

Advice: Integrating street furniture into public spaces

18 October 2016 by Ben Kochan

Street furniture should address the architecture around it, as well as the needs of users, finds Ben Kochan.



Furniture like bollards can be customised to create new features, as in this Winchester project (PIC Heather Cowper)

It's easy to bolt down a couple of benches to provide somewhere for people to rest their weary limbs in a public square, but street furniture can help create a sense of place and encourage people to stay longer. That's the advice of Tim Buykx, associate at landscape architect Gillespies. He says that street furniture needs to be considered, alongside all the other design issues, when a new space is being developed, or an existing one revamped.

"Street furniture needs to be considered right at the outset of a scheme," says Jon Tricker, director at transport planning consultant, Phil Jones Associates. "It can also increase the value of the commercial developments around the space."

Here are four tips for integrating street furniture into public space.

1. Ensure furniture fits user needs

When revamping an existing space, it is important to review how the space and the existing furniture are being used, says Richard Eastham, director of urban design consultancy Fera Urbanism. "You should observe the different groups using the space, and whether the furniture is meeting their needs," he says.

The consultant carried out a review of the central spaces in Bournemouth, which has a high concentration of students. "The street furniture did not allow them to sit round and chat in small groups, as the benches were in long rows facing in one direction," he points out.

Buykx says that most public spaces will be used by a wide range of different groups. "Spaces need to be identified for children's buggies and wheelchairs," he adds. This can be done simply with the use of a different paving in those spaces, which should be alongside the benches.

2. Minimise clutter

In some cases, furniture needs to be removed, to allow a space to function effectively, says Peter Heath, public realm design director at consultancy Atkins. "Some spaces are about movement, and furniture can impede it," he explains. He cites the consultant's project to review the Oxford Circus junction in central London: "There were curved walls, guard rails and benches, which got in the way for people who wanted to cross the road and access the underground station."

The same piece of street furniture can perform several different functions, so reducing the need for separate installations, points out Heath. Lighting can be integrated into benches, for example.

3. Install furniture in sympathy with site and surroundings

A huge range of furniture can be bought off the shelf, but it's not necessarily more expensive to have bespoke furniture designed and manufactured, points out Fera Urbanism's Eastham. "The important consideration is that it needs to sit comfortably with its surroundings," he adds.

The Here East scheme in the Olympic Park in east London has three public spaces, surrounding the contemporary industrial buildings, says Katharine Kok, project consultant at landscape architect LDA Design. The bespoke furniture was custom designed and produced to match the architecture of the buildings," she explains.

Furniture can be fitted into the contours of a site, highlights Gillespies' Buykx. By way of example, he cites LDA's scheme for St George's Square in Luton, where the benches have been fitted into the site's slope, creating an amphitheatre effect.

Buykx points out that giving street furniture a theme that runs across several spaces, with the use of colour, can help create connections. "The common thread can lead the public through the different spaces," he points out.

Benches and bollards can be customised to create features in their own right, adding to the interest of the public space and complementing existing architecture, says Eastham. He points to a project in Winchester, where 17 bollards have been painted by local artists with individual works of art, as part of the refurbishment of The Square.

4. Keep street furniture under review

The street furniture in a public square needs to be reviewed regularly, says Kok. Surrounding buildings and their uses will change over time, which could mean that different furniture is called for, or the arrangement of existing furniture may need to be altered.