

Park Bench on the Avenue

Molly Schuchat



Three rustic wooden benches, love seats really, are chained in a line along Washington D.C.'s Connecticut Avenue, between the sidewalk and a wooded finger of Rock Creek Park.

At first glance, these benches seem to be in a forlorn situation: They are too far apart to induce comfortable conversation and too short to sleep upon; they face continuous traffic day and night while turning their backs to the trees; they sit a quarter mile from the nearest fast food restaurant; and they are neither next to a bus stop nor in an area obscure enough for lovers.

But even the casual observer can tell they are popular: Each is accompanied by its own frequently overflowing trash can; puddles of peanut shells and bird seed lie beneath them all. So, I wondered, who uses these park benches on the avenue?

After watching the benches for some time now, taking note of who stops there and what they do, I've concluded the benches are very much a part of the community that surrounds them. They function as a front porch for people who live nearby, a type of place usually not found in apartment buildings, which often have balconies or secret gardens that are detached from the street. As such, they provide an opportunity for eye-level interactions, which allow residents to

recognize familiar faces and patterns of activity and to take account of exceptions to both.

The benches are an incidental place where people can take a fleeting moment of rest in the middle of errands or a journey from work. Yet they are also a destination — for those who like to feed the birds and squirrels, want to meet friends, or seek to be alone but not withdrawn from the rest of the world. They are a bridge between public and private lives, a place where diverse elements of urban society can come together in peace.

Connecticut Avenue, considered Washington's most gracious and stately boulevard, is one of the most intensely used routes through the city. Adjacent to much of the avenue is Rock Creek Park, whose 1,750 acres of wooded ravines, sheer creek banks, and hiking, biking, and pedestrian trails stretch from the city's monumental core to the Maryland border and beyond. The benches sit where the Park's Melvin Hazen tributary crosses the avenue; a trail runs along Rock Creek to the main creek in the valley to the east.

The avenue is characterized by sprawling hotels and alternating collections of apartments and commercial buildings, a pattern that resulted from 1920s zoning. Near the benches, dowager apartments and smaller walk-ups

One of the three benches that had lined Connecticut Avenue where it crosses Melvin Hazen Creek. Photos by Molly Schuchat.

are common. But at one point there are two large apartment buildings put up in the 1950s; they flank the finger of the park where the benches rest.

The superintendent of one of the apartments recalls the benches were installed in the early 1960s, at the time the trail was built and at the request of the buildings' residents. "Probably somebody from the Park Service lived there," he surmised, "who enabled the operation." For many years the benches simply perched in their spots, but about 12 years ago they were chained down because vandals made sport of rolling them down the embankment.

A neighbor says he asked for trash cans to be installed a year or two later. "There was so much trash around the benches that I called someone I knew at Interior (the U.S. Department of the Interior, parent of the National Park Service) and had it taken care of."

Folks walking from their condos and co-ops to the nearby Metrorail station sometimes rest on the benches on their way to or from work; others, often older people, pause at the benches on their usually more leisurely errands. Spanish-speaking families who have moved into the garden apartments in the neighborhood also frequent the seats. The three benches, under their canopies of beech, oak, and maple, welcome everybody equally.

The trail is used daily by dog walkers and on weekends and holidays by hikers who come in ones, twos, and families. Some of the hikers park their cars or get off the bus and start walking from the point where the trail meets the avenue; the benches are a convenient spot for them to pause and tie shoes or regroup.

Local folk stop at the benches to commune with "nature" — squirrels, pigeons, and sparrows. They are mostly unaware of the extent of "nature" living just beyond. About 25 deer are resident in the Melvin Hazen area; many have migrated from the suburbanizing parts of Maryland. A fox was flushed from beneath a car not too long ago, and not far off the trail there is a fox den. Raccoons sometimes cross the avenue instead of travelling through the pipe that transports the creek beneath the avenue. Offerings of bread crusts and peanuts attract rats and mice to the grassy strip between the park underbrush and the street.

