RUC

Test Copenhagen

Researching a new social infrastructure in Istedgade

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CHAPTER 6.1,
TEST COPENHAGEN
RESEARCHING A NEW SOCIAL
INFRASTRUCTURE IN ISTEDGADE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter tests the prototypes in the three cities. In each case, we outline how we conducted the tests, and what we learned. As with all forms of urban design, our installations are material, aesthetic, and symbolic entities that users may use, acknowledge, talk about, or ignore. While they have noticeable material effects through their physical presence, peoples' engagement with them also animates them. Research shows that how users interact with designs partly determines what they become, do and mean (Degen, DeSilvey, & Rose, 2008).

Therefore, we test the installations and our assumptions according to how they are:

- used in practice;

- redirect walking flows;

- are appreciated in passing;

- talked about and evaluated;

- fit into the overall street or square.

As discussed in Chapter 3, we use photography, observations, interviews, and intelligent video to test if they create better walking environments tailored to the local context. We start with discussing the installation in Copenhagen.

METHODS
During the three-week trial period, we observed if, when, how and by whom the installation was used and appropriated. Unstructured observations were supplemented with systematic video recordings for DataFromSky on selected days. We also interviewed 28 people (more than half were local) who sat in the installation or walked past and evaluated it with the involved urban planners from City of Copenhagen. We asked them to rate and reflect upon how it impacted their walking experience and the street life more generally.

GENERAL PERCEPTION

While our observations and data show that the installation on Istedgade attracted relatively few users, the interviewees rated it well. Indeed, although many had minor reservations, many believed it contributed positively to the street, and some wanted it to be permanent.

The interviewees generally agree that there is a need for green, inclusive and non-commercialised public places. Many describe it as an oasis, believing it is cosy and brings a friendly atmosphere to the street. As three of them say:

I think it is amazing! It looks like a city oasis (Personal communication, two women[1]).

It is great! I am sad that it is only an experiment. Here, you can meet people, relax and enjoy the sun and the fresh air. It is charming. It is a small oasis with plants. It is good to look at plants, and they are beautiful. It functions for people, children and dogs who love sniffing. Moms can also sit and breastfeed here in the summer without buying anything. It is a shame that they will tear it down … It is good to look at flowers. They are beautiful (Personal communication, older woman[2]).

It looks awesome. It is great with something green and a place to sit down [...] I have sat here in the afternoon and people are using it; it is nice with some street life (Personal communication, man, 30s[3]).

The chapter discusses six themes derived from the data, starting with how the installation impacted on walking practices.

IMPROVING THE WALKING EXPERIENCE

Interesting answers are given when the interviewees are asked if the installation improves their walking experience. First, several interviewees say that the installation improves the visual and atmospheric appeal of walking on the nice broad pavement of Istedgade. This ties into the idea that walking is not merely functional but also social, aesthetic, and atmospheric. Their slow speed makes walkers attentive to their immediate local surroundings. The installation fits into, and supports, the street's liveability:

> It has the same effect as the cafes. The fact that people are sitting and staying in the street. It has created a different atmosphere after they made Istedgade wider with more street life, and the fact that people sit down is nice. … It has only been here briefly, but the cafe expansion to the pavements makes you want to move around because people are in the street. … the fact that people sit down creates a calmer street environment (Personal information[4]).

During and after the test period. Produced by RUC.

The installation. Produced by RUC.

Walking by in the morning from 7 am to 12 am, 15.09.2021. DataFromSky. Produced by COWI.

Second, others praise, as discussed below, the installation for 'greening' an otherwise grey street. This was also noted by the urban planners from the City of Copenhagen. This confirms the idea that trees (see Chapter 1), flowers and wood can create a better walking experience. As one older woman says:

> It makes it cosier [walking], no doubt about it, and there has been an effort put in since the grass has been laid, it is made in some very, very nice wood, with some lovely flowers, and there are the gates. So, nothing is missing, but it is not a place I would sit down with my coffee because of the traffic (Personal communication, older woman with daughter[5]).

