spaces often have other expectations and goals. Designers typically put a high value on aesthetics in furniture and site design.

- The furniture itself may be conceived as art.

1.3 Above: Atwater Place, South Waterfront District, Portland, Oregon. This private courtyard of a housing and retail complex contains a series of reflecting pools. A small plaza enjoyed by residents creates a seamless transition from the courtyard to surrounding public spaces. Copyright 2008. Photo credit: Mayer/Reed and C. Bruce Forster

1.4a, 1.4b "Two Too Large Tables" by Allan and Ellen Wexler at Hudson River Park, in New York City, are designed to encourage interaction (and perhaps bemused smiles). Chair backs hold up the tall table which is at roof height. Chairs form the legs of the lower table, which is at normal height. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.4c The seating designed by Martha Schwartz for Jacob Javits Plaza in New York City filled the void left when Richard Serra's controversial sculpture was removed. The dominant element in the new plaza design, which reanimates the space and reconnects the plaza to its surrounding context, it offers innumerable seating opportunities provided on back-to-back twisting strands of New York City park benches. Photo credit: Martha Schwartz Partners

1.5 Ping Tom Park employs Chinese cultural and historic motifs in this popular riverside park serving Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood. Photo: copyright © Jim Powell

- Sometimes the aesthetic of the furniture defines the character of the space. (See figure 1.4c)
- Communities may find the success of a place in the pride it engenders or in its expression of cultural heritage. (See figure 1.5)
- Special features such as fountains or sculpture can make spaces successful. (See figure 1.6)

1.6 British artist Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate," aka "The Bean," reflects images of the city and the hordes of visitors it draws to the AT&T Plaza in Chicago's Millennium Park. Photo credit: Bill Main


1.7 A beautiful space, beautifully maintained, beckons at Norman Leventhal Park in Boston's Post Office Square. Photo credit: Bill Main

- The ability of a space to conjure or enable experiences such as hearing the sounds of wind or water or watching the play of light is an important measure of success. (See Figure 1.7)

- The ability to manage and maintain a space can determine (or undermine) success. (See Figure 1.8)

1.8 An object lesson in poorly maintained public space. Photo credit: Bill Main
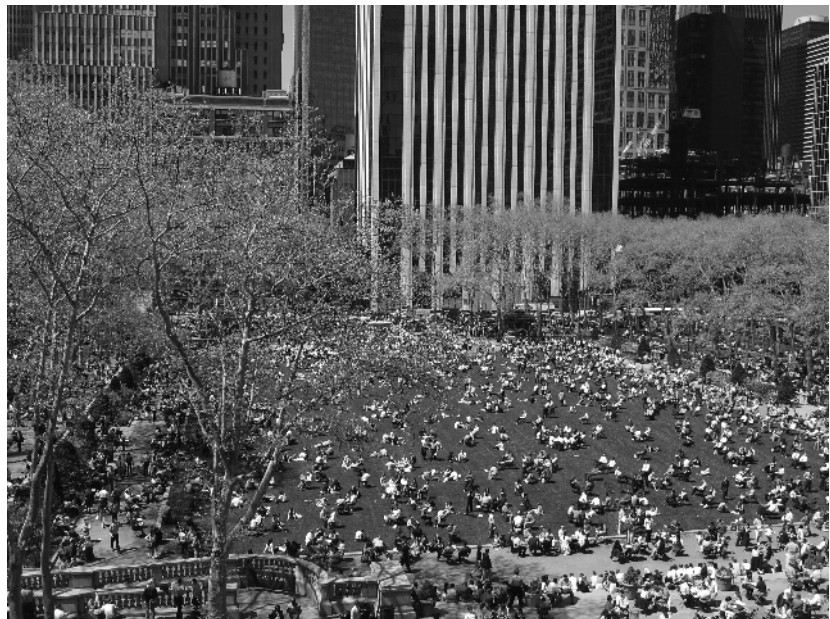
1.9 Bryant Park provides spaces for a wide range of people and activities—some work, some play. Credit: Bryant Park Corporation, photo: Ethan Lercher

- The extent to which a space supports multiple constituencies and allows people to work and play together can be critical to its success. (See Figure 1.9)

Why Does Furniture Matter?

