

A public bench does not ask what you bought

Who may stay in the city—and what justifies asking someone to leave?

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One person sets a shopping bag beside a bench, checks the time and waits for a friend. A short distance away, another sits next to a worn suitcase, showing no sign of going anywhere. If each occupies one place, blocks no route and troubles no one, why should a city treat them differently?

The scene is imagined, not reported. It nevertheless raises a real question: who gets to define the “proper” use of public space? In the heat, with aching legs, or simply needing a moment to sit, a person does not necessarily have an appointment or a receipt. Yet saying that public space belongs to everyone does not mean anyone can occupy any part of it, for any length of time, without regard for others.

A public bench must meet two demands at once: it must be accessible enough for people who need rest, and governed well enough that no one can monopolise a shared resource. The policy question is how those rules are drawn. Are they aimed at obstructive behaviour, or at removing people who do not fit a manager’s preferred image of the place?

A seat can make an entire journey possible

On a map, the distance from a bus stop to a clinic is a line. For someone with painful joints, an older person, someone recovering from illness, or anyone walking in intense heat, that line may need to be broken into manageable stages. A place to rest is not a decorative extra; it can determine whether a journey is possible.

The World Health Organization’s
Global Age-friendly Cities

guidance identifies sufficient, well-situated, safe and maintained public benches as characteristics of an age-friendly city, alongside accessible pavements, toilets and buildings [1]. In Viet Nam, the 2010 Law on Persons with Disabilities establishes principles of accessibility and participation, while QCVN 10:2024/BXD sets technical accessibility requirements for

buildings and works within its scope [2][3]. Neither instrument creates an unconditional legal entitlement to remain on every bench indefinitely. Together, however, they support treating rest as part of access to the built environment, rather than merely a question of appearance.

Counting benches is therefore a weak measure of provision. A seat beyond a flight of steps serves little purpose for someone unable to climb them. A bench in unshaded midday heat may be empty precisely when rest is most needed. A newly installed seat cannot repair a route obstructed by parked vehicles or merchandise. A better question is:
along this journey, who can actually stop, recover and continue?

A café sells seating. A city should preserve another option.

The familiar objection is that someone who needs to sit can buy a drink. But a café sells a service. Its owner pays rent, wages and operating costs; a private business cannot reasonably be required to run an unlimited free waiting room. Where a person blocks an entrance, disrupts service or occupies tables needed by customers, intervention may be justified.

The concern is not commercial seating itself. It is a city in which **purchasing power becomes the default condition of rest**. Inside a café, a receipt explains why a customer belongs at a table. Outside, a person with bulky belongings or nowhere apparent to go may face suspicion even without any identifiable obstruction. This is a *risk created by vague rules and discretionary enforcement*, not evidence that every manager or security guard discriminates.

Public space need not compete with a café on unlimited comfort. It should simply ensure that basic rest is not entirely conditional on buying something. Private sponsorship may pay for benches and earn a modest acknowledgement. It should not silently purchase authority to decide who may use publicly managed space. Access rules and accountability should remain public.

Safety is not a pretext; inclusion is not immunity from rules

An argument for access is incomplete if it dismisses the fears of a person crossing a dark park or negotiating a pavement blocked by goods. A bench serves a community only where others can still pass, sit and feel reasonably secure. UN-Habitat's public-space guidance considers safety, access, inclusion and ongoing management together rather than treating construction as the end of the task [4][5].

Threats, harassment and obstruction should therefore be addressed. But appearance, luggage or the absence of a purchase should not be treated as evidence of those behaviours. Both propositions can hold simultaneously. Indeed, they need each other if the rules are to protect those already seated as well as those seeking to use the same space.

A useful rule should pass three questions. **First, what observable harm does it address?** Occupying several seats at a busy stop, blocking wheelchair access and threatening another user are describable actions. **Second, is there a less exclusionary response?** Asking someone to move a bag, share a seat or clear a path may solve the immediate problem without removing them. Better lighting or staff presence may solve other problems. **Third, who must explain—and review—the intervention?** The vaguer the rule, the easier it becomes for an officer to substitute a judgement about who looks suspicious for an account of what has actually happened.

These questions are an analytical test proposed here, not a claim about a universally applicable legal standard. They do not prevent lawful time limits, safety requirements or other context-specific restrictions. They ask that restrictions be justified by the shared use of a place, not by judgements about a user's worth.

When a bench becomes a bed

The hardest case is someone who needs to sleep outdoors. A bench is no substitute for safe housing. Other users need seats, lighting, sanitation and protection from conflict. A park authority cannot, by itself, become the housing and social-services system.

Yet making a bench difficult to lie on changes where an unhoused person appears; it does not create a bed or a support service. This does not mean every armrest is “hostile architecture”. Armrests may help people with limited strength sit down and stand up. Their functions, unintended effects and alternatives must be examined. A more careful design can provide support, accessible routes, adequate seating and proportionate rules about overnight use without pretending that furniture specifications can resolve homelessness.

Where a person must lawfully be asked to move, an appropriate referral route to support services may be more constructive than an order with no further option. That will not resolve every case. It does, however, acknowledge the limits of the instrument a city is using.

Public spending must answer difficult questions too

Even people who favour more seating can reasonably dispute where or when to spend money on it. A dangerous pavement may need repair first. A toilet or shade structure may produce more benefit than another row of benches. Budgets should account for cleaning, maintenance, replacement and usability in heat and rain. “More benches” is not a meaningful measure of success without knowing who can use them and whether they remain usable over time.

A responsible starting point is to assess journeys, not inventories of street furniture: from a bus stop to a hospital, from a market to public transport, or outside a busy civic office. Repair broken seats, clear access and provide shade where those changes will help before buying furniture where it is not needed. Publish responsibility for maintenance and a channel for complaints. UN-Habitat’s assessment, design and management frameworks support this continuing approach [4][5]. **Actual site priorities would still require local observation**, not inference from an opinion essay.

Return to the two people on the bench. If the suitcase blocks a route, its owner should move it. If a shopping bag takes a place someone needs, the shopper should make room. Threatening conduct should be addressed regardless of who commits it. But where neither person obstructs or harms anyone, the bag and the suitcase add nothing useful to the management decision.

Public space does not mean everyone may do everything. It means that limits on shared use must be explained in terms of sharing—not whether a particular person looks sufficiently deserving to stay.

References

- [1] World Health Organization (2007), *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide*, WHO release and checklist overview. <https://www.who.int/news/item/01-10-2007-new-guide-on-building-age-friendly-cities>
- [2] National Assembly of Viet Nam (2010), *Law on Persons with Disabilities*, No. 51/2010/QH12. <https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?docid=96045&pageid=27160>
- [3] Ministry of Construction of Viet Nam (2024), *Circular 06/2024/TT-BXD promulgating QCVN 10:2024/BXD*, effective 1 February 2025. <https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?classid=0&docid=210897&pageid=27160>
- [4] UN-Habitat (2023), *The Public Space Assessment, Design and Management Methodology*. <https://unhabitat.org/the-public-space-assessment-design-and-management-methodology>

[5] UN-Habitat (2024), *Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice*. <https://unhabitat.org/global-public-space-toolkit-from-global-principles-to-local-policies-and-practice>

Method note: This is a sourced opinion essay, not fieldwork, a client engagement, a legal opinion or a survey. The opening scene is constructed. The governance test is Briefwork Studio's analysis; the references are not offered as empirical proof of every normative judgement made here.