Third, it is clear from the interviews that, as expected, the installation alone is not radical or substantive enough to affect walking flows. Instead, it has relational effects; it works because it fits in, and supports, the existing urban furniture and green installations already on the street. This showcases the importance of place-specific designs that enhance and work together with existing infrastructures.

Last, the interviews reveal that despite its size, the installation is 'in place' because of the broad pavement, whereas it would be too big for an average-sized pavement. Extensive pavements allow outdoor seating and green experiments as much as smooth pedestrian flows.

Walking by. Produced by RUC.

CREATING PUBLIC SEATING

Sitting. Produced by RUC.

The installation also works as a place for sitting. While not heavily used, it is nonetheless used (and competed well with the established outdoor seating areas on the opposite, sunnier side

of the street), especially for short stays. On some occasions, the installation attracts up to seven people simultaneously. For instance, on a sunny Friday afternoon between 3 pm and 5.30 pm, when there was a brief period of sun in this location, 22 people sat in it, eating, smoking, making phone calls, chatting with friends, and caring for their child. There were also many traces of use. Our morning inspections often reveal – especially on weekends – traces of night use: cigarette butts, bottles and kebab papers.

The interviewees appreciate the installations' inclusiveness. First, while resembling the commercial outdoor areas, the interviewees value its public nature:

> … there is obviously a need for places and spaces where people can sit down and meet and where it is not connected to a cafe or something. Places where you can bring your homemade lunch or a board game (Personal communication, middle-aged man with woman[6]).

> It is nice with places like this one, where you can just sit for five or seven minutes without having to buy a coffee, just hanging out. I have seen mothers with prams sitting here while talking on the phone … (Personal communication, man, 50s[7]).

The literature stresses that walking creates desirable social connections and inclusion (Chapter 1). The installation can be seen as an anchor allowing and animating diversity and sociability. The second quote also illustrates that it is suitable for short breaks and chance meetings. One older man says: 'For an old man like me, it is great when you walk and that you can sit down and rest with a cup of coffee and have a little chat with the person next to you' (Personal communication, 60s[8]). While short visits dominate, the installation also hosts extended gatherings, especially amongst teenagers who have few places to congregate. Lastly, the local interviewees do not contest this – sometimes noisy – social life. Whereas the commercial outdoor seating areas are removed after closing hours, our "permanent" installation can quickly become a noisy hotspot at night.

AFFORDANCES AND DESIGN

During and after the test period. Produced by RUC.

The interviewees appreciate the design's many affordances, with only a few people finding it a little out of place. Compared to the traditional Copenhagen bench (see Chapter 4.1), the installation enables many ways of using it; people can sit across from each other, in groups, lie down or sit on the grass:

> I actually really like that there is no backrest because then you decide which way you want to turn, whether it should be towards the street or the other. After all, sometimes on other benches, you are forced to turn one way; and then you sit next to each other. Here you can look at each other (Personal communication, man and woman[9]).

Interviewees also explain that the space between the benches was small enough to create a social atmosphere and big enough to allow 'personal distance' and not disturb others (for instance, when smoking).

Aesthetically, many – including the urban planners in the City of Copenhagen – compliment the organic integration of the existing boulders into the benches, rather than just laying randomly on the pavement. As one user says:

> Those boulders have been put up in all sorts of places and they look a bit out of place, so now, in a way, they are part of something that makes them soft instead … the benches camouflage something that looks massive (Personal communication, woman, 40s[10]).

The artificial grass divides people. For some, this material made the installation cosy, while others find it cheap, fake, and 'out of place'. They suggest that paint would have been a better material in an urban context:

> I think maybe I would ditch the artificial grass. It is more charming without the grass because it just feels a little fake […] The artificial grass makes it stick out. And although it is, of course, a good idea not to notice it, you see it anyway. I think, I would make it blend into its surroundings more. If you want it to stick out, you could paint it instead … (Personal communication, man and woman, 30s[11]).

> Creating greener areas has recently been a lot in focus, and then we were a bit like: 'Okay, they fix it with artificial grass', but it is still very cosy … It would be awesome if there was real grass because it is more natural, it is just more awesome (Personal communication, woman, 50s[12]).

