

# 1. Introduction



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## *reasons for the study*

This study is rooted in my work as a practising furniture designer/maker and has come about through my desire to look deeply at the processes involved in my practice. As a craft maker much of my time is spent in the dusty, dirty and often physically gruelling activities of making. Care, contemplation and self-reflection can loose out to pressing deadlines, economic pressures and the sheer cussedness of materials. The opportunity given by this research to read, look, reflect and retell is thus particularly welcome for it allows me to review and question my work and practices, to set my work within a wider context and to develop a relevant methodology that should enable such processes to be an integral part of my practice. Thus, as the beginning of a long term process, the scope of this work is broad and seeks to explore the practical, theoretical and moral basis of my practice.

Much of my work over the past few years has involved public seating due, perhaps, more to the opportunities



which have presented themselves than to a specific desire to direct my practice in a particular direction. My interest in issues of access in relation to seating can, however, be pinpointed to a particular instant. Whilst discussing sketches for the design of the seats in Sheffield's Peace Gardens an employee, who had previously worked as an Occupational Therapist, suggested that one sketch would allow wheelchair users to transfer from their chairs onto the seat. We pursued the idea. The inset arm permitted transfer whilst still providing an arm to help people rise from sitting. Compared to a seat with arms at the end it gave more people use of the arm and more private space so encouraging more people to use the benches. Further it made the benches uninviting to skateboarders or to people wishing to sleep the night – both key requirements of the City Council. We realised that if wheelchair users were to transfer onto the seats then the spacing between them must allow access and so we started to look at the overall layout of the scheme as well as the seats themselves. The gaps between the seats (some of which were later taken for extra litter bins and lighting) not only accommodate wheelchairs but also allow pushchairs to be placed within the security of the line of seating. People can transfer or take the side of the wheelchair down and have a cuddle with a partner sitting on the seat, parents can have direct contact with children in pushchairs and old ladies can keep hold of their shopping trolleys – all out of the thoroughfare.

*seats in Sheffield's Peace Gardens  
1998*

*Sue demonstrating transfer from a  
wheelchair to the seats*



### **research aims**

Once the seats were installed I was surprised to actually observe these things happening and became interested in other ways seats might be made more accessible and how these opportunities might be conveyed. These observations gave rise to this research which has two broad aims; firstly to develop research as part of my practice and secondly to improve access for the disabled to my seating. The research began by trying to put into words the hunch, that had been present in my work but not articulated,

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that opportunity increases access. The *opportunity* is the opportunity to sit, or lean or perch in different ways and by the term *increases access* I mean that these opportunities, or the opportunities of the space the seats inhabit, are available to a wider range of people – that they seek not to exclude the physically or mentally impaired the happy or the sad, the tall or the short, the rushed or the lingering, the group or the loner, the dominant culture or the cultural minority.

This research is both timely and of its time for not only has there been a general trend towards the improvement of urban and public space in the UK over the last few years but also the implementation of the third part of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in October 2004 requires that such spaces, or at least the leisure, information, recreational or economic services they provide, should be accessible to all. My practice, then, stands to benefit from the interest in public spaces and, if through this research I am able to identify ways of increasing access, from the need of my clients to comply with the DDA. But the research, I hope, will be of wider use for there is little published that specifically relates to issues of access and public seating. Guidelines about seat heights, arms to help rising and colour contrast to help the visually impaired exist and there are many examples of good practice but the sources are disparate and neither gather this information together nor seek to provide or explore the context within which the designer might work.

## **definitions**

The definitions of public space, disability and access will be explored in the context section of this study however it is useful here to look at my definition of seating. As will be seen in chapter 4 this definition has expanded during my research to include just about any architectural or landscape element people use to support themselves or their possessions. Using seats, then, includes most activities - sitting, leaning, perching, lying and squatting whether they be purposeful like picnicking or reading or incidental like



*Newcastle and Gateshead's Millennium Bridge shows huge investment in new urban space which is paralleled across the country*

*drop kerbs, tactile paving and other forms of access are being installed in a rush to comply with the DDA*





*all types of 'sitting activity' inform this work*

stopping because a mobile rings or having a rest. There is little, in a way that it excludes, the relevance of the activity and object is not that they should belong to a fixed idea of public seating but that they should inform my work.

### **layout of study**

Following this introduction (1) the study is divided into five chapters: 2 the methodology which defines the way in which the study was carried out; 3 the context which seeks, mainly through reading, to understand the theoretical perspectives that inform both my work and the reflections upon it; 4 my research observations which inform the work through observations and interviews; 5 an analysis of my practice in relation to both the context and research observations and 6 the conclusion which hopes to tie the work together.

### **2 methodology**

Broadly defined as Action Research the methodology I use, rather than following a linear pattern of cause and effect, seeks to constantly inform, reflect upon and modify itself within the pragmatic constraints of practice. The element of practice within this model is important for although, due to the timing and nature of commissions, it is a process too long to fully work itself through within this work it does establish principles and guidelines for my further development.

The non-linear pattern established in the methodology pervades the whole study thus the layout of one chapter following the next is a convenient way of presenting the information rather than a representation of the way in which it was gathered. The discussion, however, is all there for a reason and its focus, whether as cause, effect or reflection, is my practice.

