

Parklets

Providing Space for People to Park... Themselves

The movement to design complete streets that encourage more pedestrians and bicyclists is leading major metropolitan cities to reclaim street-side parking spaces and turn them into miniature public parks. Known as parklets, these spaces are popping up internationally, providing an economical and eye-pleasing solution to the need for increased public space where people can reconnect with the environment and each other in their community. In repurposing part of the street into a public space, parklets add aesthetic enhancements to the streetscape through benches, tables, umbrellas, planters, and art. While originally developed as a place for pedestrians to sit and relax, some cities are even incorporating exercise machines into the parklet platforms to create active recreation opportunities. While parklets may be maintained by the businesses adjacent to them, they are built for the general public and are accessible and open to all, and as such the seating and design must be distinct from the sponsoring business. Parklets are temporary installations, with permits allowing them anywhere from a few months to a year, with options for time extensions. They are becoming a tool to change public policy in areas that have promoted cars over pedestrians, bringing back elements of an era where people interacted face-to-face with their neighbors on the street.

While they may be small in size, parklets promise tremendous impact in urban areas. By providing traffic calming and an extension to existing sidewalks, parklets are proving to be a fast, efficient way for cities to increase safety and livability while promoting active transportation. Parklets can help address the need for wider sidewalks at a fraction of the cost and time of installing permanent sidewalk improvements, a major benefit for munici-

palities that would like to make positive changes but do not have the budget for large scale projects. With bike racks being incorporated into the installations, some areas with parklets are seeing an increase in bicycling even without the implementation of additional bicycle infrastructure. Parklets range in price between \$20,000 to \$50,000 depending on their design and scale, according to guides such as *The San Francisco Parklet Manual*.¹ Best of all, most parklets are funded and maintained by neighboring businesses, residents, and community organizations who benefit from increased pedestrian activity.

The Metered Parking Space That Started It All

Part of the concept for parklets grew out of an action taken by the Rebar Group, a cutting-edge design studio. The studio describes how on one fall day in 2005 it transformed a single metered parking space into a temporary public park in an area of San Francisco, CA, USA that had been identified as lacking public open space. As part of its mission to produce artwork and design solutions that promote human interaction and community, the Rebar Group fed the meter on the parking spot for two hours, taking what it called a short-term lease on the space and installing sod, a bench, and a tree for passersbys to enjoy. When the metered expired, they packed everything up and removed all traces of the temporary park. A picture of the park spread on the Internet, and before long the studio was fielding requests to create other temporary parks in metered spaces. The studio decided to create a how-to manual to help people create their own parks, thereby creating “PARK(ing) Day.”*

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BY MICHELLE BIRDSALL



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On Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles, CA, USA, two parklets have been installed in conjunction with new bike lanes and improved pedestrian crosswalks.

Now occurring annually on the third Friday in September in hundreds of cities around the globe, PARK(ing) Day brings together citizens, artists, and activists who temporarily transform metered parking spaces into temporary public places. The mission of PARK(ing) Day is to call attention to the need for more urban open space, to generate critical debate around how public space is created and allocated, and to improve the quality of urban living. Park(ing) Day installations have provided an opportunity to build public awareness of parklets and have increased potential support for more permanent installations.²

Collaboration and Process Lead to Success

Since the experiment that led to Park(ing) Day, San Francisco has set the stage for parklets. The world's first formal parklets were installed in 2010 as part of the city's

Pavement to Parks program, a collaborative effort between the San Francisco Planning Department, the Department of Public Works, the Municipal Transportation Agency, and the Mayor's Office. Pavement to Parks also drew inspiration from successful projects in New York City, NY, USA, where plazas and seating areas have been created in former vehicle-heavy areas such as Times Square using simple treatments such as painting or treating the asphalt, placing protective barriers along the periphery, and installing moveable tables and chairs.

According to Pavement to Parks, the program seeks to address the issue of excessively wide city streets that contain large zones of wasted space, especially at intersections, in areas that need more public spaces by temporarily reclaiming these underused areas and inexpensively turning them into new public plazas and parks in a short amount of time. The pro-

gram is helping the public to re-imagine uses for the city's rights of way. By recasting spaces for cars as spaces for people in the form of parklets, local merchants have a new way to interact with the community and attract new customers. Many businesses have reported revenue increases since the installation of a nearby parklet. This type of success can result in increased sales tax revenue for the city, and in some cases increased jobs as merchants hire more staff to accommodate the increased number of patrons.³

As of January 2013, 38 parklets have been installed throughout San Francisco, and the program is being emulated in cities around the world. Those looking to implement a parklet are turning towards the *San Francisco Parklet Manual*, which Pavement to Parks has developed not only as a comprehensive overview of the goals, policies, process, procedures, and guidelines for creating a parklet in



PHOTO COURTESY THE LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Before and after images showing a former parking space transformed into a parklet in downtown Los Angeles, CA, USA.

