

Parklets

Planning With Place-Making in Mind: Rationale and Strategy for Municipal Planners



Abstract

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Parklets, or temporary parking conversions to mini-parks, generate intensive collaborative planning nodes. Parklets create human-scale inclusive green infrastructure through public-private partnerships that demonstrate transitions of auto-centric paved spaces to people-friendly places. Successful parklet projects in San Francisco and New York have established unique people-friendly places through community engagement, public-private partnerships, and corporate support, but how might such projects translate to a smaller municipal context? What long-range and current planning outcomes can municipal planners help generate from parklet projects? Funding, development rights, impacts, public engagement and collaboration form the basis for best practices that planners and community champions can activate in their local urban environments.



“...increased concern for the human dimension of city planning reflects a distinct and strong demand for better urban quality.”

Jan Gehl, 2010, p.7

Parklets

An Emerging Community Amenity

Parklets are repurposed parking spaces transformed to small urban parks – public/private spaces with seating, planters, and art. The objective of parklet projects is to quickly and inexpensively repurpose underused parking and paved areas into new public places promoting connectivity, walkability, and social activity. Reclaiming public space from the car, parklets add to the human dimension of urban space, facilitating identifiable city places where people are the main component, often at central focal points of communities. As flexible gathering spaces that can accommodate temporary infrastructure, parklets can host special events and festivals that attract economic and social activity (APA, 2005).

With low associated costs and offering potential for collaborative public-private partnerships and investment, parklets can be tested and demonstrated as fiscally responsible public amenities. Through collaborative public-private partnerships, parklet projects offer planners an additional opportunity for meaningful community engagement with businesses, retailers, the arts, elected officials, and the public. Ultimately, parklets represent an economically responsible step towards a more people-friendly, socially just, and environmentally sustainable urban form.





Background

Grounded in Planning Theory

The repurposing of excess parking space is strongly grounded in current urban design and planning theory. Since Jane Jacobs called for a change in the way cities are built with *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961, there has been much progress in planning principles to create pedestrian-friendly conditions, affording an appropriately lower priority to the automobile (Gehl, 2010, p.3-4). Trancik (1986) describes how streets and parking create “urban voids” that have resulted in the loss of “much of their social function and physical quality” (p.103). In *The City After the Automobile*, Safdie (1997) writes that “(t)he automo-



bile has devastated the physical fabric of both older and younger cities” (p.4). Barnett (2003) details how parking fragments, isolates and disperses development, discouraging urbanity. Newman and Jennings (2008) point to social concerns related to cities where an auto-centric focus diminishes a sense of community, social capital, and urban vitality, while undermining public safety and health (p.129). Blais (2010) discusses the perverse oversupply of parking, with significant associated costs almost entirely subsidized by citizens. Parklets can be a powerful component of a multifaceted urban revitalization strategy to repair fragmented urban patterns including conversion of vacant retail outlets, greyfield and brownfield redevelopment. Whereas brownfield redevelopment has been referred to as “a salve for the wounds of the industrial age”, as a greyfield conversion parklets could be considered a salve for the wounds of the auto-centric age (Waldheim, 2006, p.44).

“The most dramatic way a city can demonstrate a commitment to reducing car dependence is by taking a strategic approach to key areas of public space that have been given over to the automobile, namely parking and road space.”

Newman, Beatley & Boyer, 2009, p.117

Facts

Legislation and Policy: Shifting Towards a Human-Scale

Legislation and policy is leading today's planner away from an auto-centric focus towards human-friendly approaches. Municipalities have adopted the principles of smart growth and new urbanism as policy in comprehensive plans (OCPs, Master Plans, bylaws and design standards), and are participating in such initiatives as complete streets, safe routes to schools, and the healthy communities movement. This shift also has a legislative basis. Provincial climate action legislation including BC's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Targets Act and Manitoba's Climate Change and Emission Reduction Act provide direct motivation for implementing both human-scale and comprehensive approaches. Under such legislation and policy, the parklet retrofits urban areas parcel-by-parcel and block-by-block.

An Over-Supply of Parking: Economic Implications

While parklets make a strong statement about urban form, "there are economically practical advantages of removing auto-only infrastructure" (Newman, Beatley & Boyer, 2009, p.118). There are high costs associated with the space requirements of

cars, particularly with unproductive parking space (Newman & Jennings, 2008; Newman, Beatley & Boyer, 2009). A study of the San Francisco area identified more than 1600 sites of abandoned paved land associated with cars, highways, and industrial lands (Arieff, 2010). Subsidies for non-residential parking in the United States are suggested to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually, a clear drain on financial resources (Blais, 2010). Repurposing paved space decreases associated costs (maintenance, resurfacing, and system management) subsidized by citizens. Low-cost conversion of parking space in exchange for decreased financial burden and a higher quality urban environment clearly supports the community and real estate benefit.