The artificial grass often starts conversations about urban nature, with some feeling provoked about it, for assimilating nature, and yet being fake, giving an artificial feeling of a green space. Others warn against grass because it quickly wears off in a public place with many users.
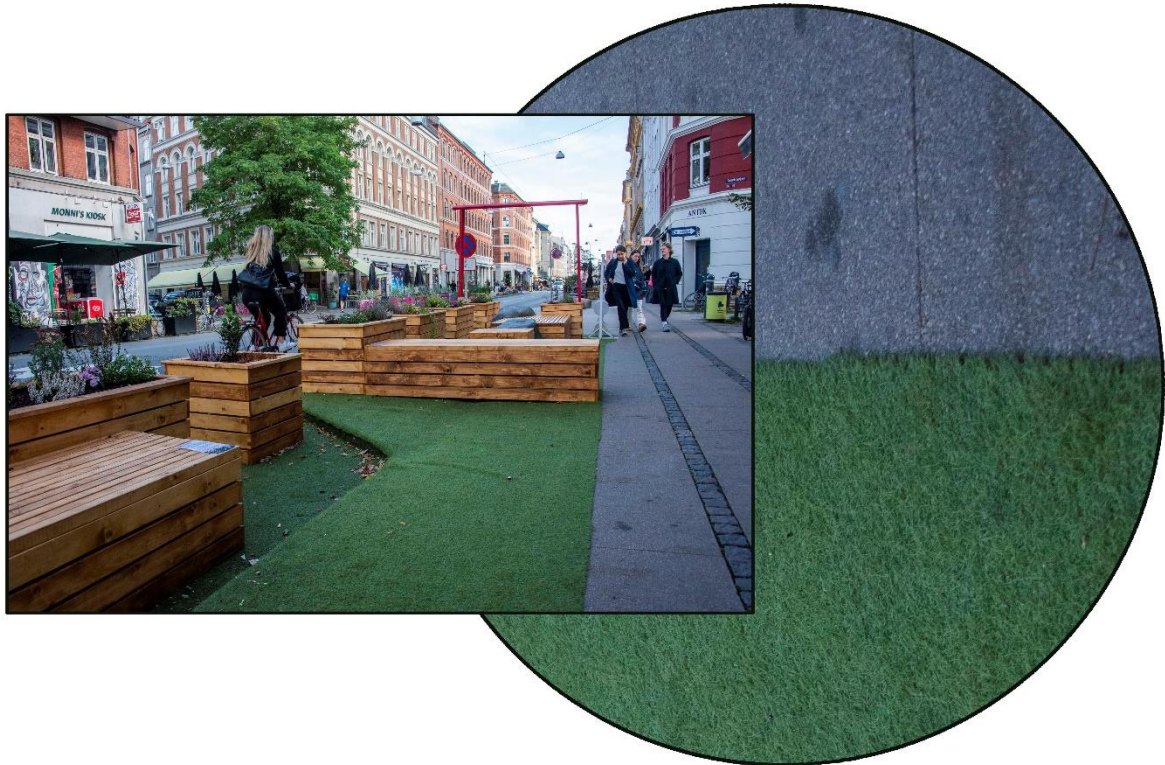
The artificial grass. Produced by RUC.

The interviewees provide insightful suggestions on how the prototype can be improved and where it can be placed in future. As discussed in the following vignette, the interviewees generally want more green nature. They largely commend the size of the installation, suggesting that possible future versions should be roughly the same size and placed in a few select spots on Istedgade. Several suggest paint as an alternative to grass to mark out the design and to create a contrast to the grey pavement. The design needs to be functional, robust, and made of natural materials. Others propose adding height and different levels, backrests to accommodate older people and play elements for children.

