



DESIGN FOR LIVING

Site Furnishings to Complement Your Context

In our recovering economy, where municipal and private officials charged with maintaining and developing spaces such as parks and public gardens not only must offer attractive venues, but also keep a sharp eye on their budgets, how the space is furnished can often be the key element leading to financial stability and community satisfaction.

Choosing one piece of site furnishing over another depends on the overall character and design of the space, suggested Alessandra Galletti, director of design, Project for Public Spaces, a New York-based organization whose mission is to create and sustain public places that build communities. “If it is an urban park,” Galletti said, the designer should choose amenities that com-

plement city life and accommodate uses accordingly. In a rural area, rugged furniture is more suitable.

Site amenities should be based on comfort and user friendliness. “Seating that is accessible, comfortable, well-maintained and located in the right places is critical to furniture use,” Galletti continued. Generally, the Project for Public Spaces believes that movable tables and chairs are better suitable than fixed benches and tables. Also, an attractive color will enliven a space and attract people to use it. Comfort is an important factor in designing a bench.

“At the Project for Public Spaces,” she said, “we’re anthropological. We look at how people use spaces and then we look

BY RICK DANDES

at comfort and where a bench should be placed, how long it should be and how people sit in those benches. We look at moveable seats, how people move them, where they move them and to what location, so that they don't get abused and where they'll function best for people."

Meanwhile, when it comes to the actual purchase, "Just like most things you buy, there are multitudes of requirements that help you determine the best product fit, including, style, durability, cost, warranty, reputation and the environment in which they will be placed," said Bryan Marousek, product designer for a manufacturer based in Mifflintown, Pa. "If your product is going in a high-traffic or public space, then choosing a company that specializes in commercial site furnishings will be ideal," he said.

Amenity designs follow trends, as in all the design fields. Many manufacturers are adding more modern and contemporary lines to their classic benches and site furniture. For example, a leading site furniture manufacturer in the United States is currently importing Santa and Cole benches—from Barcelona, Spain.

Some landscape architects design their own furniture for specific projects; very successful furniture

gets produced and commercialized, such as the benches and kiosks originally designed for the historic Battery Park in New York City, and now distributed nationwide by the manufacturer.

There are multiple resources for finding the right site furnishings for your public space, offered Ben Shirley, marketing manager at a fencing product manufacturer in Tulsa, Okla. "The first place I would search is an industry magazine or website. Then, research those particular products' websites and try to find how their features and benefits meet specific industry standards (ASTM)—this should give you an idea of how to measure the product's durability or effectiveness, and not just gravitate toward a product because they are good marketers."

Material Matters

Choosing materials should be based upon the application. Durability, maintenance and product life are directly related to the product's materials, Shirley said. Try to develop a baseline from current ASTM standards.

"Consider metal and how that surface might deter people from sitting on benches vs. wood, which is more comfortable because it doesn't get cold and it



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doesn't get hot," explained Kathy Madden, senior vice president, Project for Public Spaces. "Generally we recommend wood, or removable seating, which provides a little bit more flexibility and comfort," but there are some interestingly designed metal benches in the Jardin du Luxembourg (the Luxembourg Gardens), the second largest public park in Paris, which are very comfortable.

Similar to wood is aluminum, a material that does not become too cold or too hot in inclement weather, and it has the added benefit of color.

Common durable materials include steel, aluminum, concrete, HDPE recycled plastic lumber, and wood like Ipe, teak, or treated pines. There are also colorful plastics or coated metals used for movable chairs, tables and trash receptacles, and recycled plastic used for benches, play structures and deck platforms.

Make Your Choice

Observing how people use amenities will help in selecting the right kind for a particular public space, Galletti said. Two-seat benches will create an environment where there will be single people sitting on each of the benches.

There are also special considerations for various environments, such as urban areas, very rural areas, coastal areas or heavy snow areas. Water fountains in freezing areas, for example, need to be shut down; saltwater can affect certain materials; and urban furnishings need to stand up to vandalism.

In Louisville, Ky., park and recreation officials actually drew up a master plan in which they "mocked up the area, chose a temporary seating arrangement and tested three or four different manufacturer's furnishings before deciding what worked best in our park, and making purchases," said Gary Pepper, landscape architect and director of facilities, Waterfront Development Corp.

"These furnishings sat out there in the elements and were exposed to the general public," he said. "We periodically would ask the people what they thought, and watch them, how they were using the furnishings and what they liked about each one."

That narrowed the field down to two materials. One was wood, one was metal. The wood furnishings were going to be used in the rural setting of the park, a landscaped area, where there were a lot of heavy trees, hills and pathways. In the more urban area, near the downtown with wide open spaces,

metal furniture was used.

“What we looked for in the metal furniture was comfort, style and simplicity. We didn’t want anything that would look faded over time,” Pepper said. “We wanted something that we knew we could get replacements for. Aesthetics was also important. We didn’t want furnishings that would look too contemporary or jazzy. Many parks are using aluminum or stainless steel furnishings right now, and that’s great, but I wonder what it’s going to look like 10 years from now. How is that particular piece of furniture going to change with the use of the park and the maturity of the park? Is that furniture always going to look like it belongs? And not be dated? Those are the factors we used in deciding on the furnishings.”

