

CASE-IN-POINT 2017



DESIGNING STREETS AS A PUBLIC SPACE

How design interventions, like THE BENCH on Corydon Avenue, can transform the street environment

Matthew Robinson | Rob Galston, Jae-Sung Chon, Roxanne Gratton

ABSTRACT

Car-centric street design has dominated transportation systems for decades in North America. Along with growing city populations and the densification of urban areas, our streets have developed into infrastructure primarily designed to move people from origin to destination. These spaces are now overwhelmingly recognized as unhealthy, and hostile to pedestrians and cyclists. As the concept of complete streets becomes increasingly mandated, cities must also reimagine the social aspect of streets. They must reintroduce 'publicness' back into these spaces while providing safety and comfort for all users. In 2015, Jae-Sung Chon initiated THE BENCH design competition as a means to elevate the voice of designers in this process. He is an Instructor at the University of Manitoba Faculty of Architecture and the owner of MAKE coffee+stuff, located on Winnipeg's Corydon Avenue. THE BENCH is one of several design interventions in the city that espouses public engagement and public ownership. In collaboration with Jae-Sung, Rob Galston (Planner with the City of Winnipeg), and Roxanne Gratton (Organizer for Park(ing) Day), this research aims to evaluate the outcomes of these design interventions and the importance of designing streets as public space.

"The only legitimacy of the street is as public space. Without it, there is no city."

- Spiro Kostof

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before the rise of the automobile in the 20th century, street life relied upon pedestrians engaging in social interactions. Much of the activity on city main streets focused primarily around trade (see figure 1). Speed of movement was limited by the poor road conditions and available modes of transportation, which allowed for greater feelings of safety for pedestrians and more room for commerce. An influx of motorized vehicles throughout the 1920s brought a change in street perceptions. At first, many believed these vehicles should be kept off of public streets due to danger and nuisance, but by the 1930s, they dominated the transportation scene (Southworth & Ben-Joseph, 1997). The shift in transportation choice, along with federal funding and numerous automobile coalitions, brought sufficient pressure to improve the quality of roads and accommodate this new way of movement. Streets were no longer social places; rather, they served large masses of people going about their own business (Mehta, 2013). Over time, this extreme change in street environment was met with resistance. Planners, advocates, architects, and designers have pushed back against the car-centric city. As a result, policies and practices that shape streets into physical places can be distilled into two categories (Hess, 2006):

- Streets as movement corridors – focused on creating a network that provides mobility and access.
- Streets as places – focused on collective ownership and availability for social, political, and aesthetic uses.

Streets as Movement Corridors

Viewing streets as movement corridors means embracing their economic role in moving goods and people, while maintaining mobility and accessibility (Hess, 2006). One of the more recent forms of transportation policy supporting this view is Complete Streets. It is a targeted approach at reducing congestion, increasing mode share, and improving safety. “To date, over 1060 agencies at the local, regional, and state levels have adopted Complete Streets policies, totaling over 1100 policies nationwide” (Smart Growth America, 2017). Since 2004, professionals and citizens have used these policies to improve street conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. Not only does



FIGURE 1 | London Street, early 20th century

this approach help create safer and healthier streets, it also espouses economic benefits. After a 2007 Complete Streets redesign in parts of New York City, there were increases in retail sales and decreases in retail vacancies (New York City Department of Transportation, 2012). This demonstrates the importance of a complete street for vendors who are seeing business lost to the online marketplace.

From a design perspective, accessibility is a clear goal for streets that are trying to achieve the mandate of a complete street. Designing for all users means designing for the most vulnerable users. In Toronto, there was a conflict with restaurant patio extensions infringing on the sidewalk movement corridor (Smee, 2017). By limiting the amount of space for pedestrians with walking impairments, the City of Toronto began to investigate restricting these patios. This is bad news for vendors who rely on this additional income. It demonstrates the importance of accessible design and working within cities guidelines.

Streets as Places

Some planners believe the primary purpose of a city is “to permit - indeed to encourage the greatest possible number of meetings, encounters, challenges, between varied persons and groups, providing as it were a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted” (Mumford, 1964). These personal encounters are most prevalent on streets, and more specifically sidewalks, where we are faced with constant small interactions.