All that said, our focus is not on outdoor space itself but on what's in the space. So why does furniture in these spaces matter? Furniture is vital to the

1.10 Rain or shine, people can't stay away from New York City's Paley Park. Photo credit: Bill Main
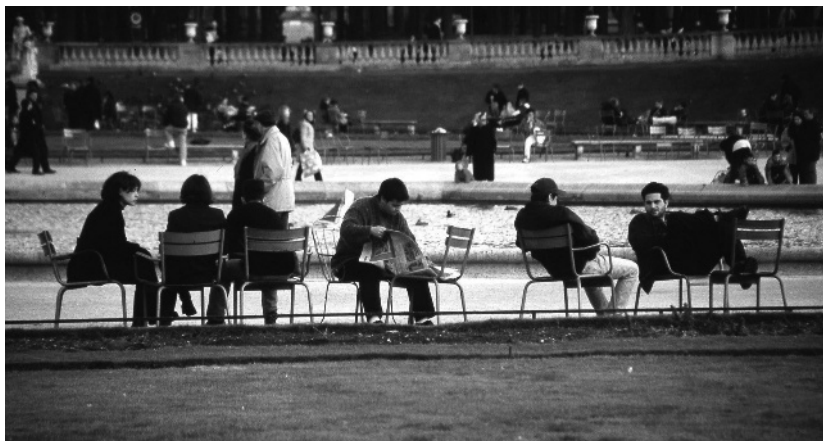
1.11 Signature seating at the Luxembourg Gardens, Paris. Photo credit: Jardins du Luxembourg, Paris, Mia Serra 1995

way people respond to outdoor space and to the duration and quality of their experience there. It has numerous roles.

- Furniture in outdoor spaces may embody and convey powerful symbolic meanings. Seating and tables in outdoor spaces say, "This place is for you." They extend a friendly gesture that attracts and welcomes. Sociable tables and chairs in New York's Paley Park were a magnet for passersby three decades ago when William H. Whyte observed activity there, and the same furniture in the same configurations still draws people into this enduringly successful public space today. (See Figure 1.10)
- Furniture in outdoor spaces can communicate identity and project image. Family-friendly? Hip? Traditional and enduring? Nothing says Paris like the iconic chairs of the Luxembourg Gardens. (See Figure 1.11)

1.12 The sunburst chair welcomes visitors to Memorial Union Terrace, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Photo credit: Bill Main

- The signature yellow and red sunburst chairs at the University of Wisconsin's Memorial Terrace have become so synonymous with the school and its culture, they've been trademarked. (See figure 1.12)
- In its type and arrangement, furniture can communicate social messages. By enabling community activity and group interaction, it expresses support for civil society. And by providing opportunities for underserved populations, such as the elderly or disabled, it signals commitment to inclusiveness. In its style, furniture may embody and convey historical connections to a specific time or event, or to the architectural heritage of a place. In its materials and the way it physically connects to the natural world, outdoor furniture may embody and express environmental values and aspirations. It may be upscale and contemporary or rustic and down-home, to complement sophisticated urban settings or evoke rural woodsy environments. New or unusual styles, materials, colors, and configurations can be a vehicle for expressing local identity or rebellion against sameness and the mundane.