Quality was the city’s No. 1 issue. The metal bench they selected was a metal-strapped bench with cast-iron ends, and a three-piece assembly, which if damaged, can be replaced. Each bench weighed 200 pounds so park officials didn’t have to worry about theft. “They can take a lot of abuse,” Pepper said, “and they are extremely durable, able to withstand the elements, graffiti paint and scratching.”

Over time, though, Louisville eliminated all of its wooden benches. “These were wonderful landscape structures benches and they are made of jar wood, which is a hardwood, but after a while the wood started to split and we simply don’t have the manpower to go out and sand down the benches every day,” Pepper explained. “So we have gone with nothing but metal. We now have 600 to 700 pieces of furniture at about \$800 to \$900 apiece in our 100-acre park. We get a greater, 10-year lifespan out of them. You can always put a new coat and finish on them so they look new.”

Theming and Special Designs

Certain companies work very well with customers to give their sites and furnishings a special touch. Manufacturers can offer custom plaques, add special designs into steel using a laser computer numerical control (cnc) machine for an additional touch, and custom labels for added messaging. Common requests include radius benches to fit specific spaces, wall-mounted benches or even very unique designs where a producer can apply their expertise and manufacturing capabilities to make the customer’s vision.

“Custom products often cost more, but you might be surprised that they aren’t too much more,” Marousek said. Waste receptacles can also be cus-



tomized for recycling split streams and labeling.

Every summer in France during the Paris Plages, the cityscape dons greenery and the riverside thoroughfares become car-free resorts. The city closes the road along the Seine and city officials customize all their elements. Part of that customization includes unique city benches, square tables with a square bench on all four sides, where you can get 19 people sitting on the bench who don’t know each other, observed Kathy Madden, of PPS.

“This is a good example of customizing to fit the situation,” she said. “These benches are very suitable for that situation because the Paris Plages attracts a lot of people and they want to sit and rest. You need a bench to accommodate a lot of people, but it’s only there for a month and then it can be disassembled and be taken away until next year.”

Maintenance Specifics

Maintenance is essential in public spaces. Choosing furniture and amenities that are easy to clean and store will help. In our current economic climate, many park officials are purchasing low-cost products without balancing associated maintenance



costs. Products that are no- or low-maintenance can be a better deal than some of their lower-priced counterparts. It all depends on how much time and how many resources you can devote to upkeep when it's needed.

Dense hardwoods like Ipe and teak will eventually gray after being outside, but once they are gray are still a very durable outdoor wood, explained Marousek. If you want to bring the gray Ipe back to the fresh brown, that can be achieved with pressure washing. Other woods, like pine, need to be recoated yearly with wood sealant.

Plastic lumber is made from HDPE (recycled milk jugs) and does not have the same maintenance issues as wood. If the surface requires cleaning only, any household cleaner may be sprayed on and wiped off.

Steel and aluminum site furnishings are usually powder-coated. Maintenance for these types of sur-

faces varies depending on the environment. Washing and inspection can help your furnishing last a long time. For severe environments, such as industrial or marine where high atmospheric pollution exists, such as salt spray, cleaning should be done at a maximum of every three months. In more average environments like a rural area or "normal" urban environment, a cleaning and inspection every 12 months is recommended. It is best to wash with warm water and use a non-abrasive, pH-neutral detergent solution.

Upon inspection, Marousek said, "If you notice oxidation on a steel product, it can easily be fixed by removing the rust with a wire brush and/or sandpaper and reapplying paint. Most manufacturers will supply touch up paint. If aluminum parts or furnishings get chips in their paint or scratches, it can be touched up the same way as steel."

Addressing Accessibility

As in any public space, accessibility needs to be considered, and it is “actually quite easy today to be ADA compliant,” Galletti said. “There is a wide variety of play equipment, surfaces and site furniture that fulfill the requirements.”

Keep in mind that the ADA has recommended measurements for space under tables for wheelchair accessibility. Usually manufacturers will offer standard or custom products with these measurements. But ADA does not have any official guidelines for benches. Certain considerations can be taken into account for older adults and patrons with limited mobility. Armrests and open space beneath a bench can be helpful. Oftentimes people can use the armrest to push up and kick their feet under the bench a little to help stand.

A great example of an accessible space is the public park in Louisville “We just built a bridge which is probably one of the longest pedestrian bridges in the United States,” Pepper said. “It’s about a mile long from the ramp across the bridge, and we have a ramp that goes down the other side to Indiana. It’s

accessible at all grades. The furniture in the park is placed sensitively to accommodate accessibility. We are one of the first parks in the U.S. to have Braille signage in the park, which we started last year. Placement is the most critical thing. Our benches are accessible; some have ends, some are just benches with no backs and no ends, so you can slide onto it, but then you have a homeless issue too, which you have to be concerned with.”

One caveat: If the bench is a little bit longer than 6 feet, he said, you might have people lying down or sleeping on it overnight. You want them a little bit shorter than 6 feet “so as to make it less comfortable for vagrants.”

Be sure to place your accessible furnishings along paved or otherwise-accessible walkways. And provide plenty of places for people to picnic, to enjoy the views, to rest their feet and to throw away or recycle their refuse.

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