### **3 context**

The built environment and the way it shapes and is shaped is complex and interwoven not separated into categories. It is the overall picture or the 'combinations or mixtures of uses, not separate uses, as the essential

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phenomena' (Jacobs p155) that we must seek to understand. Thus, I believe, it is important as a furniture maker to explore this wider context and operate within knowledge of it for it acts upon the objects I make and the people that use them<sup>1</sup>. Although my work stands on its own its theoretical background is not explicit and thus the context section which makes up nearly half (in terms of words) of this report is of particular importance to me. It represents both an opportunity and a journey which I am unlikely to have the time to repeat in the near future and a full retelling seems justifiable.

In chapter 3.1 I look at how ideas of space have developed and in particular at the social production of space which points towards a plural and diverse understanding of and aspirations for public space. Although when talking about access and inclusiveness disability, and particularly physical access, are often to the fore the expectations of this space is that it should be genuinely open to all and reflect the diversity of society. Disability, however, provides a key test of access and inclusiveness for not only are the physical barriers at their most apparent and pronounced but it also searches and



*street furniture must be understood within a wider context*

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst furniture is the focus of this work much of this theoretical background is set within architectural theory and practice which is justified, I believe, not only because I have a personal interest in architecture but also because it comments directly on the issues raised by my observations and practice. Furniture may be considered to be a microcosm of architecture – as an expression of it, as a reflection of its preoccupations and trends and because it enables us to shape our physical and social environment. Street furniture and seating is certainly a contributory part of architecture just as architectural elements such as steps or the bases of columns contribute to sitting opportunities. Furniture itself has little theory of its own particularly, if as I choose to do, it is considered within its environment rather than as an independent product. For unlike the product that you may choose to purchase and/or discard you are forced to suffer the architecture and street furniture you are given. The history of furniture is largely that of architecture - its designers are architects and its preoccupations and formal elements, at least until recently, are largely architectonic. But more than this my research attempts to look at the social not just the physical context of public seating and thus covers the ground of architecture at least since the Enlightenment if not for all time. As Foucault points out (p428) any discussion of public health or civil order since the early C18th involves the layout of the housing and the width and orientation of the streets and thus architecture both responds to and helps to define social behaviour. Today we blame the built environment for our sense of alienation, lack of sense of place and social problems and yet still look to it as holding the key to solve them. I would not want to make such lofty claims for my furniture but would wish myself to be identified within a trend that accepts the social responsibility of and seeks to better the built environment. In considering this theory I use the terms architecture, built environment and planning within the general term of architecture for although there are distinctions between them the purpose of this study is a generalised rather than specific understanding.

questions inclusive social theory. The social model of disability which I look at in the next chapter (3.2) suggests that disability is not the result of an impairment but is imposed on people with impairments by society. This discrimination is interwoven into society's structures and values resulting in the denial of physical access and exclusion from the labour market and positions of influence. Such barriers to access and the social structures that generate their conception and form are nowhere more apparent than in the built environment and are thus particularly relevant to my practice.

The ideas of the social production of space and the social model of disability share many similarities. Both suggest a social cause to the problems of alienation and the inaccessibility of much of our environment and that their solution lies in genuine inclusiveness and a consequent shift from conventional models. In order to understand the shape these theories might take and how they might relate to my own practice I have discussed them in terms of various models and in relation to the DDA in chapter 3.3. The choice of these models is personal, in that I am attracted to what they say and do, but it is useful to test them (for they are often formed by the aesthetic, behavioural and social notions discussed in chapter 3.1) against the social model of disability.

*the disabling built environment*



#### **4 observations and interviews**

In this section I analyse the main themes revealed by my observations of how people use public seating and my interviews with disabled people. This research pervades the whole study and I have used both photographs and quotes<sup>2</sup> from it to illustrate my arguments. The photographs of people using public seating formed the starting point for this project identifying the types of activity which interested me and suggesting ideas to pursue and understand. The photographing has continued over the three years of this study less intense than at first, sometimes directed by what I have read or

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<sup>2</sup> Edited transcripts of the interviews can be found in the Appendix (chapter 8). Quotes are referenced to the interviewee and section.

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designed, but still hoping to pick up anomalies and reveal situations to question. The interviews with disabled people were conducted towards the end of the study and comprise a meeting with the Sheffield Access Liaison Group at which we discussed my seats for the Graves Art Gallery as well as public seating in general and interviews with two individuals.

Restricted, by accessibility, to certain areas of Sheffield the interviews cover much of the ground of my photographs but do so in a way that it was impossible to appreciate without them.

## 5 practice

The practice chapter reviews four projects against the issues raised in the rest of the work. In doing so it discusses both how it has been influenced by and has itself influenced these sections. The work cannot fully address all the issues raised for, as it is made to commission, it responds to its particular circumstances rather than a prescribed agenda. This review has led me to understand that the project is not, and can never be, complete for the activities and circumstances I seek to investigate are unique and individual.

Designing for an inclusive environment is far from being the neat solution to wheelchair access it is often represented as but is complex and far reaching.

## 6 conclusions

The study has two broad aims: to inform my practice and research the design of inclusive public seating. The conclusions hope to merge these two strands and reflect on the hypothesis that *opportunity increases access*. My research has shown that the ideas presented in this study are not fixed but related to culture and it therefore emphasises the importance of continued study and observation. Through the study my idea of opportunity has been modified and I now see it as an addition to certain basic provisions rather than the generator of all provision. I have found research to be a useful part of my practice and have been able to establish a broad methodology that will continue to inform my work.