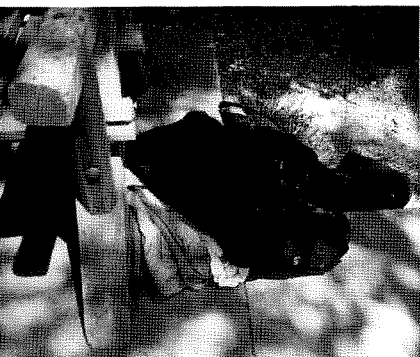
Closer to the consciousness of people who use the benches are the homeless humans. Occasionally they sleep on the benches, including a young man who keeps his possessions in one of the nearby Metrorail lockers and, scion of a local gardening family, occasionally does yard jobs for residents of the area. Another homeless person

perches sometimes on one of the benches like Peter Pan, but with a Walkman at her ear.

The homeless are not the cause of the occasional calls demanding the Park Service remove the benches as a public nuisance. It is the pigeons, continuously fed by some residents, that draw people's wrath. Every morning on the way to the Metro one regular drops leftover bread at the benches. Others anoint the area with birdseed. At least 13 pigeons rest if not roost on a limb above, swooping down on all bag-carrying or cart-pulling passerby. The newspaper not too long ago ran a picture of an 88 year old woman, arms filled with some of the pigeons she has fed and played with for most of the 30 years she has lived nearby.

One woman brings peanuts (a handful at a time, casually pocketed on her trips to the supermarket) and places them in the crotch of the double beach tree behind a bench for Fritzie, her favorite black squirrel — an activity she began because she needed to force herself to get out in the fresh air at least once a day.

She also likes to sit on the bench, watch nature and the people passing by, and occasionally talk to an acquaintance. One morning, a person walking along with a disreputable looking bike asked us for money and, after we demurred, wished us a very nice day.



The benches are a shared place where residents and passersby by can bestow their concern for life. Some people leave clothes for the homeless, others feed the pigeons that gather there.



“Poor soul, he can’t understand why we feed the animals and not him,” the woman mused.

A sign appeared early one August morning, fashioned from a brown paper bag and Scotch-taped to the center bench. It made a simple request: “Please don’t feed the rats.” Additions to the sign, made during the next day and a half, were:

“squirrels aren’t rats yet, nuke pigeons”

“Yeah! no more arms too Iran George”

“Which ones!”

And then the sign was gone.

A day later the pigeon woman said she had not seen the sign but had been told about it. “Lucky I didn’t see the writer — I would have given him hell!”

From time to time the benches serve as a place to make other offerings. While no one has ever left flowers, on several occasions fruit has been laid out, as if at a shrine. Discarded fruit rinds are regularly placed in the trash cans, but these were whole and wholesome looking fruits.

Occasionally, somebody leaves an old sweater or some other piece of clothing neatly folded on or stacked beneath the benches (safer from the rain), to be collected by one or another of the homeless. Sometimes items like children’s mittens and scarves are accidentally left;

these are more likely to be retrieved by their original owners.

The benches are a place to rally around in times of emergency. A former sociology teacher at one of the universities was evicted from her apartment in one of the newer buildings by the trail. An eviction is a singular and shocking event in this neighborhood, where alternative arrangements are usually made privately and landlords never proclaim those who fall behind and cannot pay. So the newspapers reported the story with pictures of the woman, enthroned on one of the benches, clutching her electric typewriter in one hand, surrounded by boxes of her books and watched over by unknown neighbors, as police and social workers tried to make other arrangements with and for her. The efforts, the pictures, and the kindness of strangers continued for almost three days.

Often, people passing by the benches or people sitting on it are inclined to make some harmless comment, an acknowledgement of mutual humanity. A distinguished looking elderly gentleman wiped off an empty bench with his newspaper and sat down, stating to me on the next bench and to the world at large: “Intermission.”

A young woman jogged by on a stifling day, stopped by one of the trash

cans, wiped her face with a Kleenex, tossed it in the trash, and commented, before resuming speed, “It’s so hot.”

Winter and summer, in the current anti-smoking climate, quite a few nearby residents enjoy their cigarettes or cigars at the benches. Sometimes roommates, family or others, have to get away from each other, one imagines, when coming upon one of them reading late at night by the light of the street lamp.

Often strollers will stop and stand to chat with an acquaintance already seated. But sometimes pairs of passersby sit down together on one bench to continue their conversations. A wheelchair-bound neighbor usually sits at right angles to a bench where a friend is sitting, but occasionally he faces the woods, with his back to the street. He seems to come to the benches for three reasons: to be close to nature, to have companionship, and to feed the pigeons and squirrels.

