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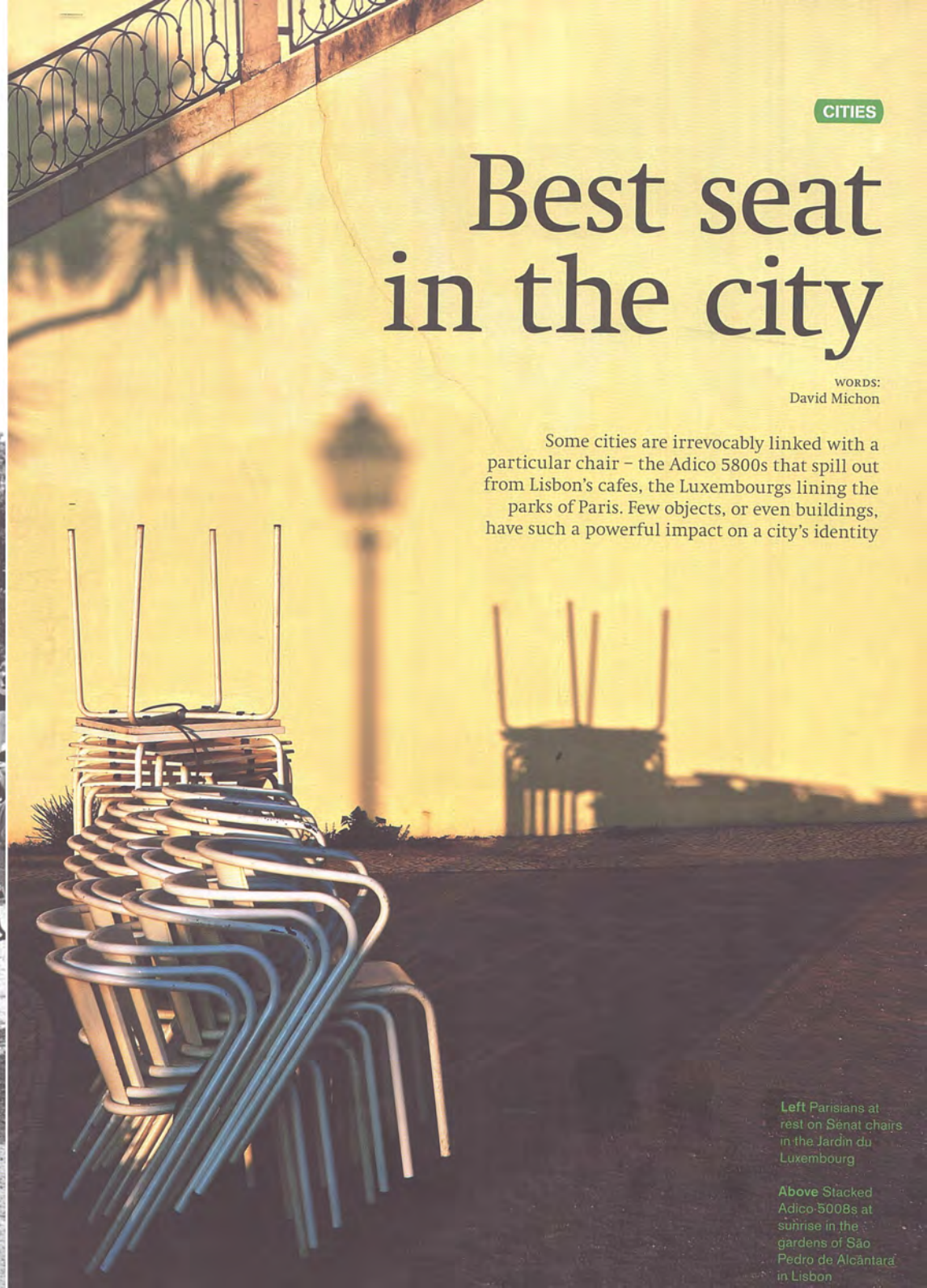
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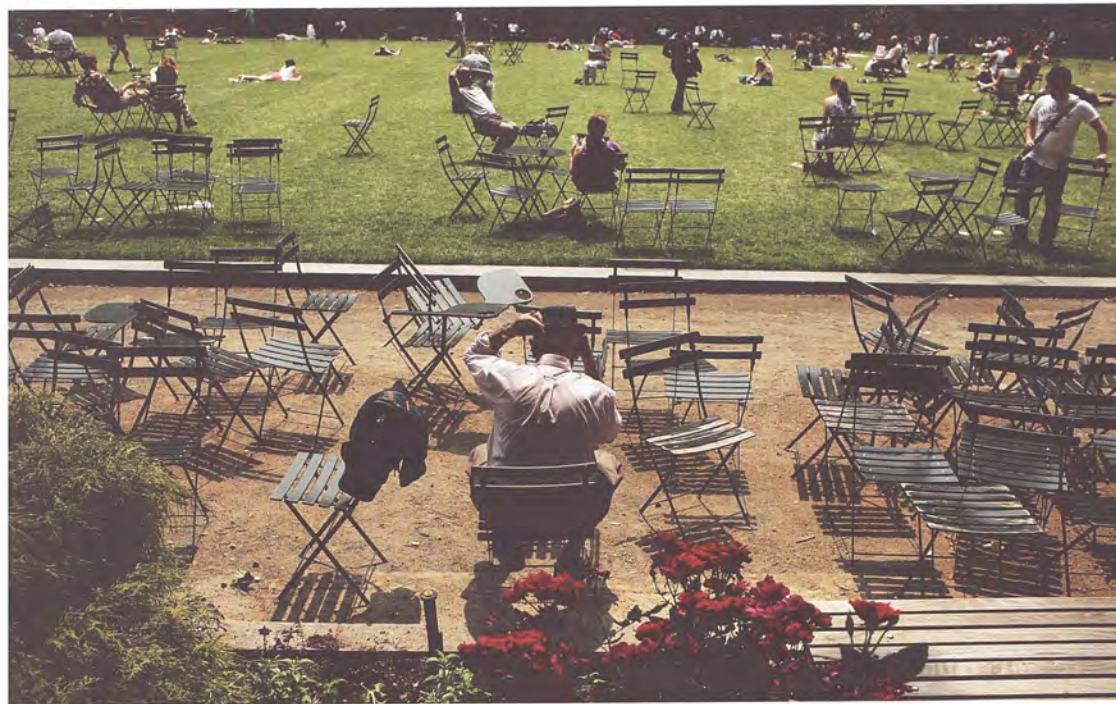
# Best seat in the city

