

LIVABLE URBAN SPACES. PUBLIC BENCHES AND THE QUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Abstract

The contemporary urban politics are facing an important paradigm shift. The quality of life became the central topic of new development plans and the public space represents the cornerstone of urban planning. In this context landscape architecture plays an important role and landscape "soft" methods are replacing the "hard" urban design instruments. Our paper will analyse an apparently dull and simple object – the bench. Starting from a series of observation on Bucharest urban design we will try to define the "perfect bench" starting from some basic qualities that this object, apparently banal, should accomplish in order to assure a real quality of urban space and a pleasant experience: comfort, security, shelter, design, location are some of the characteristics that are guiding our analyse. The study is based on participatory and non-participatory observations and questionnaires realised in several Bucharest's public spaces in order to understand how people are perceiving these qualities and how good or bad design can influence the public life and the success of a landscape project. The observations and questionnaires are structured around a matrix inspired by Jan Gehl's analyse of public spaces quality [1]. The study shows the lack of concern with quality in public space design in Bucharest. Formalism, stereotypes, overloading with useless, ugly, uncomfortable and aggressive urban furniture as well as a low quality design of the overall space determine a dissatisfaction concerning the city's public spaces. In order to enjoy the urban experience and to create successful public gardens, parks or squares a special attention should be given to a simple, yet complex object as the public bench.

Key words: public space, quality design, bench, comfort, liveability

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to bring a better understanding of the public bench and its role in the general comfort of the public space. As Jan Gehl shows in his analyses the possibility of sitting is one of the most important features of the urban space when talking about comfort [2]. There are two main aspects when we analyse the public bench from the public space comfort perspective. The first aspect is concerns the bench itself, its design. The second one concern the relation with the space: arrangement, shelter, views, distances. In this general context our research tried to find how benches are adapted to a particular kind of public space: the urban gardens and parks. This kind of spaces, conceived for relaxation and rest, are demanding a greater attention to comfort, giving possibilities to spend and sit longer periods of time. Thus a bench in a park should be conceived in such a way that will offer great comfort and also great relation to the

green space. As Steven Bourasa put it "briefly, people love landscapes with panoramic views and large places from which to observe them. They also prefer those places to be equipped with convenient refuges and they mainly dislike opened areas with no shelter. They also prefer places that not only have something to show, but they also have areas to explore" [3].

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In The research was led in two Bucharest's main green spaces in the central area: Cișmigiu Garden and Izvor Park. The two spaces were chosen for their central position in the city and for their general characteristics. The two spaces were created in different centuries, representing different socio-cultural paradigms and having a totally different ambiance and design, even if Cișmigiu was a source of inspiration for Izvor Park. The observations where done *in situ* during the autumn period. Our method was based on Gehl's perspective on the public space liveability and quality.

We tried to observe the manner the benches are used, the degree of comfort they are offering and their relation with the surrounding space in order to create interesting views and their capacities to create “talkscapes” [4].

The public bench is a functional object, but a bench stands for much more than function. This way, characteristic to it is the design as well as the comfort, material quality and the materials themselves, the location, the dimensions, the proximity to interest points, the security, and the correlation with the space around it and the shelter form bad weather. In order to do a survey concerning the public benches we tried to structure all the qualities that a bench should fulfil in order to satisfy all the demands in a matrix similar to Gehl’s one.

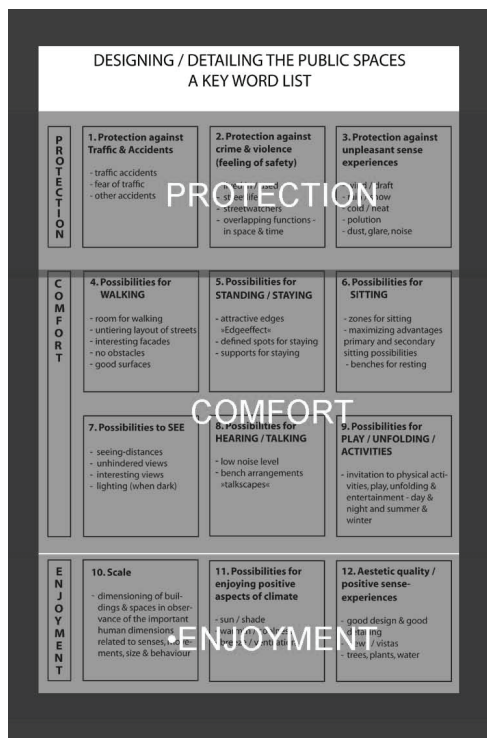


Fig. 1. 12 criteria of quality for pedestrian landscape cf. Jan Gehl, EFLA Regional Congress, Tallinn, 2011, in Gehl, 2012, p. 239

All of these characteristics should be interconnected, regardless of the category they belong to. Though, their separation helps to a better understanding of what a “perfect bench” should mean.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT</u> <u>SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Aesthetics	<u>STYLE</u> <u>ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Fig. 2. Analyse matrix of a bench features

Also, dividing according to the importance of a category helps to establish the pre-construction principles of a bench, on such a way, this bench will be able to take into account all of the nine general characteristics and to get closer to the idea of total comfort.