Finally, it became clear that the aesthetic needed to match the surroundings. Many mention that the street is already quite gaudy, which makes it fit in, whereas it would look 'out of place' in other neighbourhoods. Standing out is a balancing act between not being too minimal or too heavy-handed.
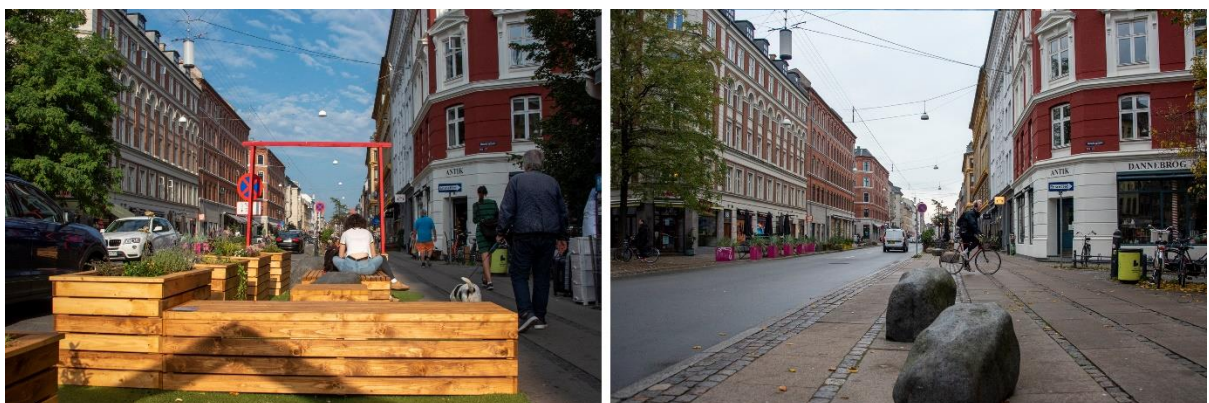
During and after the test period. Produced by RUC.

FROM A NON-PLACE TO AN OASIS: THE NATURAL ELEMENTS

During and after the test period. Produced by RUC.

Natural elements. Produced by RUC.

Greening and bringing nature into the city are a trend in urban design, and it is an essential theme in the installation's perception. Interviewees praise it for greening the street (although it could have done more). Many associate the natural elements with nature: 'I think that the elements used reflect nature, the rocks, the wood and the different flowers' (Personal communication[13]).

Many compliment the natural elements, finding them calming and creating a quiet spot for relaxation next to the heavy traffic: 'It gives some sort of calmness that there are plants. It is like you are in nature or a park, even if you are not' (Personal information, woman, 30s[14]). As also shown in other studies (Speck, 2011), the interviewees find green elements good for their mental health, being 'connected' to nature and feeling safe on a busy street. As two explain:

You feel more connected in some way, and it is nice to look at something green; it does something to the atmosphere (Personal communication, man and woman[15]).

It gives a break, I think. It is cosy, nice with the flowers and such, and the greener, the better [...] I think it provides 'lungs to the city' as it is a bustling street with cars and bicycles (Personal communication, man, 50s[16]).

For some interviewees, especially visitors from the suburbs, the installation resembles a nice garden:

