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Isabelo Smart Bench – a life changing innovation say users on the street

Africa's first ever Isabelo Smart Bench, a stand alone entirely solar powered free Wi-Fi hotspot for public use complete with USB charging points, night lighting and easy seating was launched in Johannesburg this week.

A prototype of the bench has been tested in the Maboneng Precinct since May this year and has already been welcomed by users as a “life changing” urban facility but the final cement molded version installed at The Grove Square in Braamfontein this week is proving nothing less than a sensation.

Instantly recognisable by its iconic Wi-Fi graphics, the cast concrete bench features a five-meter high central column for secure housing of the solar and Wi-Fi technology, and versatile modular seating that can be configured to fit any public space.

Users simply need to sit down, connect to the “Isabelo free Wi-Fi” network with their smart phone and get connected. Users that carry their own USB charging cables can also charge up their batteries while enjoying the free service.

“This bench is brilliant. It is life changing for people like me who are less fortunate,” said 21 year old inner city resident Brian Kekana who has used the bench daily during the past three months as a place to access the internet and meet friends.

“I like the way I can charge my smart phone while I surf the net and I like that the bench runs on solar-energy because it means no more devastation during load shedding.

“The internet is so fast that I can upload heavy documents with ease. I Google information, connect with my friends through social networks, make Wi-Fi calls, and do online job applications from ‘somewhere in town on a smart bench!’

“I've applied for several part-time vacancies from the bench and financially I've

saved a lot of money. I do all this by only using my smart phone! It's all very convenient if you ask me," said Kekana.

The developers and designers of the Isabelo Smart Bench are as excited about the final product as its users.

"We are clocking an average of 50 users an hour logging on to the Wi-Fi and the numbers increase every day," said Louise Meek, who came up with the idea of the free Wi-Fi enabled bench less than a year ago while starting studies for a Masters Degree in Urban Infrastructure Design and Management.

Meek who comes from a career in marketing in Johannesburg says she was initially trying to find a way to develop a digital methodology for identifying the needs and desires of urban consumers in order to facilitate better planning and development of cities, and in particular create vibrant inclusive public spaces.

"I believe that we can use Isabelo as a placemaking tool to connect the public with decision makers by using Wi-Fi technology. We supply Isabelo and the public can use this to get access to information, access to the online job market and access to educational content. But it can also provide the public with a platform to express an opinion and have a voice."

Meek was one of eight finalists to receive funding from The Green City Startup in March this year. Within two months a prototype of the innovative, environmentally friendly Isabelo Smart Bench was being tested on the streets of Maboneng Precinct with immediate success.

"The competition was looking for revolutionary ideas that could change the social and environmental fabric of Johannesburg. The prize money provided enough seed capital for us to start prototyping the bench."

"We have two clear objectives for the bench. The first is about providing people in the city with public access to fast, free Wi-Fi connectivity and in so doing, create vibrant public spaces. The second is about how we can commercialise free Wi-Fi in a sustainable way, so that our business can add value and unearth insights on how people in location specific areas feel on certain issues. We do this by running digital market research off the Wi-Fi hotspot.

"This is key to our long term strategy for this product as our primary interest lies in combining the needs and desires of consumers who live in cities with how we plan and develop our cities for the future.

"So the bench becomes the platform for conducting research and starting two way conversations between city managers and city residents, brands and their consumers, and helps us to access invaluable insights into how people want their worlds to be shaped," said Meek.

Adriaan Hugo, lead Industrial Designer of the Isabelo Smart Bench and co-founder of the award winning Johannesburg design company Dokter and Misses sees the bench as a ground breaking “plug and play solution for public spaces.”

“It is a first for Africa. These different technologies have been available on our continent for some time and Isabelo brings them all together into one incredible user-friendly Smart Bench,” said Hugo.

He said it was important to come up with an iconic design so that an instantly identifiable bench could be created.

“Ultimately the form followed the function and we are happy with the result which is a soft, humanistic design with flowing lines that can stand out in a densely populated urban setting in contrast to the cold, hard urban infrastructure.

“As a 100% solar powered facility; it puts no pressure on this continent’s ever-increasing energy demands and means the bench can be put in almost any location, urban or rural, provided there is sunshine!

“Using concrete was a natural choice of material to ensure that the bench is durable and vandal proof. It gives the impression of being a permanent structure yet no foundations or infrastructure is needed to support it.”

Because urban safety is a concern the design includes a low energy LED light which bounces off the solar wing at night to create a soft pool of light around the bench.

“I believe we have successfully achieved our aim of designing a bench that encourages people to use public spaces in a more engaging way,” said Hugo.

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