



Revisiting the San Francisco parklets problematizing publicness, parks, and transferability



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ABSTRACT

One day in 2005, a bench, some grass, and a tree suddenly appeared on a parking spot in central San Francisco. The parking meter was paid for two hours, and after that the installation disappeared. This action by the art-design-activist organization Rebar has led to the annual global event Park(ing) Day and an official planning program in San Francisco, From Pavements to Parks, inspiring cities around the world to introduce their own parklet projects.

Many cities are facing challenges such as economic deficits and a lack of open public spaces, and growing concerns exist regarding the need for urban greenery. This paper discusses how parklets are challenging the role of public spaces and urban nature, drawing on discussions and conceptualizations of publicness, observational data, literature review, and document analysis to explore the influence of parklets as an urban design strategy at a local and global level.

The symbolic change from parking space to public park space and the tactical urbanism inspiration of the concept constitute both parts of the symbolic value of parklets. At the same time, the line between community activism and urban strategy has been blurred. The city reviews, permits, and inspects the projects; and the sponsor is responsible for the design, financing, maintenance, and liability. The paper concludes that, even though parklets might provide a new public space and bring greenery to streetscapes, publicness, roles and responsibility, as well as the functionality of nature in these projects, remain crucial questions.

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1. Introduction

On the 16th of November 2005, the art-design-activist organization, Rebar, paid a parking meter in central San Francisco for two hours and placed a bench, a tree, and some sod on the street. This *Park(ing) Action* that created the first parklet has since led to an official planning program in San Francisco and the annual global event *Park(ing) Day* aimed at generating a critical debate on the quality and need for public space (Parkingday.org, 2015). Parklets are a celebrated example of how a tactical urbanism intervention has been formalized, and are now planned in cities around the world (pavementstoparks.sfplanning.org, undated). Highly praised for improving the streetscape and providing new green public space, parklets have also been criticized as a ‘think-piece protest’ turned into a neoliberal planning project (Lavine, 2012).

As a trendy and pragmatic model for new green public spaces, parklets and the overarching planning program, *From Pavements to Parks*, as well as the event *Park(ing) Day*, embody many of the challenging questions facing contemporary cities: financial difficulties, rapid urbanization and densification, as urban strategies put pressure on the public provision of public space. In a search for new models for public space, parklets fit these needs as inexpensive, semi-permanent projects based on a public-private partnership model, a model seen as the hallmark of neoliberalism (Lavine, 2012). Simultaneously, the ambiguousness of the name highlights the symbolic value of turning parking spaces into parks, ‘the grey to green’. The literal greening of the tactic and streetscape itself constitutes a valuable tool in creating a sustainable city. According to Lavine (2012: 144), the ‘urban green spectacle’ thus shows the adaptive capacity of neoliberalism to counteract the guilt and fear associated with climate change, as ‘neoliberalism informs the production of the spectacle at the micro level’. Literally greening the streets might establish an image of taking the lead for climate change and mitigation; however, how *parklike* are the *parklets*, really?

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Neoliberal models of service provisions and the shifting of roles and responsibilities from state to private agencies and organizations are affecting governance and management of public space and parks. More (2005) discusses a variety of models for park management, ranging from fully public to fully private, identifying characteristics of the conflicts between public and private interests. While a fully public management structure with legislative oversight and transparency is connected with problems, such as inefficiency and free riders, the private models have long-term consequences that are difficult to predict, including exclusion and strategic investments in popular sites at the expense of less popular ones. The importance of public parks and urban natural environments is further argued by Perkins (2009: 396), as they provide important social and material benefits to urban dwellers and should therefore be seen as ‘critical urban amenities’. Increasing interest in environmental issues among residents in many cities and shifting modes of provision thus affect management structures. Perkins (2013) connects diminishing park budgets with an increased involvement of the public sector through volunteering—consolidating a neoliberal hegemony. In practice, neoliberal urban governance is characterized by a nexus of public and private organizations, as well as voluntary groups. Perkins (2009) identifies shared governance as created by diminishing city budgets, pointing out that non-profits have taken on considerable environmental responsibility as costs of environmental service provisions are transferred to them from the government, which is ideologically legitimated by neoliberal market logics. Even though this process has the potential to empower non-profits and volunteers, and promotes active citizenship, it consolidates a neoliberal hegemony as environmental provision is negotiated through market mechanisms between governments and the civil society, but there are no guarantees for long-term change as non-profits and volunteering activities are sensitive organizations based on active involvement by the stakeholders (Perkins, 2009). Elwood (2002), on the other hand, points out that even though these new roles in urban governance are reproducing a neoliberal hegemony, volunteering offers the potential for spatial changes in power and participation by creating new spaces of engagement and a discourse of collaboration by legitimizing non-profits and volunteer claims for inclusion.