Thus, a bench should accomplish a series of qualities of different types:

• Objective characteristics

Are easy measurable and related to the material reality of the bench or of the space.

- **Dimension.** The dimensions of public benches are of great importance due to the fact that they, almost entirely, make up the comfort of a bench. Its length, but most important, its backrest height and the dimension of its seat define a bench and its grade of usage. According to ergonomic studies and architectural standards, the ideal dimensions are: 0.45 m height of the seat above the ground, 0.27 m height of the backrest, 0.45 m width of the seat and 110-120° between the seat and the backrest, and a 0 to 30° of the seat and the ground. Though there are mentions for the length of a bench: 0.6 m per person and 2 m for 3 persons, those dimensions are not as important due to the fact that they influence comfort the least.

- **Proximity.** This quality refers to the physical distance between a bench and an interest point or centre. This centre can be a cultural, social or personal one; this means that a bench must be placed where it may be used. The interest centre may be an intimate one, a public or a social one and even one’s own home. For elders, most of the time, their own house serve as a centre of interest, as a bench placed nearby can make them leave their house for a short walk; a public plaza where benches are placed can work as a meeting or waiting place; a public park or garden where such urban

furniture is available serve as a recreation area; a set of benches located near a monument can be used by tourists, etc.

- **Materials.** A very important aspect in designing a public bench is the material of which it will be made of. The main aspect to take into consideration is the comfort of the material or the materials both in summer and in winter. There are not to be neglected aspects like the aesthetics of the materials, its costs and its durability in time. Depending on the location of the bench, materials can be different; this way, outdoor materials are meant to endure sudden temperature rise/decrease and humid/dry changes; while indoor materials can be part of a wider range of products.

- **Subjective Characteristics**

Subjective characteristics are related to the personal perception that somebody could have about a bench. Based on the objective characteristics the subjective ones are also related to personal preferences, needs, habits or taste

- **Object specific comfort.** Comfort while sitting is probably the most important quality when it comes to public benches. Most of the time, seeking to rest, the first impulse and thought is to find a comfortable bench to lie on. Comfort is about how somebody's rest, about the pleasure he/she takes in sitting, touching, seeing and even in standing up again. This quality is also influenced by materials or dimensions, but it is also subjected to personal preferences or physics. A tall person might prefer a higher bench while an old person will prefer a bench without sit inclination. Also the psychical aspects or interests are important: a higher bench might be more appropriate for observing other people actions. A tired person might prefer a deck chair.

- **Shelter.** A bench is an invitation to rest. For this reason only, in order to rest, you may need sometime a shelter as well. A shelter might be needed against bad weather, against noise or against other people. A shelter may be build artificially or naturally. Artificial shelter may be a canopy, a small construction that has to integrate the bench, etc. Also, semi artificial shelters are the ones built and covered mostly with climbing plants. Natural shelters are made by trees or other plants that can offer shadow or

intimacy. Burke associates the category of sublime a feeling of "delicious fear". The sight of danger inspires terror as long as the threat is straight. From a certain distance, sheltered from the observed danger, fear is combined with a delicious pleasure. [5]. Though in this context, danger does not mean risk, it can stand for threat. For example, the threat from a coming storm is transformed into pleasure when you get sheltered from it and still in the middle of the storm.

- **Security.** The security of a bench mainly refers to the materials of which it is made of, but also to its location. A bench characterized by trust and safety will surely be much more relaxing than one missing this quality. However, security can be deceiving and this can make it much more interesting.

- **Aesthetics**

Apparently, the least important characteristic is Aesthetics. The aspect of a bench doesn't seem to be a determining element concerning comfort, but in fact the pleasure we take in sitting on a bench is strongly influenced by the design or by the correlation with the space nearby.

- **Style adequacy** .An important element in order to experience pleasure is the style and the coherence of the entire space. In this sense the design of a bench should be correlated with the entire layout and the style of the garden of park. Benches should fade in, they should be part of the landscape, even if the contrast to it or not. The beauty of an object might be disturbing in an inadequate context, and thus both the object and the space can be ruined from aesthetical point of view. The excess and misuse of great design objects in the public space today leads to visual chaos and lack of meaning of the public space. Mostly in historical gardens discretion and style adequacy are needed, in order to emphasize the quality of the entire space instead of the quality of a strange and alien object.

