

# Graz





# Benches for the People

By Côme Bastin and Fleur Weinberg

Over the years, Jakomini Street has degenerated into a transit street and many of its shops and buildings now stand empty. With the help of local collectives working in the fields of architecture, radio and art, FH Joanneum has been using

design to reclaim the public space for local residents and create more social interaction. Among the various experiments that have been carried out, it's worth highlighting the free benches that have started to multiply at an unexpected rate...

On a sunny weekend in May, Jakomini Street in Graz is busier than ever. Its shops and narrow pavements are crowded with people. Many of them are going home with yellow benches in their arms. 200 of them have been produced and handed out for free, to whoever wants them, in local shops and bars. A private garden has been turned into a distribution centre and a live band adds to the festive atmosphere. A visitor may wonder what this open-bench day is all about. In fact, it's taking place for the second time and is the direct result of the Human Cities experiment in Graz, led by the University of Applied Sciences FH Joanneum.

## From transit space to public space

*"We started being interested in this area in 2014,"* says Anke Strittmatter, a German urbanist who teaches at FH Joanneum and leads the Human Cities Graz team. *"We looked at everything we could: the colours of the facades, the lighting, the history of the houses and the communities that live here."* Although it is close to the city centre, Jakomini Street and its surroundings are considered a run-down area. Some of the shops are closed and some of the buildings are empty. Moreover, the poor quality of the public space is a concern. *"The street is very narrow and there are two tram lines passing through,"* Anke Strittmatter says. *"As a result, there's nowhere to sit or stand and people just walk along as quickly as they can."*

How can this transit space be transformed into a shared space where people can meet and spend time without being forced to consume? This is the question FH Joanneum decided to explore as its Human Cities experiment. To begin with, students of Information and Exhibition Design carried out a community survey and observed the public space. They used research methods developed by Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl, such as counting, mapping and tracing. As a result, *"the students concluded that people wanted somewhere to sit and more greenery,"* says Erika Thümmel, who has a special interest in the street. As well as being a teacher of Exhibition Design at FH Joanneum and a member of the Human Cities team, she lives in Jakomini Street and has been an activist ever since she moved here nine years ago.

## Street experiment

To translate knowledge into action, an experimentation week called "Five Days in Jakomini" was held in May 2016. After a month of workshops, students were divided into three groups and asked to find ways to improve people's experience of spending time in Jakomini. Each group collaborated with a different creative partner. One of them worked with OSA (Office for Subversive Architecture) and decided to make the three-minute walk through Jakomini Street more appealing for people by pushing them along on a wheeled throne. *"People could use those three minutes in a more enjoyable way,"* Anke Strittmatter says. *"To make the project better still, the students thought of partnering with local shopkeepers to offer people a cup of tea during their trip."*

Another group of students worked with art collective Zweintopf to make people more aware of the area. *"Since there isn't much physical space, the idea was to have a sound programme created by Jakomini residents and local radio station Helsinki for local residents,"* Anke Strittmatter says. The students had to record outdoor sounds that were typical of the area. Passers-by could then listen to the live programme on transistor radios. The third group of students collaborated with InterACT, an interactive theatre group that strives for social change in cities. After the students interviewed people in the area, InterACT transformed the results into a piece of theatre which they subsequently performed in public.

## The first benches

In the meantime, FH Joanneum started a final experiment to reclaim the public space in Jakomini. *"We knew that we were permitted to put objects in front of buildings as long as they didn't stick out more than 50 centimetres,"* Erika Thümmel explains. *"That's why we thought of thin benches that would allow people to sit down for a while."* A first series of 12 benches was thus installed in Jakomini Street, mainly in recesses in the buildings. Designed with local architecture collective Brauchst, the benches are reminiscent of a traditional Austrian design prevalent in the mountains. *"When you go up to the mountains, you often find small benches in front of houses where you can have a rest or chat with the people who live there,"* Erika Thümmel says. *"It's a kind of space that's somewhere between private and public and it could help make our cities more human."*

*"The experiment was a real success,"* Erika Thümmel remembers. *"People used the benches immediately! They sat down to eat something, have a chat, make a phone call, smoke a cigarette... All of these things that never happen in Jakomini Street."* But the downside was that within three days all the benches had been stolen. The Graz team felt slightly disheartened after all the experiments. *"It was sad, because we had had lots of ideas for the area but nothing happened afterwards,"* Erika Thümmel said. *"The event had only been for one day,"* Anke Strittmatter adds, *"so we started to wonder how we could make the experiment sustainable."* Both of them tried to talk with the municipality, but in vain.