Environmental Benefits: Reintroducing Nature and Ecology

Parklets offer improved environmental and ecological functionality that enhances the sustainable character of cities. It is well understood that car dependence is associated with "not just high economic costs, but also a large ecological footprint" (Newman & Jennings, 2008, p.128). Parklets present an excellent tool for encouraging pedestrian activity while re-introducing nature and ecology into urban areas. Urban greenspaces can enhance urban ecology by using reclaimed and

restored land for multiple functions including recreation, beautification, habitat, and even food production (Roseland, 2005, p.44). By re-introducing permeable landscaping, parklets mitigate storm-water run-off and improve hydrological function and air quality in urban areas. Beatley (2011) specifically cites the San Francisco "Pavement to Parks" program for its creation of "small but critical new spaces" – a new tool to foster the inclusion of nature and green space in our cities (p.136).





Precedents

Parklet projects have been established in large urban centres including New York (Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, 2012), Oakland (City of Oakland, 2012; Miller, 2012), and Philadelphia (Saffron, 2011). Planners can gain direct inspiration for their own parklet projects from successful programs in San Francisco and Vancouver:

San Francisco: Pavement to Parks

Inspired by PARK(ing) Day demonstrations, San Francisco's "Pavement to Parks" program was initiated in 2010 to create human-scale plaza areas in excess roadway and parking spaces (Miller, 2012). The process can be simple: paint or treat asphalt, install protective barriers along the periphery, and bring in tables and chairs (see image above-right). These efforts have resulted in forming inviting, friendly public places with proven tangible benefits, increasing pedestrian activity and satisfaction (San Francisco Great Streets Project, 2011).

Vancouver: Viva Vancouver

The Viva Vancouver program supports many of the strategies of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan (City of Vancouver, 2011). Emerging from three pilot projects, the goals of the program are to create a variety of public spaces, increase neighbourhood livability, and encourage sustainable and active transportation (City of Vancouver, 2011). The City has partnered with a variety of community groups and business interests to transform road space into unique public places and attractions including seasonal public spaces, recurring public spaces, roaming public spaces and on-street murals (see image above-left).

Lessons Learned

Considerations and Strategies for the Municipal Planner

Establishing a parklet involves a complex dynamic of policy, partners, and perspectives. Municipal planners are in a key position to facilitate the integrated development of parklets following best planning practices and brokering decision making internal to the city and external to the community. Considerations and strategies include:

Identify Potential Parklet Opportunities

An inventory can quantify the sites and space available for local parklet opportunities. These can be strategically prioritized around the potential contribution of the site based on location. Certain sites may have significance to enhance urban connectivity or to potential community partners. Experiential planners will recognize parklet opportunities simply from time spent in the community.

Establish and Maintain Council Support

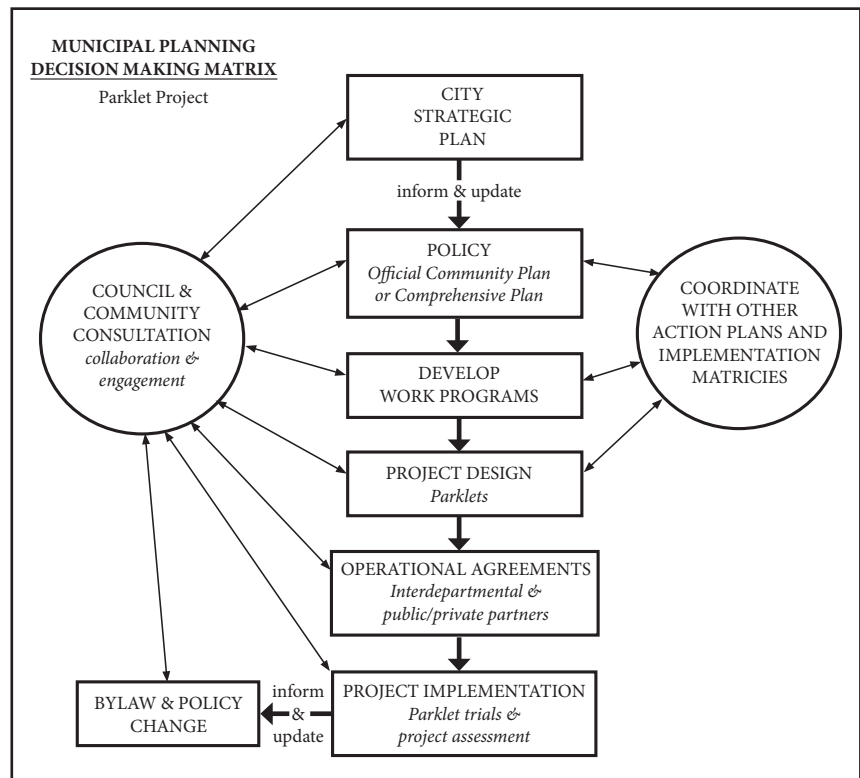
Municipal planning efforts must be supported by an informed Council through a hierarchical and on-going decision-making process (refer to chart at right). Developing streetscape enhancement project plans such as park-