It is the colour and the materials. There are flowers and nature. You feel a bit like walking into a small garden in the city … a free space; suddenly, you step from there and into nature in some way (Personal communication, two women[17]).
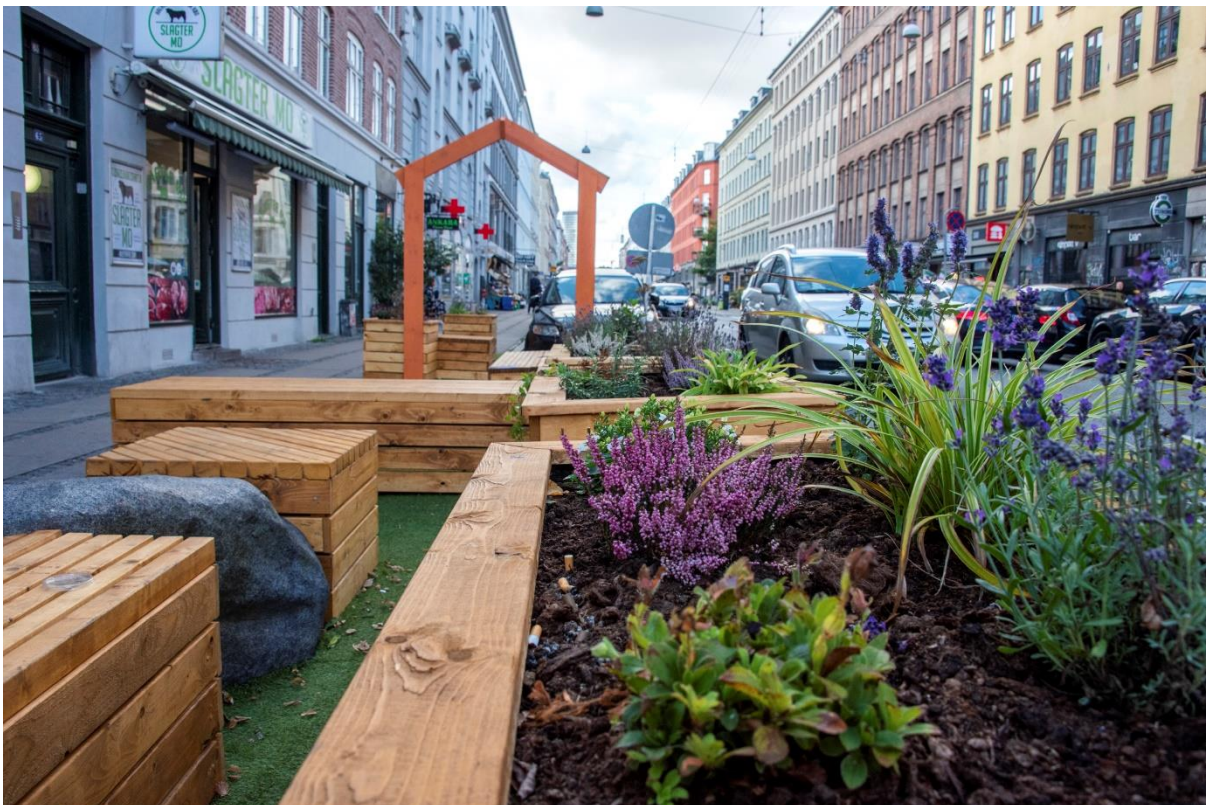
The garden qualities. Produced by RUC.

However, only some appreciate the small flower aesthetics and the garden associations. Others find it too suburban, calling instead for trees or big bushes, to allow nature to speak volumes: 'It is because it becomes a little too houseplant-like, so it fits on the street and in the inner city. I think it should be greener and have more power …' (Personal communication, man, 50s[18]). In contrast, trees and bushes would also provide some sense of nature throughout the year, even when the leaves fall off. Some suggest that evergreen plants effectively sustain the sense of nature across the seasons. Moreover, such substantial greenery would be a better physical and mental border than small flowers. Others propose planting wildflowers:

I think it could be nice if it were wilder plants, as in the old days when we had verges at the side of the road. I think there is a lot of 'wild on purpose' where it is poppy and cornflowers and other plants that grow naturally in nature, to get more of that into the city wherever possible would be nice. When doing something like this, one could design it to help get more butterflies, bees and insects into the city (Personal communication, woman, 45-50s[19]).

The interviewees generally desired more greenery in the street, especially 'wild' or 'natural' plants, to unite the city and nature more and tame the fast-paced city.

CALMING CAR TRAFFIC

Cars were again a contested theme (Chapter 4.1) in our observations and interviews; our installation was partly designed to prompt such reactions. First, the original design occupies two parking spaces. Research (Chapter 5) shows that car-parking-reducing experiments meet resistance, and the part of the installation in the parking zone is violently removed one night, presumably to reclaim lost parking space. To avoid further negative repercussions, we adjusted the design to take up one parking space only, and no further vandalism occurred over the following three weeks.

Vandalism. Produced by RUC.

