

If It Doesn't Have a Bench, Is It Still a Park?

By Peter Harnik and
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In 2013, the city of Norfolk, Virginia, removed almost 70 benches from three small city parks. The benches weren't in disrepair and they weren't in a bad neighborhood. In fact, they were located in the revitalizing historic community of Ghent, and, if anything, were incredibly popular. Unfortunately, it was the wrong kind of popularity. Judged negatively by some neighbors as a milieu for loitering, drinking, fighting and even prostitution, the benches of Stone Park and Stockley and Botetourt Gardens were deemed *facilitas non grata*.

The decision, made after several years of study, was controversial. Some homeowners near Stockley Gardens say it is now quieter and more peaceful, but one Ghent resident, Bruce Ebert, lamented, "Now, we have a park that's nice to look at but totally useless."

When asked if he considered the removal a success, Jason Baines, a park department landscape architect, was cautiously tight-lipped about the painful battle. "The citizens were satisfied," he said. But, not all of them. In an open letter to the Norfolk City Council, published by local news source *AltDaily*, Norfolk landscape architect Bill Speidel wrote, "It tells the public that we are not welcome to use that park; that it should be an empty void." In his letter, he suggested other possible courses of action, such as making simple design modifications to the benches.





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Cadillac Benches

Is a bench just a bench, just a bench? Not in Smale Riverfront Park, Cincinnati's new showpiece on the Ohio River. Among its most memorable features are the Rosenberg Swings (pictured above), movable benches that hang beneath rows of lighted pergolas. A one-of-a-kind design that was inspired by swings on a pier in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, and born out of collaborative design between city planners and architects, the benches are so popular that there is often a wait. Of course, the fun and style of these unique benches comes at a very steep price — about \$52,000 apiece. (The Rosenberg Swings, like much else in the iconic park, were funded by a private donation).

Norfolk isn't alone. In recent years Pittsburgh has taken benches out of Allegheny Commons, Roanoke has removed them from Elmwood Park, and Sarasota has done the same in Selby Five Points Park (although the city is now reconsidering). In New York City, a number of park benches were purposely removed in the 1980s, although that is no longer a standard practice. Philadelphia's famous Fairmount Park is such a bench-free environment that nearby residents drag portable chairs across busy Parkside Avenue to have a place to sit and automobile visitors can be seen taking folding chairs out of the trunks of their cars.

Other than trees, it's hard to find something as intrinsic to people's concept of an urban park. "The bench is really a symbol of parks," says Mark McHenry, Kansas City parks director. The prominent advocacy organization New Yorkers for Parks even chose a park bench for its logo.

In fact, is a park without benches even a park?

George Dusenbury doesn't think so. The former director of the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation suggested using the criterion, "Does it have a bench?," to distinguish his city's 300-or-so "parks" from its scores of what he calls "just grassy traffic islands." (That definition, however, was dropped in favor of legal ownership.) The question neatly illustrates just how important benches really can be, but it doesn't get to the heart of the controversy over taking out existing seating. This often manifests as conflict over the perceived "proper" uses of a bench, and ultimately over how society expects people to behave in a public space.

The bench — or lack of one — can clearly signal the purpose of a park: Whether one should "linger longer" or "you've got to move" (*see table*). The latter approach smacks more of the corporate plaza, a space designed to deliver an impressive message of architectural beauty without the hassle of dealing with users. At the very least, a benchless park becomes just

an empty plot of land. Sure, kids may run around on it and some nimble-bodied few may flop down on the grass if it's dry, but this isn't a park for everyone. Wordlessly, it turns people away.

Even in the days of Frederick Law Olmsted, who consciously designed to promote promenading through carefully arranged landscapes, benches were integral to the experience. Historic photographs reveal benches in early Central Park, according to Olmsted Papers Scholar Charles Beveridge. Olmsted gave his park-goers places to sit and people-watch and also to appreciate a particularly fine view or landscape, much as museums place seating in important exhibits.

