



RESEARCH GRANT REPORT

An American Benchmark in Paris: Vive la Difference!

by Mitch Ryerson

On a trip I made to France a couple of years ago I noticed what appeared to be a very different attitude toward public seating from the one I was accustomed to in the United States. I decided to do some research about this topic and, if possible, to return and study it in a more organized fashion. Thanks to an education grant I received from The Furniture Society, I was able to return to Paris last spring to photograph many benches and to meet with several people there who are involved with public seating in the city. The results of my research are not in any way comprehensive or objective. I have simply compiled my own personal responses to what I observed and tried to present them here along with a few of the pictures I took.

Paris is, of course, famous for its parks and gardens. It is known as “the capitol of 400 gardens” although in fact there are many more than this¹. It is a city that seems to live through its public spaces, both physically and culturally. The giant old parks on the east and west sides of the city, Le Bois de Vincennes and Le Bois de Boulogne, are referred to as the “green lungs” of the city. The river Seine runs between them, injecting life and space into this densely populated place. Spread throughout the city, the myriad of parks, large and small, ancient and modern, are the focal points of their neighborhoods, open spaces that provide room for people and plants to flourish.

“A park without a bench is not a park!” So says an official of the city’s department responsible for the management of the public parks². This seems like a simple statement, but it is one that has not been understood in its most basic sense in many American cities. Often benches here are regarded suspiciously, viewed as invitations to the homeless, to teenage gangs, to social predators. By removing or limiting them it is possible to keep the parks looking more presentable for the simple reason that they are less lived in. Although this is undoubtedly an issue for the parks in Paris as well, as an outsider looking in it seems that there is a much greater awareness and commitment to the importance of making people feel welcome and comfortable in their public spaces. People in Paris do seem to live in their public spaces on a scale that is not seen in the U.S. There are countless examples of this difference: the groups of old men playing boules, the innumerable outdoor markets, the rows of ladies chatting on the benches, the lovers oblivious to the world, the thousands of cafes with tables and chairs on the street, the many playgrounds that are thronged with parents and children. These things happen everywhere of course, but here there is the sense that they are actively supported and encouraged. Huge new parks have been created in the last twenty years right in the city, with no expense spared. This is not considered a frivolous waste of money, but a logical continuation of the evolution, which began in earnest in the mid-19th century, of the city as a public place. There is also a

(facing page) Canal St. Martin, 19th Century. Along the canals and avenues people sit on all sorts of things. On the left are typical “banc double” designed by A. Alphond with the classic tree and lamp accompaniment.

strong movement led by community groups to take vacant lands, such as abandoned railway lines, and transform them from neglected, dangerous places to thriving neighborhood centers for teaching, growing, and relaxing.³



Bois de Boulogne, 19th Century
This large circular bench features a cast-iron frame with wood slats for the seat and back.

Modern cities are centers of a seated culture.⁴ To understand this it is helpful to imagine a kind of typology of public seating that separates it into three main categories: moving seating, seating for waiting, and seating for resting. Each category has its own requirements, although there is some overlap as well (wheelchairs for example). Moving seating includes trains, buses, taxis, cars, etc. Seating for waiting includes train stations, bus stops, airports, etc. Seating for resting is really just parks and the larger avenues. In a world that is becoming more and more dominated by the mentality of “hurry up and wait,” the first two categories of seating sometimes seem on the verge of obliterating the third. The idea of sitting somewhere and doing absolutely nothing is frowned upon. Yet a bench in a park is more than just a place to rest your tired legs. It is a place to make unexpected as well as expected encounters.



(top left) Square Gabriel-Pierre, 1998. On the literary Left Bank, two small concrete benches in the form of stacked books are tucked into an otherwise conventional park.

(above) Phillipe Starck, Parc Villette, 1984. These chairs designed by Phillipe Starck are fixed in one place but they can swivel around. The park was created on the site of the city's abandoned stockyards.

(left) Champ de Mars, 19th Century. This view of the park at the base of the Eiffel tower reveals a perfect refuge created with a circle of benches.

It is a place where people become the glue that can hold a community together.