The inclusion of the two parking spaces divides the interviewees. Those without cars generally favour it, believing that cars – both parked and moving – take up too much space on Istedgade and make the street noisy and dangerous for pedestrians and especially cyclists:

It would be great if no cars were on the street because it just looks ugly. If I could dream, it would all be car free. I have also cycled a lot on Istedgade, and I think there are lousy cycling conditions … It is an easy street to make car-free because of

the many cafes, and it has become so cosy (Personal communication, woman, 20s[20]).

It is very nice with fewer parking spaces on Istedgade; there are too many cars on Istedgade compared to the other streets in the area. So, I think there is too much traffic (Personal communication, man, 35s[21]).

However, people who claim that they are dependent on having a car, are critical about removing parking spaces because there are so few of them:

As a driver, it is a little frustrating. I remember there was a project in another street a couple of years ago where they also included a large parking area; it does not make the day easier on your way home with the kids and such. But that is the direction it goes (Personal communication, woman, 40s[22]).


Cars next to the installation, and their speed in the afternoon from 2 pm to 7 pm, 15.09.2021. DataFromSky. Produced by COWI.

However, most interviewees are not radically pro-car or anti-car. For instance, those without cars accepted cars on Istedgade; only a few suggest turning it into a car-free street. People ask for better conditions for pedestrians and cyclists, not necessarily banning cars. Car drivers are also pedestrians and cyclists, and they acknowledge soft road users' rights to the street and protection. Our installation fits in as it contributes to such 'incremental transformations'.

Some interviewees are of the opinion that the installation – as with many of the outdoor serving areas – is too close to the noisy and dangerous traffic to make 'stationary activities' attractive and pleasurable: 'Generally, it is not super nice to sit out on Istedgade. There is too much noise, and especially when those big cars or motorcycles accelerate, it is not cosy' (Personal communication, man, 45-50s[23]). However, many do not mind sitting close to whizzing cars, believing that plant boxes and outdoor serving act as a buffer to the traffic.

Moreover, our data from DataFromSky suggests that cars now drive a little slower than the year previously when there were no installations. While the difference between the two years is minimal, cars might lower their speed when driving close to an installation where people are seated.
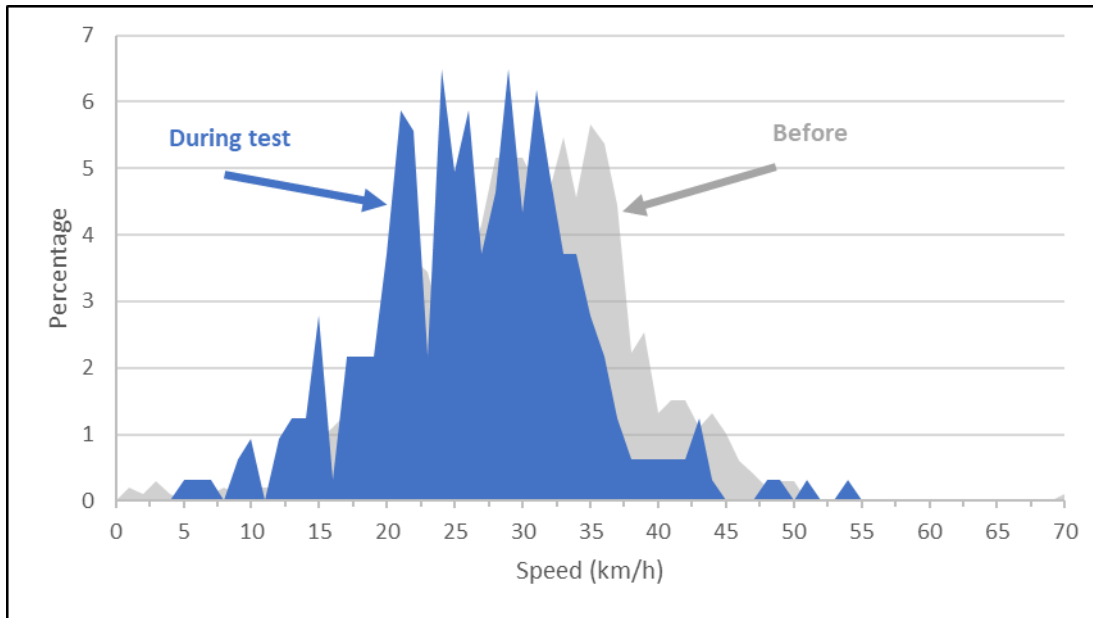
The speed of cars approaching the installation before and during the test period. Produced by COWI.

