

## 5.2 Review of Projects

### *introduction*

This dissertation now turns to looking at my own practice and how I have used the ideas developed through my reading, observations and interviews within my work and how this work feeds back into the research. Practice as discussed in chapter 2 is an integral part of the research process and I feel it is necessary to stress again that this discussion appears here, at the end of the work, for the clarity of the *write up* not as an indication of the order of the process.

For the purposes of this dissertation I have used four public seating projects spanning the period of this study which marks my attempt to make research a visible part of my practice. Three of the projects are completed work the fourth is a recent submission informed by this research and which it is tempting to suggest is some sort of conclusion to this dissertation. However each project can only respond to some of the ideas thrown up by my research and limited by the brief, situation, finances or time none of the projects claim to fully represent the ideas put forward in chapters 3 and 4.

Discussing one's own work is never easy and I have drawn on notebooks, sketchbooks and diaries as well as photographs and observations of and comments upon the finished pieces. The temptation is always to be wise after the event and I have tried to portray the projects with accuracy.

In this section I have reviewed my work against the main themes generated in both the context section and by my research observations. The themes are: *the relationship of culture and form; consultation and reflection of democratic design; reasonable provision and inclusive design; adaptability and suggesting activities; space and the body.*





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### *the relationship of culture and form*

All the projects attempt to build settings for the social interactions necessary to build communities whether in the case of the Graves this is for temporary interaction or as in Stone Hirst contributing to the development of communities that is seen as crucial to the regeneration of the area. The fact that all these projects are site-specific and different allows people to identify and associate themselves with an area or neighbourhood (Jacobs p139). They also try to contribute to the variety and social, physical and visual complexity associated with our sense of place (Jacobs p113). Anecdotal evidence suggest the Galton Valley seats are well used and appreciated by local people and visitors. Cigarette ends and beer cans beneath the seats and graffiti indicate that they are used by teenagers (even if one wishes the use was more wholesome). One of the seats has suffered a determined attempt to set fire to it which is not surprising given the effective remoteness of the locations. The concrete seats at Stone Hirst on the other hand are relatively untouched by even graffiti which suggests that they have not produced the type of space teenagers wish to own.



The form of the seating at Galton Valley is related to the very dominant forms of the canal architecture and the barges that use them and despite some early sketches for free squiggles of cast iron such a solution is a natural part of my work. The interaction between material, form and culture described by Latour is particularly apparent in such locations, our understanding of it changing from economic driver to amenity and its backdrop from heavy industry to glittering mosque.



***consultation and reflection of democratic design***

In contrast to Galton Valley, redolent with history and meaning, the site of the new urban park of Stone Hirst was cleared of its history of failed post war housing schemes and its immediate surroundings are new housing, a mix of privately owned, to let and social housing, although its direct community is still the Manor estates with their high unemployment and social

..... use and abuse of the seats at Galton Valley

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problems. Through painstaking consultation and community development the area has been cleared of burnt out cars and the first stage of the park completed. The final form of the elements was designed in collaboration with the manufacturers but, as a response to a very tight deadline and inflexible contractual system of installation on site, with little reference to the community.



*the setting for Stone Hirst is failed post-war housing*

Although consultation was intended at Galton Valley a similarly tight schedule meant that the client was unable to facilitate it. However the 1:5 models I made as part of my presentation were used very successfully at several community events to present the scheme. Models are an extremely accessible form of presentation which I now use on most schemes and they were appreciated by the Access Liaison Group. There could, however, be a concern that being rather beautiful objects in themselves they convince by their cuteness not their ideas. In addition to make convincing models detailed design decisions need to be made so in contrast to a loose sketch they present a fixed rather than open proposal. On examining the models a blind member of the Access Liaison Group felt that my written description (which had been put into Braille for her) was a 'very accurate description' (8.1) indicating the usefulness of developing both written and verbal skills.

*models can convey a scheme in an understandable and accessible form*

The competitive nature and short time scale of many of my commissions makes consultation difficult and only in the Graves project did the design evolve significantly



through discussion with the client although no user group of friends or wider staff consultation was suggested. I did however have several useful conversations with the gallery attendants about the project and how visitors used the gallery. The process is as much about informing the client as being informed by them and the rationale behind my submission for seating at Galton Valley, which changed the brief for three large seats to six small seats, to provide 'opportunities [for the elderly, less-able and disabled] to rest at regular intervals' rightly becomes part of the initial aim in a booklet reviewing this and other commissions (British Waterways, p12).