Although the street serves many utilitarian purposes for commuters, we become most intimately connected with our urban environment when on foot (Jacobs A., 1995). Sidewalks may seem unassuming at first, but Jane Jacobs (1961) saw these public spaces as the most “vital organs” of a city. The social interactions that underlie the historic use of streets help keep neighbourhoods safe and controlled. Some of the great streets are ones that invite sociability while remaining safe and enjoyable to walk through. Therefore, our public sidewalks should be striving to uphold these values.

However, “flexible and ambiguous boundaries” that surround the ‘publicness’ of sidewalks do not invite the intrinsic inclusivity that should be associated with its label (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009). There are clear tensions that arise when a space is label as public. It exists on a spectrum of public and private usage based on who takes ownership, which may lead to contentious privately owned public spaces. However, using art and exhibition can be an effective means of reallocating space to the public (Pachenkov, 2013). The use of street furniture has also played a large role in this reallocation. “Seating on the street - benches or chairs provided by a public agency or a private business, or in the form of other surfaces built into the building design or streetscape - is one of the most important characteristics to support social behaviour on streets” (Mehta, 2013). This Case-In-Point explores how THE BENCH design competition aims to resolve the tension of public space with a street furniture exhibition, fostering sociability and blurring the lines between public and private ownership.

2.0 / THE CASE

Site Area

THE BENCH is a design competition that takes place on a 4'x24' area of sidewalk in front of MAKE coffee+stuff, a coffee shop located at 751 Corydon Avenue. It is owned by Jae-Sung Chon, an instructor in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba (see figure 2). The shop frequently displays design and architecture work that attracts like-minded students and professionals.

Corydon Avenue is designated a Community Mixed Use Corridor in Winnipeg’s Complete Communities plan. Based on this plan, activity in these corridors should

be “conducive to creating vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environments” (City of Winnipeg, 2013). Corydon Avenue arguably represents this ideal. It has developed a strong identity as a main street for the surrounding neighbourhoods, supported by local retail and commercial services. However, a strong tendency towards private usage of the street is clear. MAKE coffee+stuff is one of many vendors that line the street front from Pembina Highway to Stafford Street. From spring to fall, the numerous restaurant patios in the area are a common destination for locals, making the corridor an ideal place to walk during the warmer months.

