

NEW YORK NEWS & FEATURES

Forward Thinking on Behinds

City planners make more space for just sitting still.

By **Justin Davidson** Published Oct 28, 2011



Illustration by Martin Ansin

A dimension that is truly important is the human backside. It is a dimension many architects ignore,” the urban sociologist William H. Whyte once observed. Planners and designers of urban space have often stinted on seating, leaving the rest of us to colonize ledges, lean against planters, perch on fire hydrants, set up camp chairs, and fold coats to dull the pain from pointy iron rails. Lately, though, New York has begun to recognize the needs of the temporarily sedentary. This is quietly becoming an excellent city for sitting.

A partial catalogue of places to park one’s behind in public that have been added over the past few years includes the red glass public stoop above the TKTS booth in Times Square, the stacked slabs of granite at Gansevoort Plaza, and the gray and red stone blocks lining the approach to the subway station at West 96th Street and Broadway. The new East River Esplanade offers low stone walls, waterside steps, pairs of wooden-slat chairs angled so as to encourage conversation, and bar stools with views of the Brooklyn Bridge. Next to the new pinwheel-shaped pavilion at Peter Minuit Plaza are seductively snaking “zipper benches,” designed by the firm WXY. Rogers Marvel Architects has fitted out flood-prone subway grates along Hillside Avenue in Queens with undulating structures that divert storm water and invite lounging. Much of the effort to address New York’s shortage of outdoor rear-end parking has been driven by the Bloomberg administration, but private developers and nonprofits are also pitching in. In 2009, the City Council adopted new rules for privately owned public stretches on the waterfront, which now include plenty of shaded benches and clusters of “social seating.” Lincoln Center has scattered part of its campus

with movable chairs and lined it with high-back benches. The High Line has comfortable bleachers and wooden lounge chairs mounted on railway tracks.

In the latest initiative, the Department of Transportation has rolled out a program of sidewalk seating by request. New Yorkers can go to the DOT website and suggest a location for a sleek, sculptural CityBench designed by Ignacio Ciocchini (who also authored the garbage cans and shop kiosks at Bryant Park). Each of the three side-by-side berths is made from a sheet of perforated steel, folded into a back and a seat, and separated from its neighbor by a low armrest. The benches look tough, cool, and modern, but the effect of installing 1,000 of them on sidewalks in all five boroughs will be to make the city a more relaxed, inviting place.

Some will no doubt resent the proliferation of benches and chairs as yet another encumbrance. New Yorkers would prefer the rest of the world to think that we move at a constant lope, defying cars in intersections and pushing past slow-moving tourists. The truth is, though, that some of us are also old or infirm or have only just learned to walk. It's precisely because we spend so much time on our feet that we find ourselves sometimes schlepping groceries, dragging reluctant kids, nursing bum knees, and suffering in high heels. The old solution was to segregate weary shufflers in parks, leaving the asphalt to the hurried. Whyte noted that in crowded public plazas, people don't choose to sit out of the way of foot traffic, but rather plop down amid pedestrians who happily weave around them. The reason is that sitting down is a social act. Public seating is a crucial element of a vibrant metropolis, which is why the Department of Transportation is also now functioning as the Department of Staying Right Here.