*creating the 'story' for Queen's Park*

Through this study I have become convinced that in order to achieve inclusive design consultation should form a larger part of my practice. My proposal for Queen's Park is thus deliberately presented as a the development of a scheme - a series of photographs show a 2.4 x 2.4 m marker pen drawing with models placed upon it developing alongside a story. The scheme includes aspirations for visual and tactile wayfinding and in the knowledge that these and other ideas could only be developed through consultation I have allocated, within the budget, an amount for such a process. In pursuit of this element of consultation I have taken a risk in submitting a fairly open design when I suspect the clients would prefer a well worked up proposal.

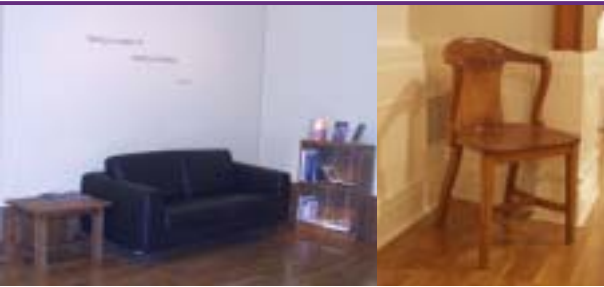
### ***reasonable provision and inclusive design***

Inclusive design makes provision within the design that is not special and separate. The provision made within my designs is not identifiable or special and is of use to all so in that way it is successful. The question as to whether there is sufficient provision is another matter. This research has started to build a picture of the provision seating can make and this will expand through further observation, and research - sufficient, or reasonable, provision is, as discussed throughout this work, not a quantifiable but an evolving concept.

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Reasonable provision is a way of understanding inclusive design for it implies, as we have seen in chapter 3, the balancing of what are often conflicting ideas. The justification of these choices is the way in which reasonableness can be judged. Such choices occur at the level of an individual seat as well as a scheme and in this way a back to the seat which is essential to Lee Harker and desirable for many elderly (8.2.) may inhibit access to an arm for a stroke victim who has use of only one side of their body or someone who wishes to place a companion on one side because they cannot hear well on the other (ALG 8.1).

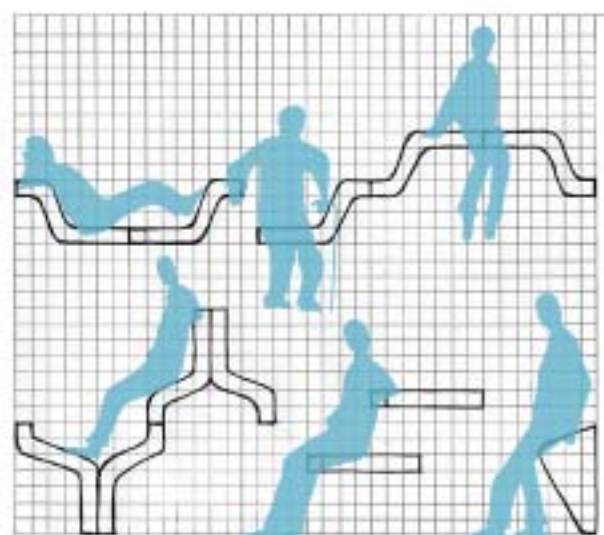


*other seats in the Graves Art Gallery*

In my seats for the Graves Art Gallery the client was keen to not interrupt the space with seat backs and although it is clearly possible to design a visually light seat back I decided to provide bench seats<sup>1</sup>. The other seating in the Gallery comprises delightful oak chairs, original to the building, which are probably too narrow and unstable to be of use to people like Lee or Brian and a low deeply upholstered leather settee which is only usable by the most able. This suggests the importance of an audit of the total provision which would have highlighted the need for a seat with a back even if the desire to make this particular room suitable for children and education groups favoured a bench<sup>2</sup>. Such a holistic approach to a project is likely to promote solutions that are relevant not just to disabled users but to a broader understanding of access.