- **Location.** The position of a bench is a rather important characteristic. Due to the fact that the bench represents an invitation to rest, this quality will be noticed easier or not, depending on the place where the bench is placed. Also depending on the place it's placed in, the public bench can be designed and used for a longer or

shorter rest. An example would be the bench placed in a bus stop for a short rest and a bench in a public park or garden, for a longer rest. A bench's location is also about the physical and visual relationship with space, location also becoming similar to sight.

Location depends on a series of factors, the most important being the quantity of shade and/or sun over the bench. As Christopher Alexander put it "people use public spaces if it is sunny, otherwise they tend not to, excepting those living near deserts" [6]. Though, cultural, social and climate aspects interfere in this topic. Alexander's analysis was referring Great Britain, where the weather is mostly cloudy and rainy, sunny days being fewer than rainy days. Alexander's point of view is perfectly objective for this context, but it does not apply to areas with different weather. However, he does not state it is a general truth. Bucharest, from this point of view, is a very demanding city. If in early spring, late autumn or even the winter we might love the sun as much as British people during the hot summers the need for shadow became a real problem on streets as well as in parks and gardens.

- **Design**. The design of an object, in this case of a bench, as a characteristic, is probably the most important when it comes to the economical value of this piece of urban furniture. A bench with a unique design will draw attention and many will be curious to sit on it. The issue is that, when the other characteristics are neglected, and the bench, as impressive as it is, will not be used as much as it was intended to. Also some new designs are in fact unusable, uncomfortable and the only effect is the visual one. Having in mind this analysis matrix we realised an inquiry concerning the central area green spaces of the city: Cișmigiu Garden and Izvor Park. The main methods we used were participatory observations and interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Cișmigiu Garden

Cișmigiu garden was designed in the middle of the city, as a green area for relaxation and recreation for the citizens of Bucharest by the landscape architect Carl Friedrich Wilhelm-Meyer, who "foreseen the importance the

garden will have in the Romanian society. In his notebook he requested buying and placing 200 benches in the garden, considering that they will still not be enough" [7]. According to Salma El-Shamali on the central axis, initially made up by three alleys with a double alignment of white poplars, numerous benches were placed. They were placed after Meyer observed that one of the most concerns of the time was the so called "urban gossip in Bucharest", and the benches located on the exterior alleys were placed for this purpose alone. [8]. Due to a large number of benches, Cișmigiu garden was and still is one of the most appreciated public city spaces for relaxation.

Case1.



Fig. 3 Bench row in Cișmigiu.
Photo Alexandru Mexi

Though it cannot be said about this kind of benches that they have a very esthetic appearance, they are comfortable, and the wood is quite warm and pleasant for this period of time. Also they are shadowed during the summer, when they are intensively used.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT</u> <u>SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE</u> <u>ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 2.



Fig.4 Benches in Çișmıgu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Though those benches are as comfortable as the precedent, their aspect and location does not work as well as in the first case. The bad commissioning gives a sense of insecurity and a bad and uninteresting image of the place.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 3.



Fig.5 Benches in Çișmıgu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Despite its ugliness, this type of public bench is appreciated by most of the people, paradoxically, due to its design and to the fact that it is comfortable. It is used as a piece of urban furniture for security and proximity to an interest point: the playground.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 4.



Fig.6 Bench in Çișmıgu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

This bench blends in the landscape due to its design. The interesting location also might give quality to this spot. But the height of the bench as well as its general dimensions and the present conservation condition does not make it usable.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 5.



Fig.7 Chess players place in Çișmıgu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Though all of the public furniture above is uncomfortable, the fact that it serve certain activities and that their position: in an intimate place, both on shade and under the sun, their placement makes them attractive.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 6.



Fig.8 Bench in Cișmigiu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

This is a comfortable and stable bench, and due to the fact that it stands near food stands and on the sun, makes it usable and used, but only during this part of the season, despite the ugliness of the place.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 7.



Fig.9 Bench in Cișmigiu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Those benches, beside of their location in the sun and near food stands are used also because they are placed near the main entrance.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Those benches illustrate better the concept of placing in the sun/shade, depending on the season. Here, nor the comfort, nor the design and nor the security are defining, but the location.

Case 8.



Fig.10 Benches in Cișmigiu. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Izvor park

Izvor Park was born on the ruins of two most beloved neighborhoods of Bucharest: Uranus and Izvor (the second giving the name of the park). The flat landscape of Izvor Park cannot suggest that here raised before a hill, with a monastery on top (transformed in the State Archives). The hill vanished as well as the neighborhoods which once with the communist systematization and the foundation of the House of People. The space stays as a scarce for part of Bucharest people while others are ignoring the past of the site.

Case 1.



