

## The *Sitoot* Bench: For Your Own Special Place

by Iain Irving

The simple act of sitting down in a public space, particularly in a city, has become a bit of a problem. There might be park benches, but they can already be occupied, cold and uncomfortable; surrounded by discarded food and fag butts, or just in the wrong place. You could of course sit on a wall or just on the grass but this too can be awkward, if not painful, so what to do?

B.Y.O.B., bring your own bench, of course.

The Beautiful Materials Design studio in Glasgow, initiated and run by artist and designer Nicola Atkinson, has designed and produced a solution. A bench which you can take with you, to your favourite spot: to sitoot.

The *Sitoot* bench is a wooden double seat-sized portable product, to use in our private spaces or to take with us to our favourite places nearby. It allows us the freedom to decide on where and when we sit out.

The bench is a development on an earlier project: a single-seat stool called the BM stool, produced by the studio. This smaller stool is a familiar looking object, based on a personally remembered domestic stool. This stool design was based on the traditional *Creepie* stool which has its background in low-level practical activities for use when milking cows and for other domestic and industrial activities. Usually made from scraps of wood which are recycled to make a useful stool. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century versions of such a stool are in the National Museums Scotland collection.<sup>1</sup> It is one of those everyday objects which are always practical, long lasting, and designed and made by everyone through necessity.

The BM stool along with other small pieces of furniture and textiles were designed and produced by Beautiful Materials in 2018. This furniture and product design range being the launch and first project for the studio.

The Beautiful Materials project is a current creative vehicle of Nicola Atkinson and is based in Glasgow. Although the studio and project has been in existence for only 4 years, Nicola has a vast track record in initiating, developing and instigating creative socially-engaged projects, events and artwork throughout the past 40 years of practice.<sup>2</sup>

Scottish-town art and design enhancement schemes in various locations such as Cowdenbeath, Aberdeen, and Dunfermline have enabled Nicola to not only collaborate with the local communities and supporting agents, but to enrich and improve these social and living environments. These projects, along with personally inspired art and design outputs, have positioned Nicola's distinctive aesthetic palette, problem-solving and negotiations skills out into the general public environment and communities. In the various projects,

there has been a conscious intention to employ a creative response to address social issues, and it has produced valid and successful solutions.

The *Sitoot* bench has its concept idea in social user-focused design. It enables the user to engage in activities which start with the product, but it is what you do with it which gives the user-experience. The portability and easy-assembly of the 7kg / 5-part bench is key to helping the user achieve a social experience, in taking time to sit somewhere that the user chooses, creating a focus with the bench but also an observational position for the user. The bench is a critical catalyst to sit, feel comfortable, contemplate life or just read a book. But knowing that this choice of position can change when you feel a need to.

As concepts go, the portable seat has a colourful cultural heritage and usage (think of the deck chair and the ubiquitous plastic café chair). The contemporary version in the *Sitoot* not only requires it to be functional, and aesthetically interesting but also environmentally aware by being consciously produced within the zero-waste requirements. The intension by the designer is also to encourage the user to customize their bench, aesthetically, like skateboards, but also in the practicality of use, by perhaps adding wheels, or adapting for comfort. The bench then becomes an animated device through its use, and is not just a static object.

The *Sitoot* product has been designed by Beautiful Materials Design studio and developed for manufacture with Alan Hawthorne of *Podbox*<sup>3</sup>, a Kilsyth-based laser cutting and CNC company. With the benefit of current computer-aided processes, the product can be resourcefully and perfectly formed, but not void of sanding and finishing. The intension is also to make the *Sitoot* bench's digital-design files available for worldwide manufacture.

Through the critical stages of design development and testing, it was determined that an 18mm sheet of spruce plywood can produce 3 benches, leaving less than 6% wastage in off-cuts. Its materials choice has been determined for its aesthetic, and is strongly influenced by the current market awareness. The 'S' shaped carrying-handle and triangle-shaped leg space off-cuts are included with the bench for the *Sitoot* owner to adapt for their own use. Nothing is going to waste.

Since the production of the *Sitoot* bench, which started in May 2022, it has been out and about: appearing in Ayr, in the audience for a Neu! Reekie music and reading event in Edinburgh, at the East Coffee Company, Glasgow, at the Zero Waste Market, Glasgow, on the streets of Dennistoun, Glasgow, to the Dunmore Pineapple in Falkirk, taken for a view at the top of Arthur's Seat, and purchased for private home areas.<sup>4</sup>

The *Sitoot* bench is an exercise in blending aesthetic, functionality, environmental concerns and social-engagement in the community. A big ask for a simple bench but with knowledge and experience by the designer through previous creative projects, the *Sitoot* achieves the intention of choice in the products that we use and want to own.

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<sup>1</sup> National Museums Scotland. *Explore Our Collections*. <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/creepie-stool/442424>

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<sup>2</sup> Atkinson N. *Portable Retrospective*. Glasgow: Beautiful Materials Design Studio; 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Podbox. <http://www.podbox.co.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> Instagram. *Beautiful Materials*. <https://www.instagram.com/beautiful.material/>

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