#### ***adaptability and suggesting activities***

Based on my observations (chapter 4) of the way people use architectural elements as seats the seating elements at Stone Hirst are intended as ‘incidental —a suggestion of a place to perch, to rest’ (Bauman) and as away of encouraging both play and lingering. The elements can be arranged to provide what is at the same time both defensible space for an individual and groupings for conversation and provide arms to help with rising. They are designed so that they can be placed upright in the ground, as if fallen from the wall, to make stools and a less linear grouping although this was not done in this project.



*the seating elements at Stone Hirst can be used in many different ways*

<sup>1</sup> Initial consultation, at the design stage with Sheffield’s Access Officer did not suggest a necessity for backs although following my interview with Lee Harker (4.2.2) I now feel this to have been a omission on my part

<sup>2</sup> My seating audit at Galton Valley showed few walls at useful heights and a virtual absence of anything to sit, lean or perch on except the lock gate levers. In this way the onus to make ‘reasonable provision’ is somewhat shifted to the client as, by providing a design solution which is relatively cheap to reproduce, the increased accessibility provided by seating is limited only by budget and considerations of the character of the towpath. On a kilometre and a half of towpath with level access from housing and shops the provision of any seating makes it more accessible than none.



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In A Pattern Language one of Alexander's *patterns* is 'stair seats' ( Alexander, 1977, p605) and one can see this adopted by designers, intentionally or otherwise, in many schemes. However steps do not present accessible seats and my proposal for Queen's Park attempts to take the idea of steps, used for incidental sitting or as an impromptu stage, and reproduce them in a more accessible form. The proposal includes, as Till and Wigglesworth's story telling, a list of activities which the seating is to fulfil from running and jumping to reading and sitting quietly and the design was based on providing spaces that enable these activities (the list, of course, should have been developed with a user group not simply from my own experience and aspirations).

### *space and the body*

Apart from the seating in the Graves Art Gallery which can be moved by the staff the seating is static and thus different activities must be suggested by the forms and groupings of the elements. My adoption of non-conventional organic form which is more related to the body is a deliberate attempt to suggest that users can perch lean or lie. Departing from the planes of seat, back and arm acknowledges, as my observations (chapter 4) showed, that traditions and hierarchies of use no longer apply and that we consider objects in public space to be there for our benefit rather than for

*Queen's Park scheme attempts to create a space for activity*



*the form of the Graves seats is related to the body*

*sitting activities involve both sitter and companions* ●●●●●●●●

their own sake. On my walk with Brian (8.3) we found ourselves using objects for our own purposes and I naturally crouched on a seat or arm or we found walls to continue our conversation eye to eye. The *sitting stones* for Queen's Park attempt to encourage this type of activity and in conjunction with the more conventional benches offer a wide range of seating options. The grouping of objects have a deliberate busyness which hopes to encourage and invite activity rather than making people feel self conscious at disturbing the formality. The variety of heights and shapes and juxtaposition of formal and organic and symmetry and dis-symmetry 'emphasising the spatial properties of the body' (Tschumi p84).

I have used information about personal space in Sommer and Lawson to inform my work and both Queen's Park and the Graves show the creation of sociopetal and sociofugal space (Lawson p142) and distances between users carefully balanced with space for access. Thought has been given to how people defend and feel comfortable about the space they occupy and this includes provision for shopping or other possessions. As emphasised by my journey with Brian (8.3) I have also tried to consider the sitter in relation to their companions whether they be in a wheelchair or pushchair. Thus spaces along side the seats become important and I have shifted arms that get in the way of this contact into the middle. The environment becomes more inclusive by providing different heights and ways of sitting not just in relation to the sitter themselves but also to their companions.



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### *conclusion*

Brought up in a craft tradition that concentrates on materials and making, this research has shifted my focus from the object in isolation to the object in a peopled environment. The notion of reasonable provision and choices between different design ideas emphasise the importance, discussed in chapter 2, of design and research which is able to test ideas in a real environment. If, as Donald Campbell suggests in the introduction to *Inquiry by Design*, we accept a design decision as 'one alternative among many possible ones' (Zeisel p ix) then it would seem reasonable to try deliberate variations particularly if an attempt is made to evaluate their consequences. Many of the ideas suggested by my research have either not found inclusion in these projects or have not been tested over the period of this study - research, as a conscious and evolving part of practice would thus seem to be the important lesson from this review.