## 280,000 benches for Graz

Things eventually took a turn for the better. Reiner Edler, architect and co-founder of the Brauchst collective, decided to scale up the bench experiment. *"The feedback from local residents was really good,"* he says, *"so we wanted to keep going."* Together with another collective called Studio Magic, Brauchst managed to secure support from Doka, an Austrian construction company who promised to provide free wood for the benches which would be modelled on the version developed by FH Joanneum. The two architecture collectives then launched a project called "280,000 benches for Graz", as there are 280,000 inhabitants in the city.

The aim was to keep handing out benches until everyone in Graz owned one and made it available for use in the public space. *"It's a huge target, but we want to achieve it step by step by doing a few hundred benches a year,"* Reiner Edler says. One year after



Top: The benches weren't allowed to stick out onto the pavement too far. © DJAKOB

Bottom: The architects and carpenters from "Brauchtst" developed the 280.000 Benches For Graz project. The long-term aim is to give a bench to every resident of the city. © Team Jakomini

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Free yellow benches were handed out to residents. © DJAKOB



Certificates of ownership were given to the new owners of the benches. © Team Jakomini



The team conducted a community survey and public space observation at the start of the experiment. © Team Jakomini

## Austrian capital of design

With more than 600,000 inhabitants in its metropolitan region, Graz is the second largest city in Austria. It is famous for its UNESCO-listed historic centre, but it has more to offer than that. The city has six universities,

about 60,000 students, and a vibrant cultural scene. It became European Capital of Culture in 2003, which led to the construction of the Kunsthaus which became an architectural landmark. Since 2009, Graz Design

Month has been held every year, transforming the city into an international hub for urban design. In 2011, Graz was selected as a UNESCO City of Design. The Human Cities exhibition was held during Design Month 2018.



“The municipality has started to warm to the idea of people reclaiming the public space.”



The neighbourhood was promoted through a radio programme produced by the students that was broadcast in the streets. © Team Jakomini

# “The feedback from local residents was really good, so we wanted to keep going.”

Reiner Edler, founder of Brauchst architecture collective.

the first round of experiments, in May 2017, Brauchst organised a “bench fest” in Jakomini at which 100 benches were given to residents. To become an owner, you had to fill in a form with your details and the number of your bench. *“We realised that we had to give the benches to people who would care for them and share them with others,”* Erika Thümmel explains. *“It’s also a matter of legal responsibility, as the benches are in the public space.”*

## Challenges in the public space

One of the things that became clear in the course of the bench experiment is how challenging it is to act in the public space. FH Joanneum and collectives like Brauchst struggled to get permission to organise anything. *“Health and safety regulations are a massive problem,”* Anke Strittmatter remembers. Fortunately the team was able to use Erika Thümmel’s garden and local cafes. But what would have happened if that hadn’t been the case? *“The only way you can organise an event in the street these days is by paying a lot of money for fees and insurance,”* she says. *“This really has to change, because the public space belongs to everyone and everyone should be able to use it.”*

All the same, the work done in Jakomini has been extremely positive for the image of the neighbourhood. *“People now think of it as a creative area,”* Erika Thümmel says. Moreover, the municipality has started to warm to the idea of people reclaiming the public space. Recently, the green, socialist and conservative parties of

the district acknowledged the value of the ideas that had been developed. Members of the Human Cities Graz team are now invited to urban planning meetings. *“What we did on a local level is being used on a city level,”* Anke Strittmatter says.

In May 2018, another 200 benches were handed out. And the next few years should see similar numbers. For the Human Cities team members, the second life of the bench experiment is a form of recognition. *“The way it happened, with us researching and triggering an idea and local collectives then developing it, is a good example of how designers and citizens can innovate in the public space,”* Anke Strittmatter believes.

She hopes that some of the other projects presented during the “5 Days in Jakomini” festival in May 2016 will have a similar trajectory. And leaving aside the Human Cities project, Erika and Anke will continue to investigate the public space with their students. *“280,000 benches for Graz is proof that it’s worth doing”,* Anke Strittmatter says.



During one of the experiments, passers-by were taxied through Jakomini Street while enjoying a cup of tea. © Team Jakomini

## Applied sciences and practical design

With 4,200 students, the University of Applied Sciences FH Joanneum is the second largest university of applied sciences in Austria. It offers degree courses in specialised technical and economic disciplines, including management and information design.

The university takes a holistic approach to learning to enable graduates to deal with new problems in their professions. The Department of Information Design focuses on research topics in aesthetics, cognitive science, cultural studies, education,

engineering and rhetoric in order to build digital systems with which users can communicate, interact and learn more effectively. The department collaborates closely with a range of European and other international universities.



Students interview passers-by to collect their wishes and proposals for the neighbourhood. © Team Jakomini