For many people in the neighborhood the benches are a symbolic territory to be monitored against intruders. But the benches serve another neighborhood purpose. One day, walking around them, I noted two strange young African-American laborers sitting there. “They don’t belong,” I said to myself. “Why are they here?”

They smiled as I passed and one held up a half-carved wooden dog.

“Not by me,” he offered, pointing to someone approaching from the other way. “I used to work in his building and know all the whittling.” The whittler, a regular bench user, arrived with a walking stick that he had carved for the porter. “That’ll protect you,” he promised.

The fact that the former porter had introduced himself and had a claim on the neighborhood made an tremendous difference to my comfort level. Neighbors have developed a possessive attitude toward the benches and bristle when they are favored by non-neighborhood people.

Recently the rustic benches were replaced with new models that have slatted, treated wood and armless, metal frames. They were bolted to the cement below, not chained. The old benches had been purchased [un]finished, requiring skilled assembly and

maintenance, and would now cost about \$200 apiece. But anyone can install the new ones, made in the park shop with materials costing about \$80. One bench was installed with a large crack in one of the back slats, which has never been replaced.

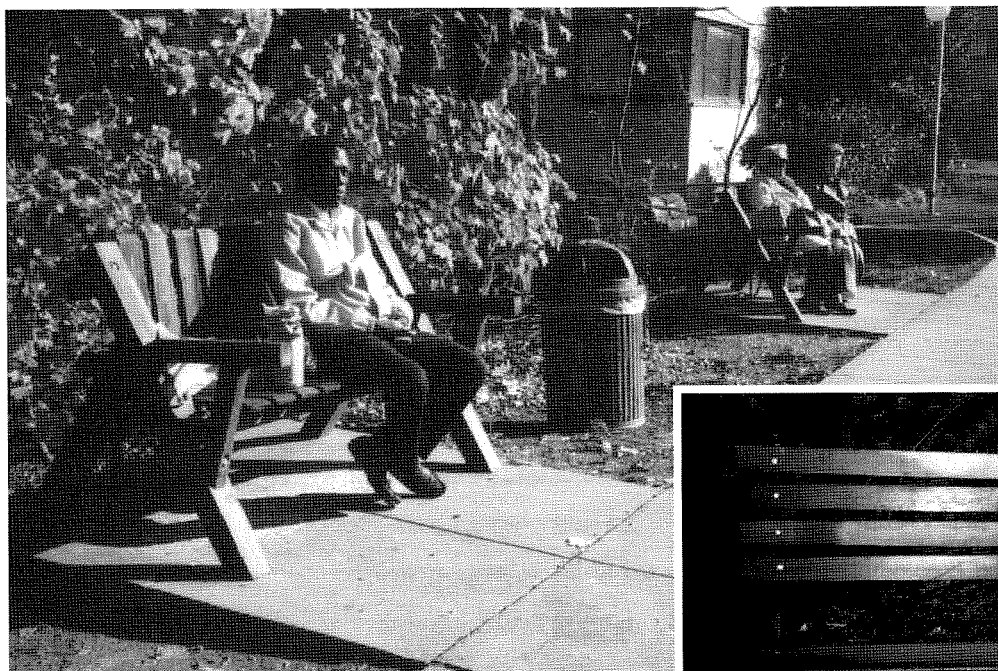
One former user commented that he hates to sit on benches that do not have a multitude of carved initials to indicate loving use. But during the summer others said the new benches were much more comfortable.

There will not be any more initial carving. But the one or two neighbors who sit on the benches to whittle (much less messy there than in the apartments) or the ones who while away a bit of time playing the banjo or taking time for a cigarette, do not appear bothered by the difference.

The story of these benches indicates that development policies, like zoning,

and larger public works, like Metrorail, can establish physical contexts and suggest patterns of activity. But the story also shows that good places develop their own priorities. It was not happenstance that the benches were set on the rim of marvelous Rock Creek Park — it was a resident taking neighborly advantage of the manner in which the park meets the city.

Good places are nurtured by people using whatever resources they have, whether it is connections to city hall or the park service, or leftover food or spare clothing. The benches, it seems, are the focal point of what we really mean when we speak of community. They are a shared space that provides something, even pigeons, upon which we can bestow our concern for life.



The old park benches (left) and one of their replacements (below).