Certainly, a benchless park will get less loitering, but it will also get less lolling, dawdling, idling and lounging. For many park lovers, hanging out is the whole point, and park professionals spend much time and effort trying to get people to spend more time in nature. Certainly, a bench can't be vandalized if it isn't there, but it also cannot provide service for all kinds of people who need to take a load off — seniors, the tired, the injured, the pregnant, mothers with children, readers, people eating lunch. Basically, everyone.

Unfortunately, some cities have opted to jettison the benefits for a quick fix when a few citizens voice complaints. But bench misuse is a symptom, not a cause. The more deeply-rooted issues — poverty, substance abuse and homelessness — require amelioration and solution from other city social service facilities. In the meantime, park benches should be allowed to remain and serve as the workhorses of park safety, convenience and enjoyment.

To Bench or Not to Bench

In the 1980s and 90s, when Baltimore's Patterson Park faced the problem of inappropriate use of benches, they were steadily removed until none were left. This supposed fix didn't actually meet

Bench Seats per Acre

Selected Parks					
City	Park	Acres	Total Benches	No. Bench Seats	Bench Seats per Acre
Washington, D.C.	Dupont Circle	2	n/a	600	257
New York	Broadway Malls	10	340	1,360	133
New York	Central Park	840	9,000	36,000	43
Washington, D.C.	Farragut Square	2	n/a	46	25
Boston	The Common	47	240	960	21
Pittsburgh	Allegheny Commons*	60	145	580	10
Orlando	Lake Eola**	46	64	160	3
Houston	Hermann Park	445	310	1,240	3
Baltimore	Patterson Park	112	25-30	108	1
Washington, D.C.	Rock Creek Park	1,754	41	164	0.1

Bench seat calculations assume a 4-person, 6-foot bench, except where noted.

**planned numbers, following implementation of current master plan*

***benches seat an average of 2.5 persons*

park users' needs — to the contrary, when users were asked in a 1995 survey what would make a “big improvement” in the park, 56 percent said more benches. Now, with the revived park getting much more visitation, the benches are gradually being brought back. The benefits, according to Jennifer Robinson, director of Friends of Patterson Park, are striking. Patrons spend more time in the park, she says, and some are even putting the benches to use for strength-building. (That idea isn't unusual — there is even an exercise book on the topic, “101 Things to Do on a Park Bench.”) Not only did removing benches fail to fix the park's problems, it actually did the exact opposite. Robinson feels strongly that the new benches were a factor in the park's comeback.

But simply adding more benches isn't enough.

“Benches have to be located thoughtfully,” Robinson says. “They have to make sense with the flow of the park.” This means in areas of high activity (such as near playgrounds or sports fields),

along pathways and just inside park entrances. Putting them in well-trafficked areas helps ensure that they are used properly. There are now about 30 benches in Patterson Park — not enough, but an improvement.

Kansas City's McHenry is even more explicit when he thinks about users' needs. “Any feature that is traditionally put in a park, you're going to want a bench to go with it.” In particular, he cites the need at dog parks (for owners to socialize), playgrounds (ditto, not to mention the quick snack or diaper change) and sports fields or game courts.

No one is anti-bench per se. The debate, says McHenry, is between those who see them more as an asset or a liability. Naturally, if there is a problem, remediation is preferable to removal, but the low cost of simply taking them out is often a lure for financially strapped park departments.

In Pittsburgh's Allegheny Commons, benches were removed from the central promenade because the community

took issue with the noise and commotion that seemed to always hover around them. But, the problem may have been more due to layout. With the benches directly facing each other across the pathway, groups often gathered on each side, talking loudly across the distance and making walkers feel threatened and uncomfortable. But the loss from the removal was keenly felt and a new master plan calls for their restoration — this time in a new, staggered configuration that hopefully addresses the problem.

In the case of Norfolk, the city first thinned the surrounding landscape, hoping that would solve the problem. Other places, in order to prevent sleeping, purchase (or retrofit) benches with obtrusive armrests at appropriate intervals. Both approaches can help, although the only true fix comes from a culture of heavy use, proper utilization and the awareness that there are eyes on the park — including, every now and then, the eyes of rule-enforcing authority.