MAINTENANCE IS A DEAL BREAKER

The interviewees value the installation's new, shiny, clean appearance. Unprobed, many state that wear and tear cause dilapidation; they fear that its appearance will not last long on this lively street unless it is easy to clean, well-maintained and solid. Interviewees believe that it could quickly look trashy, like the raised flower beds on the opposite side of the street. Some interviewees refer to the tatty and mainly empty raised flower beds across the street as an example of how a lack of maintenance lets down an otherwise lovely design.

Unkept raised flower beds. Produced by RUC.

Although there is one a few meters away, a trash bin should have been integrated into the installation to improve the cleanliness and overall impression. Indeed, it is common on the weekends to find an installation full of food wrappers, napkins, spilt food on the grass, and greasy benches. Istedgade's nightlife with its bars, kebabs and pizza shops, generates much litter – also outside the trash bins. So yes, a trash bin would have helped but probably not solved the problem. The artificial grass is difficult to clean and quickly has spots of ingrained dirt and cigarette burns, as predicted by some interviewees. This scenario was predicted: 'It is new and looks neat, but I fear it will become gross over time. I think it is a place that can be used for small parties and stuff like that, and you sit here and hang out' (Personal communication, woman, 30s). The need for extra maintenance also reflects that it is common and acceptable – especially for young people – to drink in public, with cheap beers sold in kiosks at night.

Evidence of social gathering and eating 'midnight snacks' during the night. Produced by RUC.

Lastly, maintenance includes the plants, with greenery requiring watering and some general TLC. Some plants start to wither after a few weeks. Users suggest using plants that require low maintenance in future projects.

To sum up, maintenance is crucial. No matter how great the design is in the first place, if ill-maintained, few will use it and appreciate it. It will indeed become a different and less desirable object. Walking by an installation that is dirty and full of trash also gives the impression that no one cares about the city. As one interviewee says: 'maintenance is crucial because often you see something and think 'wow, that is new and awesome', and then it only functions for 30 seconds' (Personal communication, two women, 30-50s[24]). Another person states that 'you need to think about how the street is used, also at night. There are broken glasses, beer bottles and people walking all over it and stuff like that. It is not nice to sit in a place that is small and dirty, but if you think you can maintain it, then I think it could be really nice … otherwise, it almost gives the opposite affect, aversion, because it just looks ruined (Personal communication, woman, 40s[25]).

Withering flowers. Produced by RUC.

SUMMING UP - WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED

The reception of this installation demonstrates that relatively simple designs may impact if they fit into the local context and enhance already existing urban qualities. The relatively positive reception of the installation by interviewees is partly down to the fact that it was new and fitted in, and yet added something in terms of public seating and sociality, as well as visual stimulation for pedestrians. Many are willing to sit very close to the traffic, and installations are buffers that filter out some perceived noise and discomfort of cars. If the trial had been extended, it would probably have attracted more regular users and become a hang-out place, providing it was maintained and cleaned daily. A new design can quickly lose its charm if left to its own devices (see Graham and Marvin, 2007). Lastly, benches are not only appreciated for their affordances for sitting but also in passing as aesthetic objects. Benches have the potential to please the eye and create a friendly atmosphere.

[1] Interview 16

[2] Interview 22

[3] Interview 10

[4] Interview 17

[5] Interview 25

[6] Interview 26

[7] Interview 8

[8] Interview 5

[9] Interview 23

[10] Interview 17

[11] Interview 1

[12] Interview 24

[13] Interview 5

[14] interview 2

[15] interview 23

[16] Interview 11

[17] Interview 20

[18] Interview 12

[19] Interview 9

[20] Interview 6

[21] Interview 10

[22] Interview 17

[23] Interview 19

[24] Interview 4

[25] Interview 17