lets to increase public greenspace and pedestrian traffic can be complementary to community goals and Official Community Plan policy. The low cost of such a civic amenity compliments fiscal considerations and capital plans. At the project design level, parklets can play a key role in community economic development and CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) strategies, putting more eyes on the street and increasing pedestrian traffic.

Interdepartmental Collaboration

Within a municipality, the planning department is in the prime position to broker various city departments to build support and

facilitate action. However, the necessity of administrative buy-in must not be underestimated. As well as Council and administration, parklet projects will require involvement from the Finance, Public Works, and Parks & Recreation departments. This is where a parklet project puts planning principles to work in City Hall. Interdepartmental collaboration can ensure parklets are maintained and functioning over the long-term, revealing shared goals such as complimentary location of street furniture (garbage cans, bicycle parking, benches, planters, etc.), tree storage (parklets can function as small-scale nurseries), and seasonal public-works function (snow storage).





Community Engagement and Collaboration

Parklets present an opportunity to directly collaborate with community members and a good focal point for ongoing engagement to ensure that local concerns are addressed and realized through the planning process. Employing business and funding models can support community economic development. Ensuring community involvement and engagement, providing opportunities to benefit, contribute, and commit to the project promotes citizen ownership, supporting continued maintenance and viability of the parklet project.

Private interests and community groups should be identified for potential public/private partnerships. Parklets provide opportunities to promote community groups, local artists, and business interests, including business

improvement associations and the local Chamber of Commerce. Collaborating with community groups can ensure the establishment of these unique places and on-going maintenance. Parklets provide a unique opportunity to recognize the community champions supporting local identity, building social capital, and promoting community building.

Explore Funding Partnerships

Funding for parklet projects comes from a variety of sources, including community and business improvement grants, citizen and corporate donations, merchant investments and material donations. The parklet proponent (community associations, business improvement groups, merchants and business owners) conducts maintenance. Applicants for parklets in San Francisco are responsible for all associated

design and installation costs, as well as application, inspection and parking meter removal fees in excess of \$1500 (Pavement to Parks, 2011). Viva Vancouver connects potential partners with sponsors such as the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association. Associated costs are further defrayed by material donations through public-private partnership and reduced assessment costs. Parklets can demonstrate improved future development rights (e.g. mixed-use and density) and thus enhance real-estate value.

Parklet Design

Parklet projects present opportunities for city staff to work with the community to test the mutually beneficial potential of sites for use as public and cultural space. Materials and design interventions are meant to be temporary and modular for potential



mitigates any perceived risk by Council or the community of permanent closure. A trial period allows for assessment to understand any necessary short-term adjustments, and ultimately, whether the temporary closure should be a long-term commitment.

Additional Considerations On-Site Parking

While parklet conversions are most commonly applied to on-street parking, on-site private parking spaces may also be strategically transformed with similar benefits. As a park or green space will add to the assessed value of private land previously used as parking, a permissive exemption may be granted to reallocate the land. Removing the parklet from the tax-base is a potential strategy to compensate for the loss of private space, providing significant incentive to a

