

Sittin’ Pretty: A Tactical Urbanist’s Exploration of Public Seating Attraction

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DEFINITIONS

As a city must be accessible to be successful, language must be the same. Although I work to make inclusive spaces in my work, jargon is sometimes unavoidably useful. Below are definitions of important terms used throughout this project:

Tactical Urbanism:

Referring to a human-centered approach to neighborhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions to catalyze long-term change. Otherwise known as guerrilla urbanism, urban acupuncture, or punk-rock urban planning.

Social Capital:

Those that profess an undisputed definition of social capital are dogmatic; I offer an exegesis to avoid being hounded: it’s the value of social networks, bonding and bridging between diverse people, and the heart and soul of a city.

Human-Centered Design:

It’s all about building a deep empathy with the people you’re designing for; generating tons of ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you’ve made; and putting your innovative new solution out in the world.

INTRODUCTION

The urban planning at a world class university, with a urban planning program ranked 3rd in the country, should reflect its stature. This project seeks to be a metamorphic amelioration.

The lack of public seating on Green Street on the University of Illinois campus is inaccessible, unsafe, and prohibitive. Initially aiming to simply submit an analysis of Green Street to the city planning council, my project was transfigured through time: molting from an immature endpoint of a scholarly paper to a materialized bench on the street.

Submitting a stand-alone proposal seemed insignificant. To bolster my submission, I concocted a proof-of-concept: I would engage in tactical urbanism by covertly installing my bench and gathering data until it’s removed. Included below is my budget for three test benches and safety equipment. My guiding question: Will people actually sit?

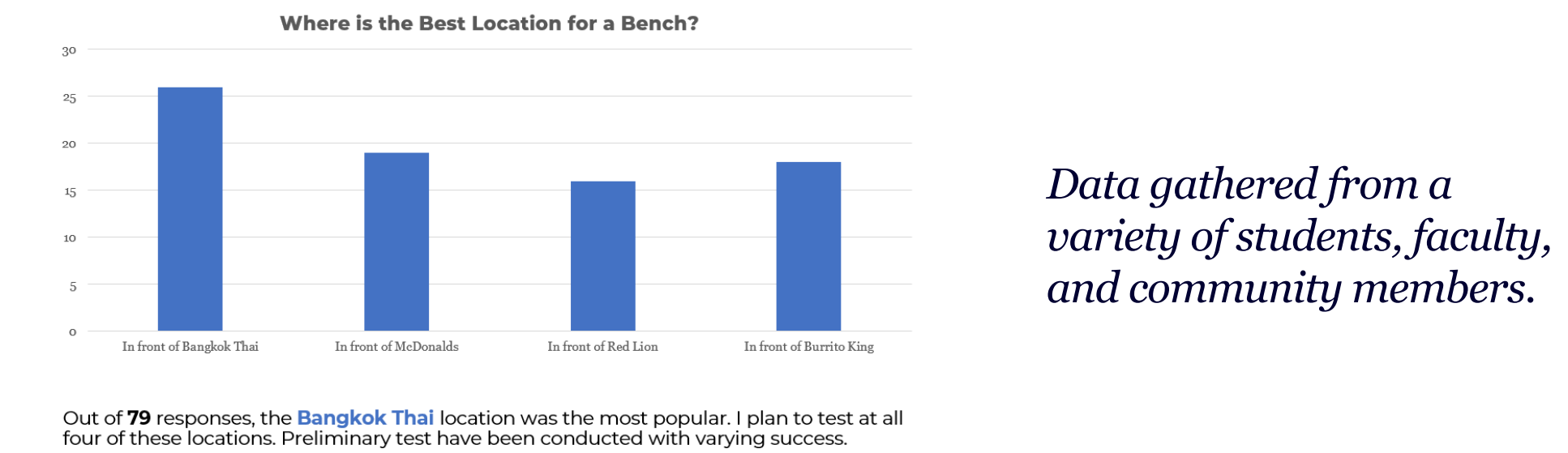
Item	Link	Use	Amount	Unit Cost	Estimated Cost	Actual Cost
Outdoor Bench	Here	Pilot Test	1	\$ 87.98	\$ 87.98	\$ -
Outdoor Bench (Artistic)	Here	Secondary Pilot Test	1	\$ 186.99	\$ 186.99	\$ -
Hi-Visibility Jacket	Here	Safety	1	\$ 49.99	\$ 49.99	\$ 49.99
Video Camera	Here	Safety / Data Collection	1	\$ 36.74	\$ 36.74	\$ -
Clipboard	Here	Ease & Efficiency	1	\$ 1.97	\$ 1.97	\$ 1.97
Cinderblocks (x15)	Here	Demo Build	15	1.97	\$ 29.55	\$ 28.05
2 x 4 Wood Planks	Here	Demo Build	6	7.75	\$ 44.10	\$ 46.50
8 oz. Orange Paint	Here	Demo Build	1	4.98	\$ 4.98	\$ 4.98
8 oz. Blue Paint	Here	Demo Build	1	4.98	\$ 4.98	\$ 4.98
Predicted Total				\$	447.28	\$ 136.47