Fig.11 Bench in Izvor Park. Photo Alexandru Mexi

The location of these benches is not attractive at all due to the nearby toilet and garbage trunk. However, the bench has a simple and comfortable design and it is placed near the entrance.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 2.



Fig.12 Bench in Izvor Park. Photo Alexandru Mexi

The fact that this bench is placed in the sun and it has a comfortable and simple design compensate the fact that it stands a nearby garbage bin and too near to a bicycle line.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 3.



Fig.13 Bench in Izvor Park. Photo Alexandru Mexi

Though those benches are comfortable, the fact that they stand to near to the garbage bin makes them not so welcoming.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 4.



Fig.14 Bench in Izvor Park Photo Alexandru Mexi

This bench is not welcoming because it seems to be stranded and because it has a garbage bin as only neighbor.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 5.



Fig.15 Bench near Izvor Park. Photo Alexandru Mexi

“Build bus stops as the will form small public centres [...] so they will work with other kind of activities such as a newspaper stand, **different bench designs**, shops, café’s, tree designs, interesting crossings, public baths, squares...” [9] This public bench belongs to the bus stop at Izvor park. This bench is totally uncomfortable having a straight backrest, a loudly electric generator behind, a dull, unattractive view, to not mention the design. This kind of urban design will never generate a small public centre.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

Case 6.



Fig. 16. Lawn in Izvor Park Photo Alexandru Mexi

Though it is not a public bench, this small hill is very comfortable, it has a pleasant sight etc. Unhappily, the fact that it is not a build/designed object is not so welcoming for the citizens of Bucharest.

Objective characteristics	<u>DIMENSION</u>	<u>PROXIMITY</u>	<u>MATERIALS</u>
Subjective characteristics	<u>OBJECT SPECIFIC</u> <u>COMFORT</u>	<u>SHELTER</u>	<u>SECURITY</u>
Esthetics	<u>STYLE ADEQUANCY</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>DESIGN</u>

CONCLUSIONS

Our research reached in the end a paradoxical conclusion. Despite the large public scandals and number of articles about the excess of plants, benches and the general overdesign of the public spaces of Bucharest [10], no good public bench was to be found in the central parks of the city. The design is often of bad quality, the interest for good location and interesting views is absent. In this context however people are interested, or at least are paying attention to some details concerning the urban landscape. Thus, from our questionnaires made in Cişmigiu, we found out that people are appreciating mostly the comfort while sitting, the proximity and location aspects of the benches in the garden. They are less impressed by design, security, dimensions and design. Nor shelter, style or materials are important for them.

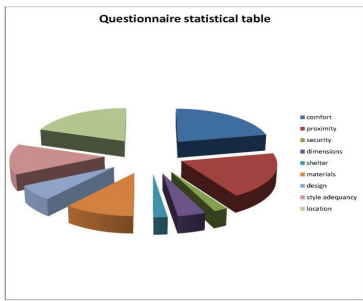


Fig. 17. Cişmigiu questionnaire statistical table

On another hand few people made comments about the lack of suitability of the new benches design in a historical park, part of Romanian heritage. In what concerns Izvor park the result are somehow similar, the comfort seems to be less important and material of the bench gains some attention. On the contrary, the style is even less important, fact that is easy to explain by the lack of character of the entire park.

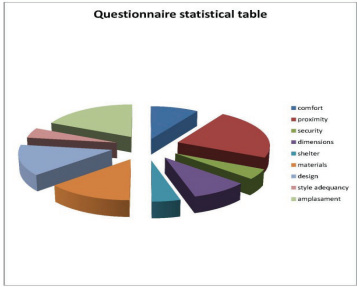


Fig. 18. Izvor questionnaire statistical table

This lack of interest for design or style as well as for location and vistas might be explained by a lack of aesthetical interest. But it will be the easy way out. Other researchers showed the official lack of interest in public space quality and the imposition of kitsch as an official policy [11]. In this context we can interrogate if Cişmigiu and Izvor parks are specific case studies or part of a larger picture. At least for these two parks the analyse show that, for most of people using these public spaces, as long as we can sit, that is accessible and it has a minimal functionality a bench is already perfect. No other expectations to have from it. This sad conclusion underlines the lack of interest concerning the quality of both the historical park – Cişmigiu – or for the new landscape design of Izvor. Both parks are

highlighting the logic of quantity dominating when thinking about urban design.

As a final conclusion we consider that a bench might be “a symbol of success in a park [...] when people come here to rest [...] sleeping in public is the most natural thing in the world. If someone sits on pavement or on a bench and fails asleep, it is possible that this should be treated strictly as a need. [...] Keep the landscape filled with **generous benches**, comfortable places, areas to sit on the grass or lie down on sand” [12].



Fig. 19 Public square in Helsinki. Photo Ioana Tudora

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