WORDS:  
David Michon

Some cities are irrevocably linked with a particular chair – the Adico 5800s that spill out from Lisbon’s cafes, the Luxembourgs lining the parks of Paris. Few objects, or even buildings, have such a powerful impact on a city’s identity

Left Parisians at rest on Senat chairs in the Jardin du Luxembourg

Above Stacked Adico 5800s at sunrise in the gardens of São Pedro de Alcântara in Lisbon



New York's Bryant Park is an urban oasis: leafy, mature trees surround a sunny square of grass, while cafe kiosks and mobile libraries keep suited office types and weary Fifth Avenue shoppers caffeinated and entertained. It has the bare bones, and the extra fluff too, that make it both peaceful and dynamic. But the greatest influence on this space is its dozens upon dozens of chairs and tables.

Today, the park is populated by classic lacquered-steel French bistro sets – a design whose patent dates back to 1889, the year the Eiffel Tower was opened – that are now produced by outdoor furniture experts Fermob, based just outside of Lyon.

Before these chairs and tables were brought in as part of a 1992 revamp, Bryant Park was utterly underused. Those who strolled through it tended to be police officers, not coffee-clutching office workers on their lunch breaks. It's not the first example in New York of the influence of good urban furniture, but certainly one of the most powerful. So popular has the French design become that it is now used in perhaps the United States' best known intersection – one that has recently been

reclaimed, in part, by tables and chairs and pedestrian spaces: Times Square.

