

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## PLACE MAKING: on the poetics of the proximate environment – figures of public sitting in neighbourhood parks.

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, August 3rd, 2016

### Preliminary: Park seat and sitting as public “place and occasion”

In between activities, or for a particular activity, we come to the neighborhood park *just to walk or to sit outside on a sunny summer day, or on a cool summer evening to take the breeze and the pulse of the neighborhood life.*

This phenomenon is fascinating to observe due to all the possible combinations of seat types and locations on one hand, and postures and social situations on the other...what we call “place and occasion”.

***“The bench in itself does not exist. It depends on who is sitting on it. And why.”***

Thomas Quinn, in Dirk Reinartz: Bench Marking in Germany, Steidl, Göttingen, 1997

***For example:***

*Sharing a bench with strangers while keeping an eye on children playing (see image below) or sharing a bench with an intimate person (see feature image) will produce widely differing postures, and project differing social messages.*

*In the image below the three ladies have all their attention focused on the children’s acrobatics ready to intervene in case of mishap while, in the feature image, the couple’s attention is clearly on its own intimate bubble and bodily relaxed postures and sensations.*

*In the image below the relative acceptance of the side to side proximity of the three ladies is probably related to their common situation while, in the feature image, the taking over of the whole bench by the couple in expansively relaxed postures is done within socially accepted limits of exhibiting such intimacy in public.*



Sitting moms watching the kids

### **Of sitting, seats and situations: figures of public sitting.**

As posts go, this is definitely light summer fare, as I gather and briefly comment interesting examples of these combinations of seat types and locations, postures and social situations in a neighborhood park.

That park occupies one whole city bloc, about one quarter of which has been left in its original woody state; about one half is an open grassy area with a few bleacher stands and soccer goals suggesting organized play areas. The last quarter is subdivided in children play areas and a picnic area separated from a basket ball court by a utility and service building.

Specimen trees line the sides of the park and its system of walkways, along with its benches and lamp posts, make for easy and safe access to all parts of the park.

**Looking at the game and/or waiting for one's turn ...** seated on a utilitarian single plank bench the users can be found lined up as birds on a telephone wire, or be more at ease for friendly banter and kibitzing of the basketball practice game at dusk, as in the image below.



Sitting out the game

**Sitting and/or standing watching over the kids playing ...** the parents will seek to squat a regular city bench with a back rest and body friendly profile. The situation is usually fluid, with other parents joining them on the bench or near it, as seated persons can be seen to turn ninety degrees to a normal sitting position to talk to a person on the next bench, or to one standing behind the safety fence, as shown in the image below.



Bench squat at play area

**Sitting on and/or standing near one of benches lining the park walkways ...** the users may be acquaintances, in this case one of them has decided to sit on her walker-seat combination ... talking, gaming, feeding the birds, etc.



Benching!

**Sitting in one of the shadiest part of the park ...** the users are seeking not only the shade but also the relative quiet of the place: to while the time of day, or wait for the bus at the nearby stop, or strike a conversation in one of those socially facilitating situations such as an old person facing a nursing mother, while the fellow who is stretching his feet and reading is at a safe distance from being involved ... as shown in the image below.



Shady benching

**Sitting at table-seat sets, near the water play area ...** the users, in the image below, have their back to the play area since we are at the end of the day. One last towel is draped on the safety fence to dry. The table-seat sets are placed on a paved extension of the water play area and have three fixed seats to their six-sided table top to allow for people on wheelchair to use the table. Again we witness the tendency to squat a table whether one is alone, with another person or in a small group, as shown in the image below.



Play area seat extension

**Sitting at isolated table-seat sets individually or in small groups ...** users seen below are seeking some individual or group privacy as expressed perhaps by the separate concrete pods the table-seat sets are set on. Of a different support design they share with the previous case the ratio of three seats to six sides for each table to allow wheelchair access. Their sitting, independent of any activity area, allows them to be of more open access and occupancy. The nearness to a garbage pail points to the likelihood of food consumption and its need to dispose of refuse material.



Private benching

**Sitting at picnic table-bench sets, and on the ground ...** the users shown below are situated in an assigned picnic area of the park particularly favored by the neighborhood families who get to know each other as they renew the weekly summer ritual of the collective BBQ. Sitting on the ground by the BBQ pit is part of the sense of being in a group, however distributed on separate picnic tables

the group may be. What the image does not show of course is the characteristic BBQ smell that spreads through the immediate neighborhood at dinner time!



Picnic grouping

**Watching two games from bleachers ...** the fellows are following a nearby volleyball competition while the ladies follow informal soccer practice games. The strategic location of this utilitarian sitting structure between these two activity areas is not an accident as the park has only two more such bleachers units, one near a possible baseball backstop and another near the assigned volleyball area. The adjective “utilitarian” is used advisedly as the bleachers provide not back rest and only narrow planks to sit on.



Central bleachers

**Watching the volleyball game on bleachers ...** the fans are sitting behind a protective Frost fence, the top of which has been wrapped with foam strips to keep the ball from being punctured if it falls on the fence loose metal wire ends. The well worn grass spot is a witness to the game assigned location in the park, season after season. The heat of the day favors the scheduling of the games near dusk with the park lamp posts turned on. Note the fact that fans of opposite teams must share the same bleachers ... the more sociable ones at least!



Competition bleachers

**Sitting on the edge of the water play basin...** the impromptu sitting at the concrete edge of the basin is of course related to the physical size of the toddlers and children users ... unless too hot for their tender skin.



Impromptu seat

### **Discussion: Park seat and sitting as public “place and occasion”**

In sitting in the park we seek the physical comfort of the seat and the social comfort of an occasion for company...sometimes company comes first as going to the park with friends and family.

In sitting in the park we seek the physical comfort of the seat and the social comfort of an occasion to be alone, surrounded by greenery and the sounds and sights of neighbors at play, walking, etc.

Upon arriving at the park one can make choices of areas and/or types of seats, having probably decided on the best time of day to arrive at the park in order to find a preferred seat and location available, etc.

**In sitting in the park we become the park’s human fixtures so to speak, the reason for its being there just as we are the reason for the seats presence, the places they help define and the occasions for neighborly relation they promote.**

For example, see image below showing the volleyball competition “back area” for food serving situated under the portable canopy, and for food preparation situated under the trees, with the additional seats and tables brought in by organizers.



Seat, sitting and situation

*Credit all photos Maurice Amiel*

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