- Furniture in outdoor spaces also has important functional roles. It adds to the overall usefulness of spaces by supporting multiple options for activities, both active and passive.
  - Well-designed seating provides ergonomic support and comfort, enabling many people to enjoy outdoor spaces and to spend more time in them. (See Figure 1.14)
  - Litter receptacles and ash urns support cleanliness and hygiene. (See Figure 1.15)
  - Furniture renders outdoor spaces more convenient by punctuating distances with places for people to rest, meet, and dispose of trash. (See Figure 1.16)
  - Bike racks and bollards provide security and safety. (See Figure 1.17)

1.13 Chicago's Daley Plaza hosts a festival in its multifunctional space. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.14 Give them a good place to sit, as here in Spain. Photo credit: Bancos Neoromantico. Barcelona, Julio Cunill 2001

1.15 Receptacles help keep it clean. Photo credit: Bryant Park Corporation

- Furniture can be used very effectively to create visual order, provide space definition, delineate functional areas, and provide orientation. A good example is Daley Plaza in Chicago, a big, flat open space in which the furniture around the perimeter provides a border for and defines the space in the center, which is used for activities and social events. (See figures 1.13, 1.14)

1.16 Walkways, well-placed benches, shade, and views. It's all there in Hudson River Park, New York City. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.17 An orderly procession of bike racks enhances the streetscape in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Photo credit: Bill Main

The importance of furniture to the viability and vitality of outdoor spaces is supported by research. The observations of William H. Whyte, based on time-lapse photography and participant-observation techniques and documented in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, have influenced

1.18 Furniture around the perimeter provides lively settings and defines central open space in Chicago's Daley Park. Photo credit: Bill Main

decades of public space design and policy. In New York City many of his recommendations for seating in public spaces have been encoded into law.

Whyte was interested in why, in their use of plazas, New Yorkers consistently gravitated to some and bypassed others. He looked at likely causes: the sun, the aesthetics of the space, and the shape of the space. All of these factors were found to be important but not sufficient to explain the differences in use. When he looked at the amount of space in a plaza, he discovered that sheer space alone does not draw people and may have the opposite effect. Then he asked, "What about the amount of sittable space?" Indeed, his charts plotting usage over time showed that the most popular plazas had considerably more space for sitting than the less frequented ones. He tried weighting for variables such as backrests, armrests, and physical comfort. "No matter how many variables we checked," he wrote, "one point kept coming through . . . : *People tend to sit most where there are places to sit.*" Whyte was quick to admit that this was not an "intellectual bombshell." But it was a critical piece of information that led to a basic guideline for the design of public spaces. "Sitting space, to be sure, is only one of the many variables. . . . But sitting space is most certainly prerequisite. The most attractive fountains, the most striking designs, cannot induce people to come and sit if there is no place to sit."[5]

Whyte was also interested in the quality of the sitting experience. He acknowledged the importance of physical comfort but after much study concluded, "It's more important . . . [that sitting] be *socially* comfortable. This means choice: sitting up front, in back, to the side, in the sun, in the

shade, in groups, off alone."[6] Another guideline for the design of successful public spaces was laid down.

Research on the role of furniture in public spaces has been done in other cultures as well. Jan Gehl is an urban designer, a professor of urban design at the School of Architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark, and director of its Center for Public Space Research. For more than three decades he has been a student and theorist of urban spaces and what makes them work. Gehl was instrumental in helping to transform Copenhagen from a car-dominated city to what *Metropolis* magazine rates as "one of the world's great pedestrian cities." He recently consulted on the transformation of New York City's Broadway between 42nd Street and Herald Square from a four-lane thoroughfare to a two-lane street with lanes set aside for bicycles and a pedestrian walkway with cafe tables and chairs. In Gehl's seminal book *Life Between Buildings*, he posited conclusions, based on systematic study and recording of people in the city, that underscore and expand on Whyte's contribution:

> It is of particular importance to emphasize what good sitting arrangements mean in all types of public spaces. . . . Only when opportunities for sitting exist can there be stays of any duration. If these opportunities are few or bad, people just walk on by. This means not only that stays in public are brief, but also that many attractive and worthwhile outdoor activities are precluded.
>
> The existence of good opportunities for sitting paves the way for the numerous activities that are the prime attractions in public spaces: eating, reading, sleeping, knitting, playing chess, sunbathing, watching people, talking, and so on.
>
> These activities are so vital to the quality of public spaces that the availability or lack of good sitting opportunities must be considered an all-important factor in evaluating the quality of the public environment in a given area. To improve the quality of the outdoor environment in an area by simple means, it is almost always a good idea to create more and better opportunities for sitting.[7]

