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Switzerland and its bench culture

Whether by the woods, lakes, on the mountain slopes or in the city parks: wherever you go in Switzerland, you are never too far from a bench. The bench is not just a handy place to sit; it is also a policy tool. The bench is at the interface between keeping up appearances and having fun in public areas.

DENISE LACHAT

It is reasonable to assume that a person would not spend hours standing on a street corner observing the passers-by. However, a person doing exactly that while sitting on a bench would barely merit a second glance. In fact, this person could even engage in conversation with complete strangers, talk freely and get to know people. That's why older, single people sometimes spend whole afternoons on the bench at the bus stop. "People like to sit near the action," says Sabina Ruff, who is in charge of the social environment in the town of Frauenfeld in Thurgau. She mentions Bullingerplatz in Zurich and the Zollhaus terrace, also in Zurich. "You have trains going there, bicycles, pedestrians and cars too. Sechseläutenplatz in Zurich is another good example: it has lots of chairs for people to place where they wish to sit."

The social aspect

The bench is indeed a place for socialising, confirms Renate Albrecher. The sociologist should know – she works as a research assistant at the

Laboratory of Urban Sociology at ETH Lausanne and has founded an association to promote Switzerland's bench culture. This association maps the locations of benches in Switzerland and shares information on benches that people generally don't know about, supported by many like-minded people who upload their photos to the platform. Albrecher says that the first Swiss benches were located at crossroads and stations – in other words, places to watch people coming and going. As tourism grew, benches were placed wherever there was a good view to encourage visitors to come. One of the first tourist benches was at the famous Giessbach waterfalls in the canton of Berne. It enabled people to contemplate wild nature, which was something of a motif for artists at the time. Moreover, as hiking trails emerged in

tandem with the appearance of benches, "the English did not have to soil their fine footwear," notes the sociologist. Nowadays benches are simply part of the scenery in the great Swiss outdoors, whether at lakes, rivers, or in the mountains. Their ubiquity even in the remotest places of the smallest tourist location is also due to the efforts of the many associations working to make their locations more attractive. After all, these associations have two hundred years of experience in the art of bench placement.

The functional bench

In urban areas, by contrast, benches can be found at less attractive locations. No view, street noise – but there's a bench. Jenny Leuba, project manager at Pedestrian Mobility Swit-

From simple to sturdy to futuristic. From lakes and parks to village streets and city centres. Benches in Switzerland come in all shapes and sizes. Photos: Keystone (4), provided (1)



zerland, can explain. The bench may be halfway between the shopping centre and bus stop or on a steep incline. “Some people, especially the elderly, need somewhere to catch their breath and take a break,” explains Leuba, thus alluding to another purpose of the bench: people need to be able to move around town on foot. That includes older people, families with children, the sick, people with injuries or disabilities and the people accompanying them. These pedestrians need somewhere to sit. Benches add cohesiveness to districts and let people recharge their batteries. Renate Albrecher refers to benches as filling stations for pedestrians.

Part of mobility planning

Jenny Leuba has designed bench placement concepts in several cities and municipalities in Switzerland and, in doing so, has come to an astonishing realisation. Although a bench costs between up to five thousand Swiss francs, the authorities do not know how many benches are in their city. She believes this is because of the arbitrary allocation of responsibility for squares, parks and streets. “There is no department responsible

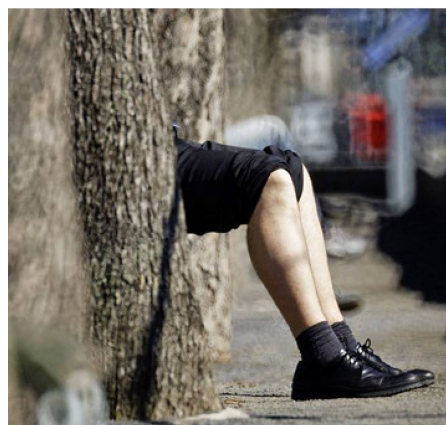


Renate Albrecher, founder and president of the association in support of benches in Switzerland (Verein zur Förderung der Schweizer Bankkultur) finds wood the best material for benches. In fact, most bench users prefer wood. Photo: François Wavre, Lundi13

for public areas, so we're lacking that overview.” That is also why benches tend to be overlooked in mobility planning. “There is no one to lobby for benches,” laments Albrecher. The three experts agree that most cities have potential for expanding their bench network. Moreover, they argue that benches are not in the places in which they would be most used, for example in residential areas where many old people live: “The further you go from the centre, the fewer benches you find.”

Conflicting needs

Wood is Renate Albrecher's favourite material. Most people also prefer wood, according to surveys. However, city councils prefer something longer-lasting and resistant to vandalism, and possibly even with the ability to stop cars. Hence the prevalence of concrete and metal. However, it's hard for senior citizens to stand up when seated on a block of concrete and metal is too hot in summer and too cold in winter. How can public areas, which “by definition belong to everyone”, as Sabina Ruff points out, be accessible to everyone at any time of night or day? The key is participation. Albrecher has developed a straightforward browser app as part of a European research project that has been tested in Munich as well as in other places. It is a success: “People who use benches and don't normally contribute to things like this also cooperated.” District inspections are being organised in Swiss cities at the instigation of Health Promo-



tion Switzerland. And they are also yielding results. “The authorities are now more aware of the issue,” says Jenny Leuba of Pedestrian Mobility Switzerland.

The outdoor living room

As seating around stations has been removed or made less comfortable in recent years to discourage people from lingering too long, some Swiss cities have developed a trend by bringing a living-room atmosphere to public spaces. This is done by blocking off sections of road or converting carparks. In Berne, for example, part of Waisenhausplatz has had a stage, seating, play areas and green islands during the summer since 2018. As it’s just a temporary arrangement (during summer), there was no need for a long and involved approval process and the project was implemented quickly, says Claudia Luder, project manager for Design and Utilisation at Berne Directorate of Civil Engineering. She also manages the Kompetenzzentrum öffentlicher Raum (centre of competence for public areas),

“We need urban areas with something to offer, so people will enjoy spending time there.”

Sabina Ruff

which promotes cooperation between the different departments in Berne and the locals – a prime example of coordination and participation. Temporary installations also reduce concerns about noise and littering, says Luder, referring to the conflicting uses of an area with facilities on offer. These issues are mitigated either through positive experiences with provisional arrangements, as in Berne, or through some technical tricks, something Jenny Leuba knows about. Two benches facing each other appeal to big groups, as do well-lit places. Niches are also popular. The city of Chur also has a good approach

to public seating: shop owners place brightly coloured benches outside during the day and take them in at night, says Leuba.

In conclusion, some Swiss cities and municipalities are on the way – each at their own pace – to organising public areas similar to what Sabina Ruff discovered to her delight in Ljubljana during the summer. That is where Slovenian architect and urbanist Jože Plečnik hailed from. Plečnik celebrated the city as a stage for life, and public areas as a venue for community and democracy, says Ruff. That is what is needed: town planning that focuses on the needs of the people. As Ruff puts it: “We need urban areas with something to offer, so people will enjoy spending time there.”

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Running the gamut – from clean benches and graffitied benches, to weather-worn benches and pristine red benches in Alpine forests.
Photos: Keystone