The Bistro set may not yet be synonymous with "New York", but because of these signature projects, it's well on its way. And it wouldn't be a first for Fermob to be the manufacturer of an iconic city chair. Closer to home, in Paris, the company defines the coiffed public gardens of the capital, in the form of the Luxembourg chair.

As early as the 18th century, park benches in Paris were being replaced with more comfortable, movable chairs – a reaction to the popularity of strolling, and thus the importance of good public spaces in which to rest and socialise. The Luxembourg chair takes its name from the Jardin du Luxembourg at the Luxembourg Palace, home to the French senate – in fact, it was originally called the Sénat chair when it first made an appearance in 1923.

In 1990, the tender to manufacture a new batch of the Sénat chair was won by Fermob. It had been only the year before that the firm, one of several historical makers of the chair, had been purchased by its current owner – the ambitious and export-minded Bernard Reybier. Reybier saw huge potential in the design, and



Top Frédéric Sofia, outside the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris

Above The Luxembourg chair, Sofia's variation on the classic Parisian Sénat chair

in 2001 tasked fellow Lyonnais Frédéric Sofia to develop a range of accessories to match it.

The brief changed, of course, after Sofia analysed the chair and decided its design had flaws (a lack of ergonomics being one of them), and so he set about reinventing it. "I always felt this chair as a Paris symbol, with a very French style. Very romantic," says Sofia, "I was fascinated by the history of this chair and its rustic but stylish design. At the time, in 2001, nobody cared about it – it was for me like a forgotten gem." He reworked its armrests and gave the seat's slats a curvature along their front edge, making it more inviting.

The result was renamed the Luxembourg chair, and quickly found a place in private gardens, restaurants, hotels, universities and even fast-food chains (Starbucks is a fan). Today, it is produced in 24 colours, something made possible by an early investment by Reybier, who developed his own painting process, allowing a quick turnover between pigments.

"The chair belongs to the history and heritage of Paris," says Sofia, adding that good, movable furniture in a city can help define the identity of the place – the Luxembourg not only belongs to Paris's history, it is also a symbol of the city now.

Fermob doesn't stand alone, however, in its mastery of outdoor furniture or the surge of one of its products to emblematic status. Just a bit further south, in Portugal, the story of Adico in many ways mirrors that of Fermob: a relatively small company, it packs a big punch in terms of its impact on the street.

Lisbon is absolutely slathered in Adico's 5008 chair. That design also comes from the 1920s, and is inspired by the Bauhaus, with its smooth, simple and utilitarian shape. Adico's CEO of 18 years, Miguel Costa Rodrigues calls it – quite rightly – "part of the architecture of the city", along with the city's distinctive yellow trams.

Rather than public parks, Adico's success is via Lisbon's private sector, as a default for cafes, restaurants and kiosks. And, as with Fermob, the 5008 is spreading its wings, making cameo appearances in Madrid, London, Palaia in Tuscany and Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

Yet the design of the 5008 belongs to the public domain in more ways than one – other companies are able to produce copies. Controversially, Aralco, one of those companies, had its model from the mid-1950s included as part of a major exhibition on Portuguese design at Lisbon's Museum of Design and Fashion (MUDE).

However, the significance of this design still stands. It has, as Rodrigues explains, "become part of the public imagination", as has the Luxembourg or the Bistro – among others around the world. Cities whose streets sing in unison with a singular design or range of street furniture seem to say something much stronger about themselves than those that don't – a strong brand, a point of view. To see a Luxembourg chair is to kick your feet up by a fountain in the Tuileries; to see Adico's 5008 is to be chomping into a fresh pastel de nata. They speak to a city's approach to public life. ■



Top A man takes a break in the shade at Bryant Park, New York City

Above Outdoor tables and umbrellas in central Lisbon, Portugal