In the 1970s the American urban planner W. H. Whyte studied many public spaces that either did or did not serve their purpose well. He determined that one of the key ingredients to a successful space was the presence of public seating. People would use a place that welcomed them. His phrase was “sociability attracts sociability.”⁵ Paris seems quite comfortable with this idea. Much of the seating in the city is carefully arranged in groups of several benches or chairs together. Although chairs are inherently less sociable than benches, their use in several of the newer parks (Villette, Bercy) is

clearly designed to encourage people to interact with each other. This re-introduction of chairs as public seating is interesting when considered in the context of the perennial struggle between private versus public use of open space. In 17th century Paris, before the commitment to parks for all the citizens was made, there were “chaisieres,” whose occupation was renting chairs to the upper classes as they strolled along the avenues. Although these chair renters resisted vigorously, they were eventually put out of business by the creation of free public seating.

The “banc double,” or back-to-back bench, is an iconic image of Paris. It is used in great numbers



(top left) Montmartre tramway, 20th Century. On the highest hill in the city, this very modern glass tramway booth looks out over some of the oldest neighborhoods in Paris.

(above) The 19th Century banc double is found throughout the city and takes many forms.

(left) Square du Vert Gallant, 19th Century. Large circular bench in a rustic style uses pre-cast concrete.

along the avenues and in the more formal parks. It is particularly appropriate for long rows of benches alternating with trees and punctuated with lamposts. This three-part formula was first developed by the landscape architect Alphond in the 19th century, when the city was being rebuilt on a grand scale.⁶ The banc double allows for many kinds of social interactions. This flexibility is an essential quality for good public seating that is often ignored nowadays. The decision to divide a bench with armrests is an example of this new, fundamentally anti-social approach. By restricting the benches, armrests prevent a variety of ways to use the seat. In Paris I saw many people enjoying a comfortable lying-down nap in the sunshine.

This activity seemed to be totally acceptable, yet it is deliberately made impossible by many of the designs currently used in the United States.

In addition, there are many places to sit in the city that are not really defined at all. Low walls, steps, and embankments are incorporated into many of the new public spaces, almost like benches in disguise. These answer the evolving needs of large groups to gather together after the older, more formal parks have been locked up for the night. These gatherings, as well the crowded cafes on the streets and the bustling markets, make it clear that people in Paris are more comfortable being near each other than people in the U.S. are, and the way



Mitch Ryerson
Little Fresh Pond Bench
 Cambridge, MA, 2006
 Ipe, steel, stone
 39" H x 300" L x 48" D

they use benches and public spaces seems much less self-conscious.⁷ Perhaps the great variety of seating and its availability reinforces this.

The one thing that seems to be less common are one-of-a-kind benches produced by their designers for a specific place. Where I live, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, there are several successful examples of this more American approach. Bill Keyser's huge stack-laminated bench at the Alewife train station, and Judy McKie's bronze cats at the Valente Library Reading Garden, are two that come to mind. I did see a few benches in Paris that were truly individual sculptures⁸, but for the most part they were either very traditional or were quite high-tech industrial design.

The challenge to provide public seating that meets the needs of a greater and greater variety of situations certainly requires a great variety of approaches. It seemed to me that Paris is addressing this challenge with energy and

determination. With its long tradition of urban planning and landscape design to draw upon, the city continues to invite people to come outside, to walk, to play, to visit, and not least of all, to sit down. 🪑

Notes

1. Jarrasse, Dominique, (2002). *L'Art des Jardins Parisiens, Paragramme*.
2. Jole, Michelle, "Quand la ville s'invite a s'asseoir," *Les Annals de la Recherche Urbaine*, number 94.
3. A good example of this is Les Jardins du Ruisseau in the 18th arrondissement.
4. Jole, Michele, (2002), "Les Assis", *Urbanisme*, number 325.
5. Whyte W. H., (1980), *The Social Life of Small Urban Places*, The Conservation Foundation
6. Alphand, A., *Les promenades de Paris, 1867-73*, 2 vol.
7. To get the idea of this listen to the song by Georges Brassens "Les amoureux qui becotte sur les bancs public."
8. Boursier-Mougenot, E., (2002), *L'Amour du Banc*, Actes Sud



Mitch Ryerson
Copper Wave Benches
Union Square, Somerville, MA 2006
Copper, marine plywood, epoxy, stainless steel
48" H x 66" L x 40" D

(top) Mitch Ryerson
Fresh Pond Wave Bench
Cambridge, MA 2005
20" H x 84" L x 31" D