**Street Furniture**

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Although it is reasonable to argue that street furniture is as old as the concept of a street, what is generally

termed street furniture is largely a product of industrialization and, in particular, local and national

government interests in civic pride and regulation. Early street furniture was generally street lighting, common

water supply, and mile markers, but there was little regulation of these. Often their provision was set down by

statute, but their erection depended on the response of private individuals. In terms of technological

determinants, a key element for the proliferation and aesthetic of street furniture was the invention of

processes to smelt iron using coke in the eighteenth century. This made cast iron a ubiquitous and cheap

material through the nineteenth century, particularly after Neilson’s “hot blast” system was introduced in

1828. This used raw coal and lower grade ore to smelt “black iron” which was used widely for street furniture,

railings, and gates. As a fluid material, iron lent itself to decoration and raised lettering that could be cheaply

achieved through sand-casting, a process that allowed for one-off castings to be easily effected.

As municipal authorities took increasing control of services, most significantly lighting and sewerage,

the demand for street furniture increased. By the late nineteenth century most streets in larger towns in

industrialized nations were gas-lit from decorative cast iron lamp posts; had water and sewage served by

decorative cast iron vents, pumps, and hydrants; and had human comforts in the form of benches and toilets.

An important and growing area of street furniture was signage. First in the form of street names, but as

mechanized personal transport was introduced, cycle clubs in the UK developed the first modern road signs in

the first years of the 1880s. This proliferated after the motor car began to take over the roads in the early

twentieth century and governments began to take an interest in regulating road signage, first in the UK in 1903

to 1904 with others following. The concept of an international “language” of signage, was debated from the

first road congresses of the 1890s. This would be achieved through shapes and, in particular, pictograms, first

adopted by European touring associations in 1899.

The proliferation of decorative street furniture was looked at unfavorably by modernists in the 1920s,

who pressed for a utilitarian approach based on concepts of form following function. Modernist street

furniture tended to use reinforced concrete and rolled or drawn steel, without decorative embellishment. The

opposite of this was neoclassical street furniture favored by government, a good example being Gilbert Scott’s

K2 telephone kiosk for the British Post Office (GPO). A neoclassical style was adopted by authorities across

Europe and the USA regardless of politics, it being difficult to differentiate street furniture designed by Albert

Speer for Berlin, from that of Washington or London. Twentieth-century street furniture benefited from the

rapid spread of electrical supply, which made it far easier to illuminate shelters and signage effectively. During

the interwar period robot traffic signals, an outcome of motoring and electricity, became and remain a

significant part of the streetscape.

Currently, street furniture is a mix of the highly regulated (such as signage) that changes little (most of

its design is at least two generations old), and that for recreation, comfort, and convenience, which tends to

reflect postmodern diversity.

**References and further reading**

Herring, Eleanor. 2018. *Street Furniture Design: Contesting Modernism in Post-War Britain*. London:

Bloomsbury.