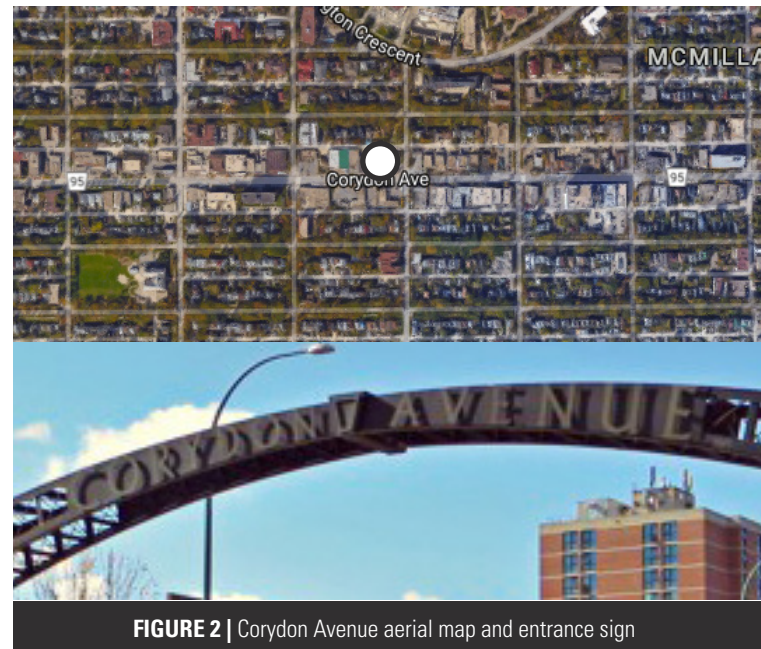


FIGURE 2 | Corydon Avenue aerial map and entrance sign

THE BENCH

Jae-Sung began THE BENCH design competition in 2015, welcoming submissions from around the world by designers of all ages and backgrounds. The basic premise of the competition is to design a seasonal seating-space along the street edge of MAKE’s retail front. Not only does it have to accommodate a minimum of 12 seating space-surfaces, it must facilitate instant, ongoing and changing street dynamics. The City of Winnipeg street furniture permit criteria regulates the over-arching design parameters. A jury selects the winning submission, which is subsequently constructed at the proposed site. This new seating installation is available for public use during the summer and fall months of that year. At the end of the fall season, THE BENCH is donated to an undetermined location for future re-use. The main purpose of the competition is to contribute to design by demonstrating its ability to advocate for public space in the city. The design brief asks, “How can we (re) imagine the street as

a public space? How can we imagine the street beyond its function as a 'route'?"

As discussed in the theoretical background, there is ambiguity in the boundaries of sidewalks as public space. Vendors play a large role filling the space in between people's journey instead of connecting point A to point B. They will often take ownership of the space around them, operating them loosely under their jurisdiction. Jae-Sung recognizes this conflict of interest but insists it offers the opportunity to facilitate a greater public benefit rather than a social hindrance. His role as a vendor helped facilitate the necessary municipal support and provided the capital to initiate the project. The street furniture permit from the City of Winnipeg was found to be easier to procure as a business owner than simply as a designer. It was, however, Jae-Sung's architecture background that allowed THE BENCH to materialize rather than an interest in financially profiting off of the space. The project is only seen as viable when viewing it through a lens of advocacy and design. Finances used to create this loss-leader could have been allocated to more efficient uses, such as promotional material and other assets.

THE BENCH was supported by the neighbouring business, Tutti Frutti, during its first two years. The project was jointly funded with respect to liability, costs, and labour. Jae-Sung covered all costs relating to construction, promotion and the street installation permit, and Tutti Frutti extended their liability insurance to cover the temporary seating area. Concerns over vandalism and weathering were present in the design considerations; however, the promotion of public ownership was seen as a way to lower the threat of vandalism.

The 2015 winning submission from New York was titled "Plug-In Bench", made with only 1/2"-thick plywood sheets and threaded steel rods welded to base plates that maintain the bench forms (see figure 4). The concept of 'publicness' was created through participation with the form. Participants had the ability to re-configure aspects of the benches, thus creating a sense of public ownership with the newly altered form. At the end of the installation period, it was donated to The Edge skatepark. The 2016 winning submission from a New York/Paris collaboration was titled "Over-Under", shown in figure 5. The height differentials of the design allow for high visibility and offer the opportunity to see the street in a new way.

