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(Park)ing Day—September 21, 2006

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Take a sunny downtown parking space, add a layer of sod, a few wooden benches, and a pocketful of donated quarters, and what was once a place reserved solely for cars becomes a sunlit respite from the daily grind.

On September 21, 2006, in nine cities across the globe, artists took to the streets with these instructions in hand and installed more than thirty temporary parks in areas where asphalt is usually king. It was the birth of the first international Park(ing) Day—where for a brief moment, the lofty goal of improving the quality of urban life overcame the more practical consideration of where to store automobiles when they are not in use.

(Park)ing Day was the brainchild

of Rebar, a San Francisco-based arts group known for installations that challenge common thinking about space, urbanism and absurdity. Their first project was the Cabinetlandia library—a three-drawer filing cabinet archive located in an uninhabitable stretch of desert once slated for development, but which is now a faux-country owned by *Cabinet* magazine. Rebar once processed and canned sections of an art gallery housed in former can company—their attempt to sustain the physical connections and the spirit of the gallery as the building underwent a seismic retrofit.

This latest venture centered on one simple question—why parking rather than parks?

“It’s a creative, thoughtful and imaginative way to draw attention to a critical need, and to do it in a playful manner,” said Will Rogers, President of the Trust for Public Land, which sponsored the (Park)ing Day event.

A few friends hatched the plan several years ago over drinks at the Latin American Club in San Francisco. According to their calculations, more than 70 percent of the outdoor public space in downtown San Francisco is devoted to the automobile. The question was, what could they do about it?

“We looked into the law and discovered that actually in San Francisco County it doesn’t appear to be illegal to program a parking space for



another use,” said Matthew Passmore, one of Rebar’s founders and a lawyer by training. “We then set about thinking about what kinds of programming we would like to put in the space.”

They obtained a Department of City Planning map detailing areas of downtown San Francisco that were underserved by green space. Though the group had settled on using a parking space as their stage and wanted to say something about public space, the hard part was figuring out just how to put those two things together. A swimming pool? A brothel? A number of proposals were put forth until they hit on an idea that worked both logistically and philosophically—build a temporary park inside a metered parking space.

Since the meter functions effectively as a short-term lease on the space, the park would last only so long as the meter was running.

Passmore and his colleagues set about designing a portable yet functional urban green space. It had to be easy to copy, easy to assemble, and, most importantly, easy to disassemble, in case they were forced to move by a police officer or meter maid.

Then, on November 16, 2005,

from noon until 2 PM, a park sat on Mission Street between 1st and 2nd Streets. It added “24,000 square-foot-minutes of public open space that Wednesday afternoon,” read the group’s website.

Less than a year later, Rebar returned to the same place to create another parking space. Despite the midday traffic, Passmore peddled his bicycle down Mission Street, toting a cartload of sod and equipment behind him. Another pedal-powered pick-up transported the tree and benches; others followed. The army of volunteers quickly jumped from their bicycles and set to work—first laying down a tarp, then gently rolling out the sod while Rebar members collected donations for the parking meter. This was the third (park)ing spot of the day in San Francisco. Others included a hanging garden, a bioswale, and a beach party. Even Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi and Mayor Gavin Newsom donated their city parking spaces for the day.

Parks were also temporarily established in Manhattan, London, Milwaukee, and Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

As the late Jane Jacobs wrote in her book *The Death and Life of American*

Cities, however, it is not enough to merely have parks. In order to be truly effective, people must actually use the space. To this end, Rebar included a tree for shade and two comfortable benches for seating. Some merely stared at the installation as they passed by, trying to decide whether it was art, or whether it was intended to be truly functional. A few took a seat and enjoyed the summery afternoon.

The best part is just having the patch of grass nearby, commented San Francisco resident Kay Hoskins. Though there is a park within walking distance of her home, the nearest glimpse of grass is at least four or five blocks away. That’s not usually a problem for Hoskins, who has three dogs. But while her foot is broken, it can be a long way to walk, she said, pointing at the heavy cast wrapped around her leg.

“A tiny mini-park, even the size of a parking space, would help,” Hoskins said.

This is an important point, said Rogers.

“Cities are recognizing that not only is it great for quality of life and making them competitive and attracting the twenty- and thirty-somethings that they desperately need for vitality, but it is also a really, really good economic play,” he said.

“The other side of the story is that while large central parks are thriving in many cities, neighborhood parks aren’t there where they need to be.”

Above: San Franciscans enjoy (Park)ing Day. Photo by Andrea Scher.

Opposite: Using a pocketful of change to feed the meters, Rebar activists created a global network of temporary public parks, like this one in downtown San Francisco. Photo by Andrea Scher.