The Project for Public Spaces has studied and improved thousands of public spaces around the world as it carries out its mission: "connecting people to ideas, expertise, and partners who share a passion for creating vital places." In "A Primer on Seating," PPS declares, "Seating that is accessible, comfortable, well-maintained, and located in the right places is critical to successful placemaking."[8]

Jay Walljasper writes in *The Great Neighborhood Book*: "A key ingredient of lively, safe, fun neighborhoods is public spaces where people will spontaneously gather. People out on the streets bring a community

magically alive. You get to know your neighbors, you feel secure, and you have a place to hang out. And there's one simple way to do this: Give everyone a spot where they can sit down. A bench or chairs can transform a lonely space into a lively place."[9]

In *How to Turn a Place Around*, PPS analyzes why many public spaces fail and concludes:

> Today, many public spaces seem to be intentionally designed to be looked at but not touched. They are neat, clean and empty—as if to say, "no people, no problem!" But when a public space is empty, vandalized

1.19 A well-designed, well-maintained, busy, and welcoming space. Photo credit: Capitol Plaza, New York City, Thomas Balsley Associates.

1.20 No good place to sit in a sad space. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.21 The value of absence: unoccupied chairs in the Luxembourg Gardens, Paris. Photo credit: Jardins du Luxembourg, Paris, Mia Serra 1995

or used chiefly by undesirables, this is generally an indication that something is very wrong with its design, or its management, or both. . . . Some problems are related to the design of a space . . . [including] lack of good places to sit.[10]

Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis, editors of *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Space*, write: "Site furniture makes the space usable. Without it, people's choices are limited, and they are likely only to look around or walk through a space and then leave. Site furniture should enable the space to be used by as many people as possible throughout the year."[11]

Even when good places to sit are unoccupied, they can convey powerful meanings about a space. "The value of absence is another good keynote for urban elements," writes Marius Quintana Creus. He goes on to explain:

> The image of the empty chairs in the Jardin des Tuileries and the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris is perhaps what best sums (this) up. We can still feel the presence of the people who have just used them. The positions in which the chairs have been left allow us to guess at the number of people who gathered and the arrangement in which they sat. The place and orientation they occupy help us to seek out the spot's finest views. These are chairs so simple and almost natural in design. But this simple and natural design is fruit of the mobility and adaptation they allow the user, their long presence in these places and the lengthy tradition lying behind these urban spaces. They are the elements which lend these places their definitive content, once places of contemplation and dramatism, now become places of tranquility and relaxation in the midst of the great metropolis.[12]

Furniture Is for People

The foundation for all of the discussion in this book is the conviction that furniture in outdoor spaces is for people. Its primary role is to provide utility

and comfort. It may play a secondary role in accessorizing, but if it is no more than an object to pretty the plan or occupy a void, it isn't doing what it can do. Furniture is a key touch point of outdoor spaces. It's where people stop and make a physical connection with a space. It is direct evidence that a space was designed with people in mind.

The number of people using a space drives furniture demand. The more people in the space, the more furniture required. (It's not rocket science. When you give a party, you borrow or rent more chairs.) Too much furniture can make a space appear overprogrammed. Too little furniture can discourage people from frequenting the space. How much and what kind of furniture is needed in any given space should be the subject of careful research and planning. Just as every landscape architecture project includes a site analysis, every outdoor space intended to attract people and support their activities should include a furniture plan. The plan should address who is expected to use the space, why, how, and when it will be used. User input can be invaluable in getting a plan off the ground and avoiding misunderstandings and missteps down the line. The furniture plan should— by design—leave some room for surprise. Planning to the last detail can dampen the spirit of a space. Learning through the process and observing people actually using a space can lead to inspired evolution. (For detailed information on furniture planning, see Chapter 2.)

Whose Furniture Is It?