On the other hand, there are those who flat-out reject the idea that anything is wrong with lying on benches. Galen Crazz, a professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and a founding member of the Association for Body Conscious Design, has published thoughtfully on both seating and on urban parks. She calls purposefully uncomfortable bench arm designs “really nasty,” in part because she suffers from a back injury and primarily uses benches lying down. What she refers to as “healthy sitting” means no right angles — she herself finds it beneficial to stretch her spine in a supine position.

Beyond sleepers, benches face another nemesis: skateboarders.

“Oh yeah, skateboarding is an issue,” says McHenry. He feels the best defense is to provide official skate parks (which can even include bench-like shapes for aficionados). Kansas City has two; other places have many more — 11 in Las Vegas, 13 in Sacramento. But skate parks are not inexpensive, plus some rebellious boarders will always attack benches because they’re convenient and they’re there. In Cincinnati the problem is compounded by the city’s many granite benches — the sharp edges are attractive to skaters and disastrous for the stone. Many cities, rather than removing the benches entirely, respond by installing iron studs on the seat edges, as Roanoke did in Elmswood Park.

Financial Bench Warmers

Naturally, a lot of the struggle comes down to economics. While benches are cheaper than almost any other piece of park apparatus (including even trees), the cost of purchase, installation and maintenance still adds up. Steve Schuckman, superintendent of planning, design and facilities with the Cincinnati Park Board, says that buying and installing a practical, aesthetically pleasing and durable bench costs between

\$1,500 and \$2,000, assuming it will last about 10 years. In Kansas City the standard design comes to about \$900. The 2002 master plan for Pittsburgh’s Allegheny Commons put the cost of modest benches at \$1,200 each.

And the price of the bench itself may be just a portion of the cost. Kansas City’s McHenry said his city has benefited greatly from installing lighting and sometimes even security cameras in parks. While expensive, he feels these measures have done a great deal to reduce bench misuse and ensure public safety.


One way to cover expenses is through an adopt-a-bench program. Flourishing in many cities across the United States, sponsorships take the shape of a small memorial plaque in return for the purchase, installation and maintenance of a bench. (Many park agencies or conservancies stipulate that the memorial lasts for either the lifetime of the bench or for a certain number of years, whichever ends first). The cost varies by city and by park, but is generally around \$2,000. In Austin, Texas, 11 of the city’s parks have already reached their bench donation limit. In New York’s Central Park, the Central Park Conservancy’s program (at \$10,000 per bench) has yielded benefactors for more than 4,100 of the park’s more than 9,000 benches.

Because of the popularity, some programs have had to institute rules. The Pittsburgh Park Conservancy gives wording guidelines, has a character count, and does not allow logos. “This program is a nice way to honor loved ones,” says the conservancy’s Susan Rademacher, “but if we have too many memorial benches, it may detract from the feeling that the park is a common space meant for everyone.”

Some of the country’s most famous park benches — even featured in the movie “Harry and Tonto,” — are located along the miles of greenery along

the center malls on Broadway in Manhattan. Maintained by the Broadway Mall Association, their prominent location combined with “eyes on the street” have warded off unwanted behavior and made them particularly beloved in the community. For Kate O’Brien, development associate for the association, seeking bench sponsorships is a joy of her job. “Donors,” she says, “always have a great story about their connection to the park. Something like, ‘I’ve lived here for 40 years and always drink my coffee on this bench.’” The benches may have an association with an important moment or a special person, and O’Brien calls the program “a really good source of revenue.” Of the 340 benches from 70th Street to 168th Street, 39 are adopted.

Bench Bottom Line

So, what is to be done? Are park agencies simply doomed to be pummeled by anti-bench complainers and to then be criticized by outraged bench-lovers and park-lingerers when they remove the problem? Some cities have succeeded in saving their benches and maintaining parks that are safe and enjoyable for all, but it certainly requires creativity and resourcefulness, and of course no two cases are alike. Maybe Adrian Benepe, senior vice president of The Trust for Public Land and former commissioner of parks for New York City, is correct when he says, “It’s like everything else — you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” Or, maybe it’s more alarming, as put by Tampa Parks Director Greg Bayor: “If you start removing benches then you’re on the way to removing everything else too.” 

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