

PARK(ing) Day

In 2005, on an auspicious Friday in September, between 12-noon and two in the afternoon, artists from a San-Francisco urban art collective, Rebar, inserted money in a parking meter and proceeded to create a temporary public park composed of sod, a park bench and a tree in the corresponding parking space and created what is now known as PARK(ing) Day.

PARK(ing) Day has become a yearly global event held on the third Friday of each September during which parking spaces are reimagined as temporary public spaces reimagined in a variety of ways.

Using a grouping of separate temporary structures, called Park(ing) Spaces, that have been materially inserted into the framework of the city with the goal to intervene, PARK(ing) Day challenges the ways in which the urban infrastructure is defined and used. Operating from an interest in art, design and ecological principles, Rebar intentionally sought to intervene in the urban fabric of the city as a reaction to outdated ideas about the environment, urban health, and the well-being of the urban residents of San Francisco.

Park(ing) Day essentially enables citizens to take back their city, and act on their city using guerrilla art methods, or tactical urbanism, according to Rebar. Rebar defines this as “the use of modest of temporary revisions to urban space to seed structural environmental change”¹.

According to its mission, PARK(ing) Day was created in response 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 human habitat ... at least until the meter runs out!”²

Rebar believes that altering even a small part of the urban infrastructure has an effect on the way infrastructure is perceived and used. It is for this reason that Rebar declared the parking space, a designated metered space generally entails buying time entitling you to park, or temporarily store your private vehicle in a designated space for a specified amount of time³, as the site for “creative experimentation, political and cultural expression, and unscripted social interaction”.⁴ Thus, Park(ing) Day is an event “where citizens, artists and activists collaborate to temporarily transform metered parking spaces into “PARK(ing)” spaces: temporary public places“.

¹ Jeffrey Hou, “Insurgent Public Spaces: Guerrilla Urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities”

² <http://parkingday.org/about-parking-day/>

³ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/parking+meter>

⁴ http://parkingday.org/src/Parking_Day_Manual_Booklet.pdf

Park(ing) Spaces disrupt and intervene by subverting the rented spaces intended for private use. With Park(ing) Spaces we can now venture into those areas and connect with those who have paid to break down the barriers of privacy in favour of the greater public.

PARK(ing) Day has become an event where people reclaim the streets by intervening in the urban fabric of the city and transforming a space to be used in a way that add something new to the urban space that the public feels is lacking or is used as a platform for issues that need to be addressed.⁵

PARK(ing) Day is promoted as a way for the people to take back their city and to redefine it and use it in ways that are beneficial to them. This is in opposition to the reasons that municipal or governmental agencies intervene in the urban fabric of the city.

By taking metered parking spaces and using them not for private or individual use, Park(ing) Day “attempts to draw attention to this slow creep of privatization and commercialization into the public realm”⁶ and promote creative adaptation, beautification of an otherwise drab space, innovation, urban transformation by the city’s own citizens. By acting as agents of change, citizens modify expectations about their own urban space by drawing attention to the parking space and the issues surrounding it.

From its own website PARK(ing) Day is described as “a citizen-powered, worldwide event, and people of all stripes from all over the planet participate every year. The event has become a tool for artists, activists and “ordinary” people of all ages to demonstrate what matters to them, engage their communities, and encourage play and have a little fun.”⁷

Since its initial creation, Park(ing) Day has become a global open-source movement. As of 2011 PARK(ing) Day had reached 975 parks, 162 cities and 6 continents⁸ and counting. This was helped in part by Rebar’s efforts in repackaged Park(ing) Day as an open-source project including a manifesto, a licensing agreement and multiple resources for those who wish to participate in PARK(ing) Day in their own city.

With these tools, Rebar has empowered various peoples and enabled Park(ing) Day to adapt and redefine space to suit and draw attention to a variety of important local issues and needs. In past years, variations have included free health clinics, urban farms, ecological demonstrations, political activism, art exhibitions, free bike repair and wedding ceremony.

Rebar has limited the commercial exploitation of the concept and term PARK(ing) Day, a registered and trademarked by Rebar, by offering an official PARK(ing) Day License designed to maintain the original values and mission associated with PARK(ing) Day while also being aware of and respecting the local legal codes and laws regarding the use and function of parking spaces in each city.

⁵ <http://rebargroup.org/parking/>

⁶ <http://parkingday.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

⁷ <http://parkingday.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

⁸ <http://parkingday.org/about-parking-day/>

The website also warns against using Park(ing) Day for promotional gain or interest. The website states “PARK(ing) Day is designed to celebrate people and their creativity, not to extend the commercial realm (further) into the public realm. [...] Instead of extending your business into the street, we suggest you look at your neighborhood from the perspective of a community member, and use the space to serve the public interest – a shady spot to read or eat lunch, an explanation of a local issue, a performance, or just a beautiful moment... get creative. Besides, happy neighbors create immeasurable goodwill for local businesses.”

It is through Rebar’s efforts and belief in empowering citizens to effect change that PARK(ing) Day has been a success. For example, in cities such as San Francisco and New York, city planners and agencies began creating what are known as “Parklets”⁹, acknowledgedly inspired by temporary PARK(ing) Day structures. Parklets are outdoor extensions of local businesses and shops out into the street which cover the parking spaces and provide extra seating and green space for pedestrians and shoppers.

What began as a response and challenge to a specific issue in San Francisco grew and evolved into a larger global event which has effectively challenged the perception and use of parking spaces for greater public use.



Image of Rebar’s original sod, bench and tree PARK(ing) space from 2005.

Source: Rebar, Accessed Feb 25, 2013. <http://re bargroup.org/parking/>

⁹ Ethan Lavine, “Spectacle in the New Green City”, *Berkeley Planning Journal*, 25, 1, 2012, pp. 145.