Furniture in public spaces has multiple constituencies, each with its own expectations and agendas. Whom does the furniture serve? Owners, for example, are typically concerned with how furniture looks and how it complements the larger project or site. As the people who write the checks, they also have a healthy interest in the bottom line. Some owners use their authority to achieve amazing things. Others have been known to opt for the easy choices: lesser-quality furniture in limited quantities to save on first costs; fixed, rather than movable, furniture to reduce maintenance and limit loss; multiples of a single type instead of a variety of furnishings, to simplify purchasing and management; furniture lined up in repetitive rows to systematize installation and cleaning. None of these choices necessarily considers the impact on spaces and the people who use them. W. H. Whyte's work in New York City was targeted at (and culminated in) establishing a body of regulations to ensure that owners who were granted bonuses to build public plazas were forced to consider the needs of the public and do the right thing.

The users of outdoor public spaces come from many different groups with potentially conflicting interests. Moms with toddlers don't have the same furniture or space needs as solitary elders. Teenagers looking for a space to hang out have different needs than do office workers looking for a place to set up a laptop. People from different ethnic and cultural groups have

different expectations about acceptable levels of density and noise in public space. All will promote their own needs and defend their own choices. Selecting and arranging furniture that accommodates all of them is a formidable task.

The maintenance staff in a public outdoor space is critical to its success. It, too, has interests to defend. Complexity in furniture types and configurations is more difficult to deal with than simplicity and repetition. Certain types and sizes of litter receptacles may be judged easier to handle; certain materials are considered easier to clean and maintain. These preferences are often independent of the convenience or comfort of the people who use the space.

The designer is faced with the difficult challenge of reconciling needs and differences. But designers don't stand outside the realm of conflicting interests, either. They have their own agendas. Although professional practice is certainly trending toward a user-based approach to outdoor spaces, critics still charge designers with pursuing purely visual or aesthetic solutions to the detriment of other concerns. Often the critique is leveled at budget expenditures for elaborate infrastructure or special features that do not enhance amenity for users and leave no funds for activities and management over time. Aesthetic integrity is entirely compatible with people- and activity-based solutions—look at Bryant Park. It just takes a commitment to make it happen.

While public furniture has many constituencies, sometimes it's left on its own: an orphan, with no one looking out for it or taking care of it. Once it is set out and the ribbon is cut, it may have to rely its individual fortitude to survive and serve in the public domain. Site furniture sometimes has to be its own best friend.

In general, we suggest that an appropriate mind-set for addressing furniture in outdoor spaces might be the hospitality model. Pay attention to everyone. Aim for the satisfaction and comfort of all. Focus on first impressions. (If they won't walk in, you've lost the game.) Follow through with substance. Keep all the balls in the air.

Trends Worth Tracking

Social, cultural, and economic trends influence the importance of public spaces, how they are used, and how they are furnished. Among those influences having tangible impacts today we note:

- *Reurbanization.* The revitalization of American cities has led to a rethinking and revaluing of public space. Density, diversity, walkability, a live/work ethic, the return of young couples with children, and a 24/7 social scene are drawing people into public spaces and upping the ante

for quality and amenity. Investment in outdoor public space is a vital aspect of reurbanization initiatives.

- *The use of outdoor space as a choice, rather than a necessity.* This puts the focus on the importance of quality. The Danish urbanist and researcher Jan Gehl writes: "In a society where public life is dominated by necessary activities the quality of the public spaces is not an all-important issue. People will use the city spaces regardless of quality because they have to. This pattern can be seen all over the world in countries with less developed economies. In a society situation where use of public space becomes more and more a matter of interest and choice, the quality of the spaces becomes a crucial factor for the death or life of modern cities. . . . Protection, comfort and enjoyment are essential for open space design."[13]

- *The Starbucks effect.* The proliferation of sidewalk cafes and al fresco dining has energized life along the streetscape. It's a virtuous cycle in which people are drawn out into public spaces and in turn draw others in their wake.