San Francisco, but as a resource for those outside of San Francisco working to establish parklet programs in their own cities. This extensive manual provides detailed specifications and guidelines for developing parklets and provides a detailed overview of the entire start-to-finish process, from obtaining a permit to disassembling the parklet when the project is over. San Francisco also disseminates information about parklets through informational meetings, bringing city staff from the Planning Department, the Department of Public Works, and the Department of Transportation together to answer questions about the parklet application, design, and construction processes.

The San Francisco Parklet Manual designates parklets as being able to occupy former parking spaces, street medians, traffic triangles, repurposed travel lanes, or excess asphalt space at angled or irregular intersections. Their shapes may be linear, square, rectangular, triangular, or irregular depending upon the available space, with sizes ranging from one or two

parking spaces to the length of an entire block. Parklets are generally permitted on streets with speed limits of 25 mph or less and need to be located at least one parking space away from an intersection or street corner where they are less at risk for a motorized vehicle collision. Integrated bicycle parking is strongly encouraged, with bike racks integrated into the parklet structure or installed adjacent to the parklet as a bike corral on the street.⁴

Another valuable resource is a manual developed by the University of California, Los Angeles Luskin School of Public Affairs, titled *Reclaiming the Right of Way: A Toolkit for Creating and Implementing Parklets*. The manual documents examples from cities such as Montréal, Quebec, Canada; Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; Philadelphia, PA, USA; Los Angeles, CA, USA; Long Beach, CA, USA; and Oakland, CA, USA.

The city of Los Angeles has been successful with its own emerging efforts to establish parklets in downtown areas where officials would like people to stop

and linger rather than drive through to other destinations. According to Valerie Watson, Assistant Pedestrian Coordinator, City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT), Pedestrian Programs Division, the most effective projects are using parklets as one application within a complete streets toolkit, installing the parklets in conjunction with traffic lanes restriped for bicycles and improved pedestrian crosswalks. Watson is on the Los Angeles Parklet Design Team, which has installed two of the first four pilot parklets on Spring Street in Los Angeles in February 2013. These first two parklets occupy the length of two metered parking spaces in downtown Los Angeles and have been installed to complement the overall life of the street along with new bike lanes and crosswalks. The overall effect, achieved with simple paint and the parklet construction materials, has yielded significant safety benefits at a low cost. Lessons learned from installation of these pilot parklets will help with the development of a citywide parklets



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Parklets are clearly marked as open public spaces for the community to use and enjoy.

program, similar to San Francisco's Pavement to Parks.

Watson explains that the Los Angeles pilot parklets are the result of a successful collaboration between LADOT employees across many departments and elected officials. The project has brought together the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Complete Streets Working Group with Downtown Los Angeles Councilmembers José Huizar and Jan Perry, the City of Los Angeles Departments of Transportation and City Planning, the UCLA Complete Streets Initiative, the Gilbert Foundation, and the Historic Downtown Business Improvement District. These groups convened volunteers and community members to work with design professionals on a pro-bono basis. Concerning the role of traffic engineers, Watson states that the city's traffic engineers have been involved in the parklets initiative from the

very beginning, taking a leading role in evaluating site locations and helping with designs and specifications.

Another large part of the appeal and success of parklets has been their temporary designation, which clears the way for faster implementation. Approaching them as pilot projects helps remove barriers. Los Angeles Director of Planning, Michael LoGrande, has been quoted on these benefits, stating, "By moving quickly and showing people we can take chances, we can try things that are pilot programs and not necessarily go through a huge process that people lose interest in because it takes too long to see results. In government, we have to be nimble as ever, and show small successes."⁵

Primarily parklet projects are about rethinking the way that streets are used. By opening up opportunities for more efficient, people-friendly uses of streets, parklets provide an opportunity for trans-

portation engineers and planners to work with officials and community organizations in making urban environments safer and more desirable. By creating parklets, cities can support community building and sustainable transportation. ■

References

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