

Future of urban furniture, bus shelters in Africa

By  Craig Page-Lee

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The highly pedestrian and densely populated main cities of Europe have seen very specific formats of urban furniture evolve, from incredibly sophisticated glass, steel and aluminum bus shelters and vending kiosks to robust, but well proportioned and easy to use benches, seats and ledges, and having just returned from London and Lisbon and as with most visitors to these cities, had the need to use the various elements mentioned at different times during my visit.



Urban furniture with free Wi-Fi

Well designed and strategically placed urban furniture is not a unique or new concept in Europe, but the use of these elements on a continuous basis over a few days allowed me to appreciate these elements as a highly effective advertising medium and enabled me to experience and engage with the brands on display in a very different way.

The strategically placed and comfortable benches, set between small shrubs in open public spaces not only provides a rest place for weary pedestrians, but in many instances, a place to stop, disconnect from the hustle and bustle of the real world, while connecting to a virtual world through free Wi-Fi broadcast from nodes within these zones. Many socially conscious brands now provide free Wi-Fi as their contribution to the cities and societies they serve.

Platform to interact and engage



London bus shelter

The bus shelters are equally sophisticated, some with digital panels, scrollers, or static posters integrated into the design of the shelters. These panels create the 'ends' to the shelters and provide a perfect platform for pedestrians to not only interact with and engage in the advertising campaigns on display, but also to order products online while waiting for the bus.

In most instances, NFC tags (near field communications) and QR codes (quick response) are a standard feature, either directing you to mobisites to search and discover more about the products and services on offer, or as a platform to serve you rich content to support the brand stories or call to action to engage in social media and share your brand experience with the world. In all instances, the high number of pedestrians utilizing the public spaces and public transport systems makes this a very effective and often fun medium.



Victoria Ave, Cape Town

SA not lagging behind

South Africa is definitely not lagging behind in understanding the value of bus shelters or other transport nodes as an advertising medium, but in most instances, the design and construction of these elements is rather rudimentary and unrefined and the use of these elements varies significantly from city to city or region to region.

There are too many factors to consider as to why we do not have any street furniture elements and urban space nodes with free Wi-Fi of the kind found overseas, especially as we have a significantly large portion of our population as pedestrians using such facilities on a daily basis.

The cost of technology can be blamed, the risk of vandalism and damage is real, and the lack of electricity supply to every bus stop and kiosk is a major factor.

The fairly rudimentary and unrefined structures found along most the streets of this country have nevertheless served as an

ideal media platform for years gone by and many brands have benefited from the up close 'face time' with pedestrians and consumers over this time.

New forms of bus or 'commuter' shelters

That said, it has not stopped some media owners in South Africa from innovating and developing a medium that is suitable to South African weather conditions and user fatigue. We are now seeing new forms of bus or 'commuter' shelters emerge, primarily in Gauteng and Cape Town, but I'm sure these will make their way across the country as more and more advertisers come on board.

The city of Cape Town is benefiting from well-designed, bold coloured steel and glass bus shelters with well-presented panels for advertising messages. It's no wonder Red Bull used just about every single one in Cape Town for the launch of its Special Editions range recently - a perfect medium for the brand.

Johannesburg on the other hand, is seeing the roll-out of a more robust and less designer series of bus shelters appear, presenting even larger faces for advertisers to advertise their brands.

The key question for me is when are we going to see shelters with interactive panels that enhance the brand engagement experience for consumers, and when are we going to see urban spaces that connect the physical world with the digital world at no cost to the users?

ABOUT CRAIG PAGE-LEE

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