- *Fluctuating fuel costs and other economic bad news.* Sticker shock at the gas pump is reflected in rising numbers of people using public transportation, placing greater importance on bus stops, light rail stations, and transit hubs. More people are riding bikes—and looking for places to park and lock. There is anecdotal evidence that as people are driving less, they are making more use of outdoor parks and other leisure spaces close to home. In a sagging economy, sit-down restaurants are reporting declines in business, and analysts see a trending down to fast-food venues. An increase in takeout and brown-bagging increases attendance, especially during lunch hours, in plazas and parks.

- *The 100 percent corner.* In many cities around the world, investment in public spaces has had the positive effect of encouraging real estate development and driving up neighborhood occupancy rates. The demonstration that public projects, including parks, plazas, transit systems, and high-profile streetscapes, often draw significant private investment is helping justify funding for these projects and spurring the proliferation of business improvement districts to ensure their maintenance and vitality.

- *The importance of place.* Richard Florida, in his critically acclaimed book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, posited that the successful cities of the future will be those that provide the three T's: technology, talent, and the tolerance required to attract the young creatives who are driving emerging economies. In laying out what he calls his "creative capital theory," Florida notes the importance of opportunities for outdoor recreation in the places that win the high-stakes competition for this dynamic, influential group of movers and shakers.[14]

- *Wi-Fi in the wide outdoors.* Public spaces are more than places for rest, recreation, and recuperation. They're extensions of the workplace. You can take it with you, as the growing presence of laptops, BlackBerry

devices, and cell phones in outdoor spaces testifies. More things to do in outdoor spaces means increased demand for spaces in which to do them and amenities, including furniture, to support them.

• *The "undesirables."* From spikes and moats to strategic management, we've been here before. After the winos it was the hippies, and today it's the skateboarders and the homeless. But before all that it was some-one else. In 1857, when the debate on funding New York's Central Park was raging, the *New York Herald* came out in strong opposition to the plan. The newspaper saw no way that Olmsted's democratic notions of a park for all the people could work. Referring to a fictitious composite character called "Sam the Five Pointer," a resident of the city's notori-ous Five Point slum, it opined: "He will run races with his new horse in the carriageway. He will knock any better-dressed man down who remonstrates with him. He will talk and sing, and fill his share of the bench, and flirt with the nursery girls in his own coarse way. Now, we ask what chance have William B. Astor and Edward Everett against this fellow-citizen of theirs? Can they and he enjoy the same place?"[15] Today, the answer is "of course." After generations of inspired but mostly unsuccessful deterrents, many of them inflicted on furniture, a more nuanced approach to "undesirables" in public spaces has emerged. It is now clear that if the furniture in outdoor spaces is designed to discourage certain people, it will discourage everyone. Ensuring spaces that are open and inviting to all has become a matter of management, rather than interdiction or medieval intervention.

CROWN FOUNTAIN CASE STUDY

Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois
Jaume Plensa, artist, Barcelona, Spain
Krueck + Sexton, architects, Chicago, Illinois

In Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain, two 50-foot-tall glass towers separated by a long shallow pool literally face off. Projected images of humankind in all its diversity and eccentricity engage in wordless dialogue punctuated by sudden spouts. Kids splashing in the water below catch the spray, and the milling crowd mostly grins. The fountain, which opened on July 16, 2004, is a hugely successful public attraction and a prime example of how compelling art and inspired site furniture can work together to create a truly great space.

The 42-by-222-foot pool is set into a black granite platform 276 feet long by 84 feet wide. Hewn log benches set about 17 feet from the edge of the pool line both sides. The benches, although installed a year after the fountain, were always part of the plan. "My intention was to create a space in itself," Jaume Plensa explains. "The towers were an excuse for me to create an emptiness that draws people in and, with the reflecting pool, makes a place for gathering. The two lines, one on each side, enclose this space and the benches delimit the perimeter of the project. The benches are the same length as the reflecting pool, and it is really nice to walk between them and feel that you are inside a place. Many times in public spaces the benches are a problem. It's a complicated element in the urban design. But in this case the whole project has been created as one idea."

