

THEME

Street Debater

Street Debater —

Conversations for a Better Society

Something as simple as a set of scales and a provocative question is helping recast the dynamic between homeless people begging, and the multitude of people trying hard not to meet eyes as they pass by on the street. More than this, Street Debater points to the power of conversation as a way to help people in need that goes far beyond a few coins.

Text by Steve Jarvis Photographs by Street Debater



Increasing numbers of beggars on the street is a side effect of the ever-growing problem of homelessness in the world's major cities. Raised in Japan, Tomo Kihara knew little of begging, but what preconceptions he held were challenged when he befriended a homeless street seller in Amsterdam. While his friend made little money, he said he preferred it to begging because at least it gave him a shred of dignity. This piqued the interest of budding social designer Kihara, and raised the question — is it possible to design ways for homeless people to earn money on the street, that also allows them to maintain their dignity?

To better understand homelessness as a problem, he decided to try begging for himself. "Sitting in the middle of Amsterdam was definitely one of the worst experiences of my life. I felt stripped of dignity and self-worth." This experience kicked off a year-long journey spending time with dozens of street beggars in four European capitals, and observing their interaction with passersby. He came to understand that the interaction was uncomfortable for all parties, with passersby often conflicted by suspicion and guilt at ignoring a fellow human in need.

Kihara set himself the design challenge of creating a new type of job, one that can be done without special skills, did not denigrate a person's self-image, and spurred positive interaction between strangers on the street. He tried numerous options, various combinations of selling things, and games, but they all proved flawed. Finally, he struck on the idea of putting two plastic cups above photos of the candidates for the 2016 U.S. presidential election and asking people to choose. People started to stop and talk about the election, and even put money in the cups above the faces of their favoured candidate. It was successful enough to try different variations, and from this the street debater model emerged.

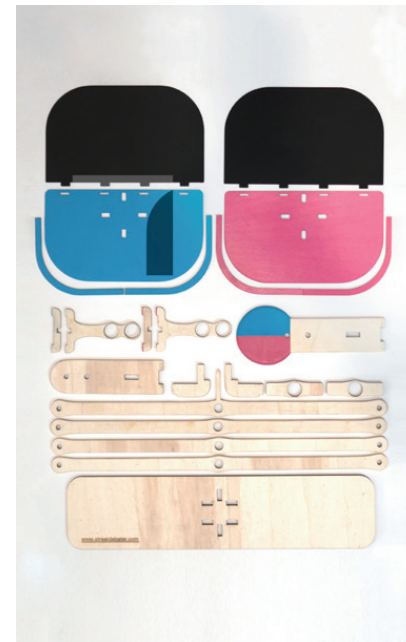
It doesn't take much to set oneself up as a street debater. A topical question to instigate a debate, a signboard to write the question on, and a set of scales where people can vote for their preference with coins. Kihara maintains that the scales are important. "After experimenting with several forms, I found that a physical scale made interaction intuitive. Moreover, the placing of coins to tip the scale makes the winning side visible and explicit,



which fosters a sense of competition and motivates participation."

On average, during its proof of concept period in London, in just one hour a street debater can earn approximately 13.5 pounds by engaging about 12 people for a friendly conversation. Not only proving more dignified, but also more profitable than simply begging. He has since created a street debater kit, which can be purchased for a nominal amount from his website, or you can get a computer fabrication version online for free. The kit has been introduced in Europe, Africa and Asia, and with recent EU Commission Horizon 2020 funding to bring it to scale the future looks bright for Street Debating.

For Kihara, this is more than just an improved version of begging. "The people are no longer invisible, they have a job, which is called street debating, which is not begging, and they have a reason to be there now." Taking the focus of interaction away from an emotionally-charged financial exchange, and substituting a secondary topic closes the gap between the homeless



person and passerby, giving the homeless person a sense of worth and dignity that could never be achieved by begging.

The street debater approach can instigate conversations on the street from a position of equality, not charity. Although, Kihara suggests it has an even deeper impact, "Street debating is not just solving the problem of begging, but helping to alleviate social segregation by bringing people with different ideas together in a friendly environment, helping to build understanding of others' situations and perspectives." This potential to spark public discussion between people from different backgrounds and social situations, may yet prove to be the most profound result to come from this experiment in empathy building.



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