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Creators	Gamman, Lorraine and Willcocks, Marcus

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The Anti-bag theft & ASB-resistant “Camden Bench”.

Where it is located? On a new square at the end of Great Queen Street, opposite Freemason’s Hall, Covent Garden, London, WC2B 5AZ.

Who designed it? The bench was designed by Factory Furniture. Its design was given very strong direction and guidance by Tim Long and Jane Debono, who commissioned it for the London Borough of Camden and who based their detailed (and demanding) design brief on a list of problems Camden had experienced in terms of maintaining street furniture. They also brought in a team of stakeholders who advised on the 15 sketch designs, and suggested adjustments. These “experts” formed the Bench Design Group that included external consultants who advised Camden and Factory Furniture on how to improve designs, including Prof. Lorraine Gamman, Adam Thorpe and Marcus Willcocks from the Design Against Crime Research Centre (DACRC)¹ at the University of the Arts London, plus Adam Lindsay, Crime Prevention Design Advisor from the Metropolitan Police Camden plus members of Camden staff such as Camden Transport Planning, Sites Team, Highways Engineers, Community Safety, Street Policy, Conservation and Urban Design, Street Cleansing, Operations Manager - recycling centre, and the DDA officer.

What are unique characteristics / USP’s of the bench? The Camden bench is designed to improve activity support in public space and resist criminal or anti-social behaviour (ASB) through the following features:

- Anti-graffiti – coating.
- Anti-postering – has few flat surfaces, except the ends which have the Camden logo cast into the bench so it is easier to pull off any posters.
- Difficult to skateboard on – as the edge of the bench fluctuates in height.
- Anti-rough sleeping – bench has a peaked top that cannot be slept on.
- Deters drug dealing as no cracks or slots in the bench to hide materials.
- Deters bag theft as slot along each side allows people to position bags behind their legs.
- Easy to slightly move the bench, removing it from problem areas, as it sits on the footway and is not bolted to a foundation.
- Reduces littering as it has no flat surfaces, slots or water traps to leave litter on and so it is designed for water and litter to flow off it.
- A stand alone bin has also been designed in the range, which can be placed next to the bench. However, an improved bench is being delivered imminently, with bins inserted into the ends of the bench.
- The bins help reduce littering as they cannot be tipped over and contain a cigarette bin. There are a range of benches, so the right solution can be provided for precise locations, targeting specific problems.

What prototyping has occurred to date? After the first iteration was located on site, the above Bench Design Group of experts was consulted, in addition to Keep Britain Tidy, and some interviews were conducted with the public. Further refinements to the design briefing and consequent solution were recommended and implemented, and the revised benches were installed at the site. The anti-terrorism version was developed later by Factory Furniture and CPNI officers. This heavier bench includes a foundation and has passed the first test, to resist a given impact under specified conditions.

Achievements. Observational study has shown that people have taken to using the bench quickly. In fact, Camden are pleased to find people sitting on it in ways research did not predict. People seem more comfortable sharing it compared to a park bench, possibly due to the different heights and varied seating faces. A further positive accolade is that this first installation is one block from a homeless hostel, on the edge of the 24hour economy in Covent Garden, and is surrounded by high-value flats, yet no complaints have been received to date, unlike many other areas of Covent Garden, Bloomsbury, and Camden Town, which have caused the council to remove virtually all the street benches. After the initial pilots in Greet Queen Street, additional slimmer single sided benches have since been installed in various locations in Covent Garden including High Holborn and Chancery Lane.

Tim Long from Camden comments “I believe the Camden bench sets new standards: in reducing anti-social behaviour, simplifying street cleaning, and creating a much more inclusive design (as the benches address about 28 different design issues). The new counter-terrorism version contains many of the features that reduce ASB and make it easier to clean and more inclusive, and so we are much more likely to use this version in high profile locations”(October 2010). Keep Britain Tidy have subsequently documented the design process of the bench and bin as best practice².

Disadvantages. The aesthetic value of the bench is yet to be validated among the design community, even if public uptake indicates user support over its function. New design updates and evolution, based on the original brief, however, will hopefully provide further opportunities for even more creative and beautiful approaches to final designs.

Design Against Crime Research Centre, April 2011

¹ DACRC is funded 2010-11 by Camden to create a Diagnosis Tool for assessment of further ASB-resistant seating opportunities in the borough.

² See pp.28-31 of http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/ImgLibrary/Evidence%20Paper%20Two_1728.pdf