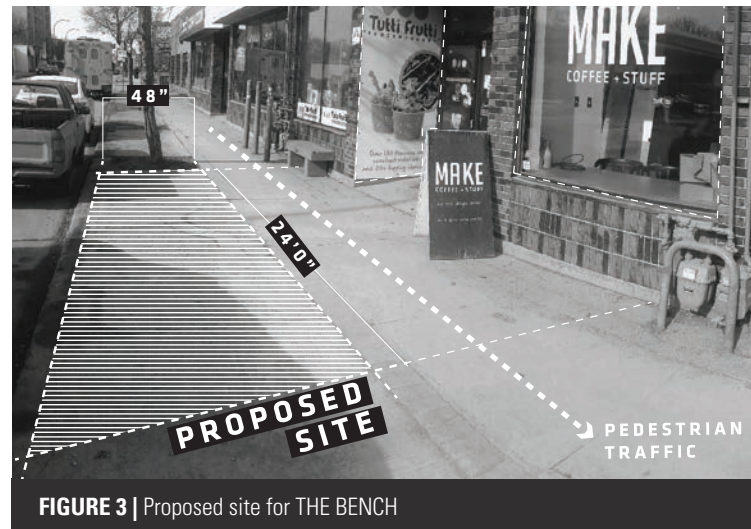


FIGURE 3 | Proposed site for THE BENCH

THE BENCH DESIGN COMPETITION

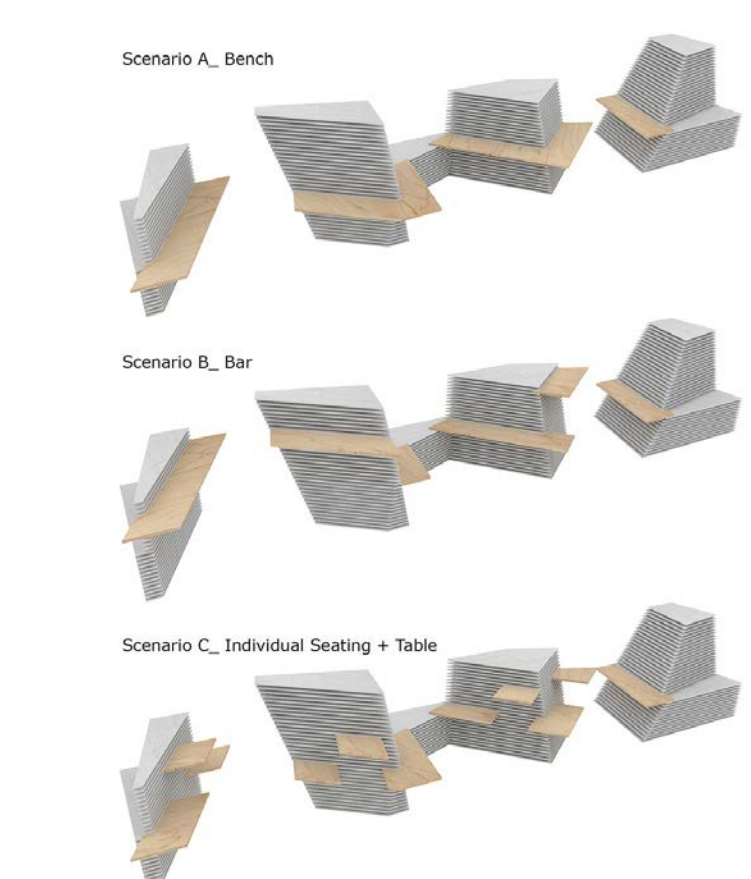


FIGURE 4 | "Plug-In Bench" concept drawing

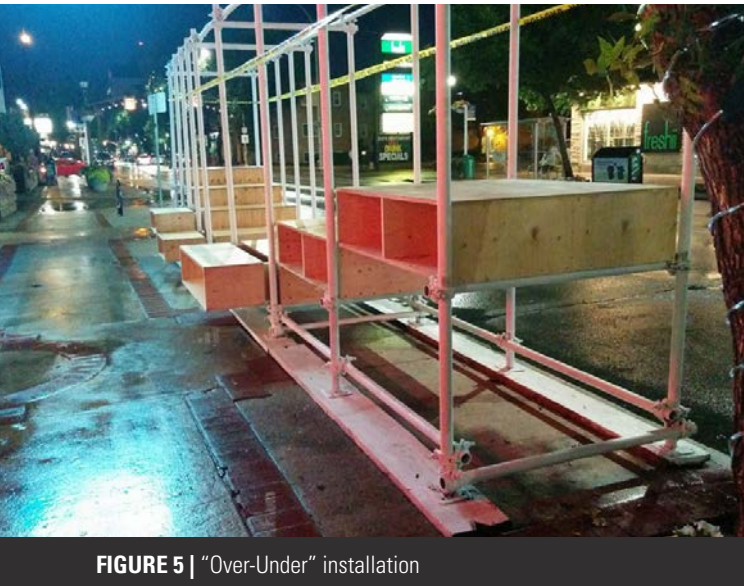


FIGURE 5 | “Over-Under” installation

Public ownership was sought through the bench’s multi-use expression, allowing participants to play or relax. Two citizens noted that it was the first time they laid down next to a busy street.

Other Interventions

Other public space design interventions are becoming more prevalent in Winnipeg, portraying similar qualities and overall intentions to THE BENCH. For example, Park(ing) Day has become a reoccurring intervention in the city. It is an annual worldwide event where artists, designers, and citizens transform metered parking spots into temporary public parks. Manitoba Association of Landscape Architects (MALA) has organized it since 2012, and has incorporated a design competition to help fund and construct 2 winning submissions. In 2016, twelve total designs were constructed on downtown parking stalls in Edmonton Street and Graham Avenue. Media outlets covered the event and the public was free to interact with the designs. Some of the most impactful designs from past events have used elements such as music and fire. However, there are limits to the possibilities of a city-sanctioned event. All designs are

instructed to conform to specific guidelines based on City of Winnipeg standards for their Use of Street permit. Figure 4 demonstrates the inventiveness and variety of the submissions each year.

