

I DIG IT



**The art and science of the
chair in the parking spot**

I OWN IT

By Charlene Arsenaullt

Up and off Shrewsbury Street, two old folding chairs and a cheap, plastic green number tipped on its side stake claims to their owners' territories: parking spots on Ellsmere. At the corner of Marshall and Chilmark, a red three-decker's got a few beaters propped against the house, ready to unfold at the next storm. Around the corner, there's a light birch-colored beauty dangling from a branch, camouflaged in the trees. It'll hide there until the shoveling's done and it's called in for street duty. Across town, in Main South, chairs and a crate with a box on it form a marching line to save spaces all the way down Wyman Street.

Talk about your urban pressure. There was a time not too long ago when you'd shovel out your car but be afraid to leave it because some joker would be sitting in the space you excavated while you patrol the street looking for another spot. In those days, when most three-deckers were owner-occupied, you knew your neighbors and which cars were theirs. You knew who was pirating your spot and could deal with it.

Then came the real estate booms. Nobody could know everybody else's car and, as the Internet teaches us, anonymity breeds contempt — or at least, rudeness. You didn't take someone's spot when they knew you and you'd have to face them.

Something else had to be done to save that spot. And so a tradition began.

What makes it worse is that the city's not built for the pressure. Three-deckers were built (mostly without garages) before there were cars, or when there was, at most, one car per family. "Back in the '60s, if there was one to two cars in the whole three-decker, that was typical," says Worcester Mayor Timothy Murray, who grew up with the chair-in-the-spot tradition as it was practiced on Richmond Avenue. "Now you can have six or seven cars per three-decker because, well, everyone has one.

He adds that the proliferation of cars, particularly in three-decker neighborhoods, is one reason why the city uses a declared parking ban in snow season. And why nobody official bothers you when you leave that broken cane chair in front of the house.

JEFF LOUGHLIN



The city, the chairs, the poster

When photographers Donna Dufault, Mark Doyle and Scott Erb unveiled their first "Chairs of Worcester" poster at the stART on the Street Festival last fall, they got a lot of knowing nods and comments. "I think people relate to this poster," says Dufault, "because they spend four hours shoveling out their parking spot, then watch as they're pulling away and someone is pulling into it. The city doesn't really help you clean that side of the street, so you get really frustrated.

"I think whether you hate having to use your chair or not — and there are plenty of people who think that it's ridiculous — I think they get this poster either way."

Doyle, who owns and operates AutumnColor Digital Imaging on Webster Street, where Dufault works, first suggested the idea of the poster when she vented to him about her own predicament. On their way to lunch one day, Dufault said she couldn't take it anymore.

As they drove, Doyle started to take notice of the chairs that lined just about every street. He's out in Leominster, where there's plenty of parking, so as an onlooker, he finds this whole marker system amusing. "The green chair in the middle of the poster," says Doyle. "That's what gave me the idea. I said, 'We should do a "Doors of Dublin"-type poster. Why don't you and Scott and myself take some shots and make one?' None of the chairs are set up. They weren't even moved. At night, should you move it, a little old Italian lady is going to come and get you."

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Scott Erb (left), Donna Dufault (center) and Mark Doyle ponder their next poster project. At right is their current effort.



CHAIRS OF WORCESTER

"I shoveled it, I own it."

It offered not only a chance to capture some folk art — hey, there are some beautiful, distinct and downright hilarious chairs out there — but a way for Erb and Dufault to turn their frustration into something productive.

Following an overwhelming response to the poster, Doyle copyrighted the idea and the name — including the title of other major New England cities. The three are going to produce Worcester posters every year and are planning a shoot soon in Boston (which may not pan out now that the city is plowing away their chairs). They've sold more than 100 posters so far, without even trying. Now available at a couple of art galleries, at festivals and through their Web site (autumncolor.com/cow/), they are available on photo paper but will eventually be reproduced on poster paper.

"No, I haven't shown my neighbors yet," laughs Dufault. □

— C.A.

COVER STORY

“[Putting out a chair] is the kind of thing that in normal circumstances, you’d never think of doing,” says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television and a trustee professor of TV and popular culture at Syracuse University. “But when these big snowstorms come in, I believe an old economic theory kicks in — one that goes back to the 17th or 18th century — which is that labor equals ownership.”

Mayor Murray will second that. “I think in any urban area, there’s a certain amount of, ‘You worked for it, you earned it’ attitude; that’s a fundamental premise,” he says. “It’s one of those unwritten rules of civility that exists and should exist. I lived in a three-decker until last year. I think we had one of those bins and a sand bucket.”

As with most of us accustomed to the etiquette of the street, Murray has found that the claim staked by old furniture is generally respected. “There was a situation once, though,” he says. “My wife and I dug out some spots and a fancy sports car pulled in. I wrote a little message on it with my finger, in the snow — a one-word message. It turned out to be a friend of mine.”

Somebody’s tired black wire chair and two chunky wooden numbers mark the territory at the corner of Cohasset and Plantation streets. Gwen Stiles, who moved to the neighborhood from Marlboro three years ago, used to have to deal with such things. The landlord apparently failed to tell her how stiff the competition for a parking spot would be, especially in the winter.