"The bench as a huge log was Jaume's inspiration," says Mark Sexton, principal of Krueck + Sexton, who collaborated with the artist to turn his vision into physical reality. Plensa and the project architects went to Vancouver to source the Canadian red cedar trees and watch them being milled. The choice of material was calculated. Plensa explains, "My project has a lot of technology and hard surfaces—glass, stainless steel, LED. I wanted to introduce something warm and natural. Something coming from the most basic thing, which is wood, and which is always warm. So I looked for this kind of big, big timber. The benches are simple in just the way that, when you are walking in the mountains and you are tired, you sit on a log."

The 18-inch-high,18-inch-deep wood benches are constructed of long pieces joined end to end to create the expanses Plensa had in mind. The benches are

CROWN FOUNTAIN CASE STUDY

(Continued)

1.22 Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.23 Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Bill Main

set on 2-inch-high stainless-steel legs, so splashed water washes under them, creating the illusion that they are afloat. "The pool becomes like a stage," Plensa explains. "When you decide to walk in the pool you decide to play. And the rest of the people, just like in the theater, are sitting and looking up at what the players are doing. People are smiling and enjoying and suddenly one decides to be part of the theater—and it's in and out and in and out. The bench is where you rest a little bit. It's a kind of transition."

1.24 Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Bill Main

1.25 Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Bill Main

"It's miraculous what happens there every summer day," Mark Sexton adds. "It's as if that bench is at Malibu Beach. People sit for hours watching the waves come in and out, but it's more alive because they're watching a flow of people, not water."

CROWN FOUNTAIN CASE STUDY

(Continued)

1.26 Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois. Credit: Robert G. Chipman, ASLA
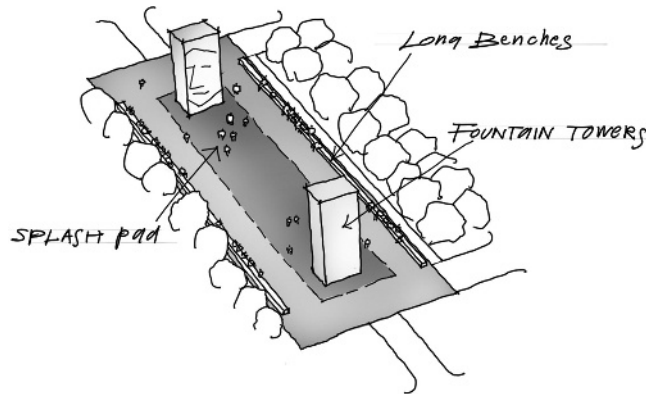
Indeed, the magnetic pull that Crown Fountain exerts on visitors to the park necessitated some changes to the adjacent landscape. The Boeing Gallery, a terrace elevated 6 feet above the fountain, originally did not offer direct access to the fountain space. But so many people watching the scene below began climbing over the terrace rail and down the planted slope that a stairway was built and an opening was cut in the bench nearest to it to provide access and promote safety. The overflow of people also required widening the pavement behind the benches to allow people to circulate in the area between the bench and the shrubbery border.

The Crown Fountain project was awarded after a competition. "Plenty of people in the city were against the project because they said it had too much technology, it was too intellectual," Plensa recalls. "They were afraid that it was something more for the museum than for the street. But when we unveiled the project, there was an extraordinary response. Kids really saved it—they just went boom. And I remember the parents were a little disappointed with me that day because all the kids were completely wet. The next day they did the same thing, but they brought towels. And everybody was happy. So probably the most intellectual piece I ever did in the public space has become the most physical one. People use the space as an experience."

The benches are integral to that experience. It's an instance of Whyte's triangulation made manifest.

"The bench supports conversation," Mark Sexton explains. "You turn to the person next to you and laugh at the crawling toddler at the edge of the pool. The very long bench is democratic. It welcomes everyone. It's nonhierarchical. It makes no distinctions among people. And it's nonprescriptive. Because of its length, you can sit anywhere. The bench ultimately connects the whole experience."

Endnotes

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