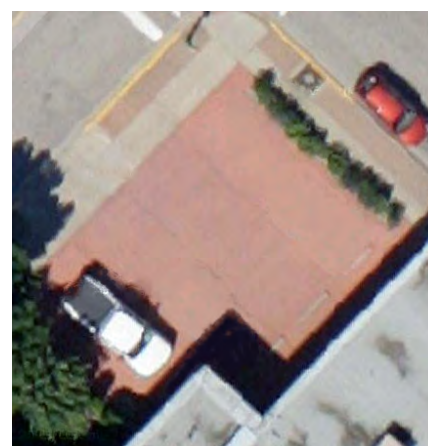


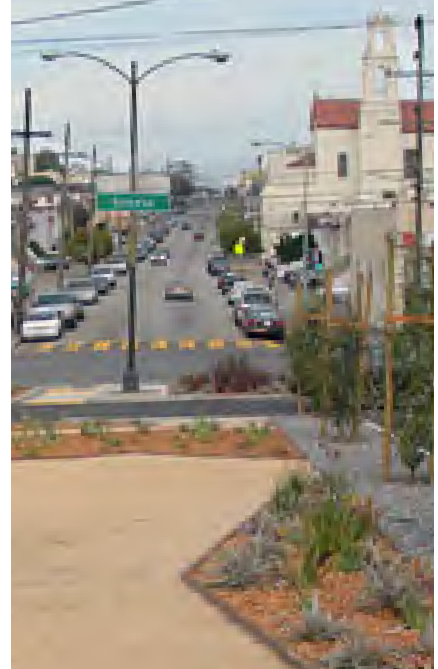
changes. Parklets can serve as a nursery: trees and other plants can transfer to new sites once they outgrow the parklet. Cultural elements can be incorporated in the form of public art installations or gateway elements to enhance and define the public/private space. Parklet design creates opportunities for the arts community, youth and school groups, community based designers, builders, and suppliers to highlight their local talents, presenting future development options for the parklet proponent. Tapping the community to put local culture on display in parklets can be a winning combination.



Parklets on Trial

Establishing a parklet plaza on the basis of a temporary closure of a parking area allows the success of the project to be evaluated over a trial period. This





private landowner at little cost to the municipality.

Potential Controversy

While constraint and resource analysis (refer to sidebar) can identify change mechanisms and provide an opportunistic basis for overcoming impediments, in times of economic depression parklets can be perceived to be out of touch with the direct needs of some community members. Perceptions of increased public spending can be controversial. It is important to engage the public with facts: parklets are low to no-cost, people-friendly, established on a trial-basis, contribute to economic development, and highlight the positive efforts of community partners. Parklets can be an important factor in a more sustainable, social, and healthy community.

Planning a parklet project is a collaborative process, offering opportunities for inter-departmental and community engagement throughout.

Constraint and Resource Analysis

Incorporating constraint and resource analysis into the planning process can ensure that goals are realistic in terms of local limitations and opportunities. Constraint and resource analysis considers balancing community needs with financial means, addressing resident feedback, capacity planning and resource demand, as well as temporal constraints.

Resources

- Brander, J. & Dawe, M.

Use of Constraint Reasoning to Integrate Risk Analysis With Project Planning

Retrieved from: <http://www.inteng.com.au/RiskAnalysis.html>

- Integrated Land Management Bureau, British Columbia.

Resource Analysis Guidelines for Land and Resource Management Planning in British Columbia – Interim Guidelines

Retrieved from:

<http://archive.ilmb.gov.bc.ca/slrrp/reports/raguide/section2.html>



Parklets represent opportunities to increase human-scale public space, enhancing our urban areas, promoting unique local identity.

Conclusion

The Significance of Small Places

While they are small in stature, Parklets have great potential. As a means of transitioning from auto-centric to human-centric considerations, parklets represent significant opportunities to increase human-scale public place in our urban areas, bringing more people out onto the streets and promoting unique local identity. Municipal planners are in a unique position to encourage and engage various departments, community groups, and local interests necessary to make parklet projects happen. Parklets enable planners to maximize community contributions through best engagement practices, such as co-design charrettes and forming community-based public/private partnerships to achieve true col-

laboration. Parklets are just one element of a healthy, complete community: human-scale places must be well connected throughout the community via a human-friendly network. While parklets may just represent one small step towards a more people-friendly city life, they are an important step in the right direction.



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Images

- page 1: Pavement to Parks, San Francisco (all)
page 2: Pavement to Parks, San Francisco (all)
page 3: Pavement to Parks, San Francisco (all)
page 4: Lower Manhattan Cultural Council
page 5, from left to right: City of Vancouver; Pavement to Parks, San Francisco
page 6: Chart created by Chris Larson and John Guenther
page 7, from left to right: City of Vancouver; Pavement to Parks, San Francisco
page 8, from left to right: Jack Verdon; Steven Kyle Weller; Deepistan National Parklet; GoogleMaps
page 9, from left to right: Chris Larson; Pavement to Parks, San Francisco
page 10: Chris Larson (all)