“I got towed, I don’t know how many times,” she says. “I didn’t experience this in Marlboro. I had an idea of what they were doing with the chairs, and I don’t blame them. You just have so many people and so many cars and no place to park. I have a friend who lives in Shrewsbury, and I used to park my

car over there and have her drive me here.” Stiles thinks the city does an excellent job of snow removal — which is sometimes the problem, since the plow can pack the cars in, make the dig-out that much harder, and raise the emotional stakes when someone is guarding a spot they excavated.

The neighborhoods that cluster at Rice Square, especially along Plantation Street, are hotbeds of chair activity. It’s the neighborhood that photographers Donna Dufault and husband Scott Erb chose to move to from Rochester, N.Y., in 1998. (That’s also the neighborhood that inspired the idea for the “Chairs of Worcester” poster — see sidebar, page 12.)

At first, Dufault and her husband didn’t even understand why the chairs were there and would just move them out of the way to park in front of their house. They’ve had their cars egged and battered.

“We’ve had all kinds of confrontations and issues with our neighbors,” says Dufault. “The first year, the windows were broken. Last year, I had my window broken again and also had a screaming

Artists, of course, are their own critics, and we had the three creators of the “Chairs of Worcester” poster sit down and comment on each of the chairs that made the final cut. The three call this one The Kneeling Chair, one of their favorites. Not only do they love it for its photographic value, but they’re all amazed it’s even left on the street because it’s so dang nice. “Some folks ask us where it is,” they say. “Whoever put this chair out was pretty desperate to keep their spot and resorted to the only chair they could find in their home — a nice dining room chair — and it just broke their heart to use it on the nasty street scene.”



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fight with my neighbor because he was putting snow on top of my van because there was nowhere else to put the snow. It ended pretty well and we apologized to each other and helped each other out.”

“I think these kind of disputes are responsible for a whole lot of ruined days and bad feelings,” says Thompson. “I think there’s a whole subculture of urban winter parking.”

Last year’s string of storms sparked a lot of heat on three-decker streets. One night, Erb came home late from work and found people with a driveway vacant and the car that should have been in it on the street. Tempers flared. “There was no place to park at this point,” says Dufault. “We felt it was extremely rude. They have proceeded to park on the street since, so we have no place to park. It got really ugly during the winter of 2003.”

In fact, last winter, she and her husband came close to returning to Rochester. “Now there’s a town that knows how to deal with snow,” she says. “You’re only allowed to park in the same place on the weekends, so Monday through Friday, you have to switch to every other side. So what happens is both sides of the street get cleaned and nobody is allowed to save

Well, this beauty makes the photographers downright sad that it's out there. It's just too nice to be demoted to spot-saving duties. "Looks like it is from the MOMA. It's a real nice old piece — perhaps found in an attic and relegated to the street scene. We believe this to be a younger person's who may not know what they have. If they only knew."



their spot because they clean the street. They would just get rid of a chair there."

She hasn't used it yet, but Dufault's got her chair on standby. Actually, she has two — one of those medical seats that people use in the shower and a backup green-and-white striped beach lounger. Dufault and her husband are ready to claim their spot with it on the street as soon as the next flakes begin to fall. Hopefully they can get home from work in time.



While the media is obsessed with winter weather coverage," says Thompson, "things like these chairs often fall under its radar. I think they tend to be the kind of things that you don't read about because the disputes don't come to gunplay. This is one of the reasons that laws of the jungle are more contentious than actual laws. The people who cleared those spaces feel they have a God-given right to keep them. At the same time, people who are desperately looking for a space are enraged by this."

The ritual isn't unique to Worcester. It prompted Boston's Mayor Thomas Menino to implement a new policy last month for that city's DPW: Remove any materials used to save parking spots 48 hours after a storm.

Worcester's man in charge when it snows, Department of Public Works Commissioner Robert Moylan, takes a much more laissez-faire attitude toward the winter crop of old chairs. "If it does-

n't interfere with what we're doing, then we're OK with it," he says. "On the flip side, if it's snowing and we're plowing snow, then their chairs are going to get plowed away."

Moylan, a multi-decade veteran city employee, says people have been putting out chairs "forever. At least as far back as I can remember." His department does not ticket cars or offer any response, really, to citizens' complaints about the chairs, says Moylan. "We've had people call and complain, but the facts are, it's a public street and people are to park wherever they want," he says. "Isn't that the 11th commandment? Thou shalt not take my parking space? It's a historical phenomenon of Worcester that if you shovel out your spot and mark it with something it's yours."

"The funny thing," says Dufault, "is that everyone acts as if nothing happened in the summer. I know everybody's name, but in the winter nobody looks at each other. You don't look at each other in the eye." □

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The trio affectionately refers to this one as "The Red Rocker." It's photographer Mark Doyle's personal favorite, envisioning the chair as splitting its time between the angry passage of winter and the sweet serenity of summer, when he pictures a nice older person lounging in it in the sun: "This shot has a lot of nice elements, from the red color to the muddy water swirling around the legs leading you down the frame."