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METHOD

Bench Surveying:

I consulted my social groups and the campus community at large asking a simple question: **If you could put a bench on Green Street, where should it go?** This is the core of human-centered design; you need to consult your audience before you start your project. Upon synthesizing the data, the most popular response was at the corner of Green and 5th, in front of the restaurant Bangkok Thai.



Bench Building:

14 cinder blocks, 6 2x4’s, a lot of paint. From earlier tests, I learned that travelers must find both physical and emotional comfort to engage with public seating, hence the orange and blue paint signaling that students are welcome. The Siebel Center for Design workshop was my home for two days as I cut, painted, and glued it all together.

Once it was completed, I did a second coat outside my house.

Some passersby were interested and came to join me! Before the bench even left my property I was building connections and fostering social capital.



Bench Placing:

I placed it in the most popular spot and hid across the street to film, popping out to interview those who sat on the bench or interacted with the provided chalk. Three students were willing to talk to me!



The bench in action.

With the provided chalk, passersby signed their name, doodled, and took a rest on the busy sidewalk of Green Street.

RESULTS

Interactions:

In less than an hour of recording (56:51 in total), the bench received 20 interactions from the denizens of Green Street. I was able to create connections in the city through a simple bench, building bridges for new people to meet and interact. This is the heart of social capital.

The most important interaction I had was with the building owner of this property. Initially upset with what I had done, she quickly changed her tone when she realized the eye-catching allure of my bench. We set up a meeting to plan how to permanently install a bench on Green Street.

We are currently looking at sustainable materials for the final build, hopefully to be bolted down soon. We are working on the next phase of the project.

Upon an interview, the couple (triptych, right) noted, “I love it; it’s a super fun addition to Green Street. If you wanted to make it even better, you could add colored chalk.”



Upon an interview, this student (left) said, “The chalk was inviting. I needed to wait for a friend. Other people came and used it while I was waiting. Maybe if you draw more behind it... people are more likely to see it... I like it.”



A diptych of students waiting (top) and drawing (bottom).

I went up to many of them afterwards and fielded their thoughts on the bench, receiving much positive feedback!

LIMITATIONS

Material Weight:

The largest limitation I encountered was the sheer weight of the bench, weighing over 540 pounds. My original vision included multiple testing locations; however, I was only able to put it in one location.

Funding:

With more funding, the project would have included more (lighter) benches and more testing locations. Other benches would have provided more data on which locations would be the most popular and how people would interact with them.

Time:

A longer timeline would have allowed me more testing opportunities. With more testing opportunities, I could have better assessed what the perfect place for a bench would have been.

Weather:

I couldn’t test my project if no one was outside to sit!

CONCLUSION

20 people, 1 hour.

To conclude this project, I offer an argonautical analogy: I am much like Orpheus, forbidden to look back on my former goals (of multiple testing locations), looking onward lest I face the consequences. Instead of losing Eurydice, I listened to the people.

The prospect of a bench somewhere is better than no bench at all.

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