3.0 / LESSONS LEARNED

As Mehta (2013) expressed in her book *The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space*, sociable and pedestrian-friendly streets are very important to the framework of a city. THE BENCH has been able to attract the type of use conducive to creating these social spaces. Jae-Sung Chon’s pioneering efforts have resulted in positive attention from the public as well as interest from other Corydon Avenue vendors. However, it is a unique design installation that is difficult to replicate based on Jae-Sung’s role as both a vendor and a designer. Without a desire to advocate for the city as a public space, the financial loss of creating street furniture in this manner is a strong deterrent. Jae-Sung believes public ownership is the most important element to cultivating a truly public space. Public ownership breeds a greater respect for the installation, thereby reducing concerns of vandalism. Besides one instance early on in the first installation, vandalism has not been an issue since THE BENCH’s inception, largely as a result of Jae-Sung’s efforts.

Apart from the threat of vandalism, short-term events like Parking(ing) Day risk becoming a ‘one off’ intervention that only appeals to a niche audience. One of the event organizers, Roxanne Gratton, hopes it could develop the capabilities to engage with a wider audience. A way of achieving that goal would be to extend the project’s duration, although liability and permit restrictions complicate this process. Roxanne believes the city should become more of a “front yard”



FIGURE 6 | Winnipeg Park(ing) Day installations

that is environmentally- and pedestrian-friendly as we continue to densify our urban areas. It is becoming increasingly important to foster places to gather, socially engage, playfully interact, or simply relax outside of our private spaces. However, we must remain aware of our need for accessible movement in the public domain. Otherwise, spaces may be expropriated to ensure they are conforming to City regulations. Creating complete streets should be advocated equally alongside design interventions that evoke public ownership.

4.0 / CONCLUSION

Streets will continue to be designed for movement as one of the primary purposes. However, our ability to synthesize the “Streets for movement vs. Streets for gathering” conflict can help create accessible, multi-modal corridors as well as spaces for sociability. In turn, we can recreate the elements that initially made these public spaces great. As a vendor and designer, Jae-Sung Chon used a design competition to advocate for a greater sense of street ‘publicness’. He believes that this goal can only be achieved when public ownership is taken, a process that does not occur overnight. While ‘one-off’ design interventions can act to alter perspectives of our public spaces, it fails to produce the impact of a seasonal street installation. THE BENCH is a model of public space advocacy for the future design of our cities.

“Without places for active and passive socialization, with no opportunity for casual and formal interactions, our cities and towns would be no more than agglomerations of privatized spaces and buildings, devoid of the space for the individual to be a complete citizen: A landscape that affords a limited ability to explore, create, express and share; to encounter difference and learn; and to confront, tolerate and resolve conflict.”

- Vikas Mehta

RESOURCES

City of Winnipeg (2013). Complete Communities. Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg

Hess, P. (2006). Making Toronto’s Streets. Toronto: University of Toronto.

Jacobs, A. (1995). Great Streets. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jacobs, J. (1961). The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Random House.

Loukaitou-Sideris, A., & Ehrenfeucht, I. (2009). Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation Over Public Space. Boston: MIT Press.

Mehta, V. (2013). The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space. New York: Routledge.

Mumford, L. (1964). The Highway and The City. London: Secker & Warburg.

New York City Department of Transportation (2012). Measuring the Street: New Metrics for 21st Century Streets

Pachenkov, O. (2013). Urban Public Space: Facing the Challenges of Mobility and Aestheticization. Frankfurt: PL Academic Research.

Smee, M. (2017, February 9). New plan proposes pushing patios back to make room for pedestrians, people with disabilities. CBC.

Southworth, M., & Ben-Joseph, E. (1997). Streets and The Shaping of Towns and Cities. New York: McGraw-Hill.