In a larger planning context, parklets are an example of urban local tactics conceptualized and discussed as DIY urbanism, insurgent urbanism, and guerrilla urbanism, among others (see, for example, Chase et al., 2008; Hou, 2010). The need for these interventions is identified as due to financial strains, shifting demography, and digital modes of sharing information and promoting best practices (Lydon et al., 2012; Mould, 2014). In Ocubillo’s (2012) study of the emergence of parklets, tactical urbanism is discussed as a synthesis of community action and progressive governmental experimentation, promoting a collaborative practice that engages urban design through provisional programs and projects that are continually self-evaluating. The emergence of parklets in San Francisco is connected to the artist Bonnie Ora Sherk’s installations Portable Parks I–III in the 1970s, and Portable Parks IV in the 2000s, using park and agricultural elements in roads and traffic space, and highlighting how aut centrality is accelerating the degradation of naturalized environments within the city (Lydon et al., 2012; Ocubillo, 2012).

More than supporting a critical debate of the provision and use of public space in general, parklets and Park(ing) Day are phenomena connected to the role of the street. Reprogramming of streets serves as a main argument for the tactics, and as stated by Rebargroup.org (undated), “more than 70% of San Francisco’s downtown outdoor space is dedicated to the private vehicle, while only a fraction of that space is allocated to the public realm.” The importance of the street as public space (Appleyard, 1981; Gehl, 2011; Jacobs, 1961;

Metha, 2013; Whyte, 1980) and the multiple roles of sidewalks as infrastructure, sites of everyday life and leisure destinations (Ehrenfeucht & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2010) further highlight that the street as urban environment possesses the potential to contribute to public life. Moreover, in a time of increasing privatization of public space, Kohn points out that “public sidewalks and streets are practically the only remaining sites for unscripted political activity” (Kohn, 2004: 4).

Due to the ambiguousness of the name parklet, both the public features of the phenomena and the natural and green are discussed in this study. As a result of global urbanization and densification as urban strategy (OECD, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2003), urban green space is facing a complex reality while, at the same time, influential planning paradigms, such as sustainable urbanism, green urbanism, and landscape urbanism are acknowledging the importance of nature in our cities. Drawing from discussions of publicness and neoliberal governance, as well as the functionality of urban greenery looking at the materialized results of the parklet movement in San Francisco, this paper aims to discuss how parklets are challenging the role of public space and urban nature, and affecting cities around the world. *What, as a result of the high profile of the project, can we learn from the existing parklets in San Francisco that is important for the introduction of the concept in other localities?*

2. Material and methods

This paper analyses parklets as public green space through a literature review, document analysis, and an observational study carried out in San Francisco. Secondary data have been collected through the Pavements to Parks program, the parklet manual, and articles and theses written on parklets. The observational study of the existing parklets in San Francisco was conducted in February, 2015. Aside from direct observations, the information about the location, design, and management of the parklets was also collated from secondary sources, including websites, their promotional literature, from media reportage, and from the existing academic research on the subject of the broad spectrum of everyday and tactical urbanism approaches.

The observations are based on a table adapted from Németh and Schmidt (2011a) in this study indexing both publicness and parklikeness, see Table 1. Each parklet was evaluated based on quantification of directly observable components. Multifunctionality and the furnishing of the parklets are connected to the design choices made by the sponsor. Perceived ownership of the space is influenced by the appearance of the parklet, as well as whether or not the sponsor is obvious for the parklet users. The parklikeness was evaluated based on the existence of vegetation, the provision of shade and movement by the vegetation, and the ecological functionality as the connection to the cities green structure. All of the 51 official parklets at the time (according to the map at pavementstoparks.sfplanning.org) were visited and assessed. The aim was not to acquire statistical data per se, but to determine what had been implemented; to compare the materialized result with

Table 1

Observation-based index adapted from Németh and Schmidt (2011a) for public and park features.

Feature	Approach
<i>Features of publicness</i>	
Multifunctional	Design
Furnishing	Design/ownership
Obvious Sponsor	Image/ownership
<i>Features of park</i>	
Park/nature-likeness	Existence and coverage of vegetation
Protection/restoration	Shade and movement
Ecological functionality	Connection to green structure

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