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Pavement to Parks

Last Friday, cities and towns throughout the world celebrated [Park\(ing\) Day](#), an event created to bring awareness to the importance of using and enjoying public space. Witnessing all those swaths of pavement transformed into plant-filled community gathering spaces ([Streetfilms.org](#) has a [short film of San Francisco's Park\(ing\) Day](#)) got me thinking about — given the tangential way my brain works — the process of land-banking.

Top image courtesy ChiPhilly; bottom image courtesy San Francisco Bicycle Coalition Top, (Park)ing Day installation by S.M.P. Architects, Philadelphia; bottom, Park(ing) Day, San Francisco.

Land banking — the strategic acquisition of land in advance of expanding urban development, and the holding on to it as long as possible to maximize profits — is especially pronounced in once-booming, now-busted city centers like Las Vegas, Baltimore and Phoenix, which by the way now has more vacant land than any other major city in the United States. With the economic downturn things have changed somewhat, but there remain huge amounts of empty lots being “banked” in downtowns nationwide, all waiting for a real estate recovery.

Of course, if an entity bought property for future development, it is understandable that they'd want to wait until it began to recoup its value before building on it. But cities across the country are now left to grapple with the grim reality of abandoned lots and buildings that leave gaping holes in our urban fabric.

The downside of this isn't hard to discern: the streetscape is rendered not only uninteresting and unsightly but unsafe. Pedestrians stay away, and the streets become even less safe owing to a lack of what the urbanist Jane Jacobs famously referred to as “eyes on the street.” With no foot traffic, existing businesses suffer and new ones hesitate to come in. A similar condition emerges in a very different kind of urban setting, where traffic flow exceeds neighborhood capacity, pulling pedestrians off streets because of noise, fears about safety and general unpleasantness.

An innovative and practical concept for new urban parks most directly addresses the latter condition, but I can see it working in the former as well. San Francisco's [“Pavement to Parks”](#) program creates spaces for people by reclaiming excess roadway, through the use of simple and low-cost design interventions. What's innovative about these parks isn't so much the design as the implementation. As Andres Power, urban designer at the San Francisco Planning Department explains, because there is no structure in place to do

something like this “it fundamentally changes the old impasse of years of planning and just lets the space evolve over time.”

European Pressphoto Agency/Justin Lane Times Square, New York City.

Pavement to Parks was given particular impetus by the success of similar projects in New York City, especially the recent transformation of Broadway from 47th to 42nd Streets, and 35th to 33rd Streets, where plazas and seating areas have been created in excess roadway simply by painting or treating the asphalt, placing protective barriers along the periphery and installing movable tables and chairs.

Similarly, PTP begins with the goal of “transforming a sea of asphalt,” says Power. A pro bono designer (one hopes a budget will emerge to pay designers for their efforts) works on each park (there are 12 scheduled to be finished through 2010; three have just been completed) with the mandate of using materials the city already has to maximize greenery and, says Power, “transform a sea of asphalt.”

This approach diverts resources that would have gone to landfill and keeps the budget of these interventions low. Composted soil comes from city landscaping and plants are either donated or purchased at cost. Volunteers, typically community residents, are mobilized to plant, motivated by the desire to beautify their streetscape and meet their neighbors. And as part of Mayor Gavin Newsom’s initiative to provide edible landscapes throughout the city, fruit trees will be planted at each location. The plantings also add storm water management capacity to streets.

One of the first three pilot parks was created to transform a dangerous and poorly conceived intersection (below) at 28th and San Jose Streets on the outskirts of San Francisco’s Mission District.

In 1947 San Francisco planned to build a new freeway here, and in preparation for doing so the city tore down or moved close to 200 homes in this neighborhood. The homes you see above on the right-hand side of San Jose Avenue were lifted and moved back onto their backyards to make room for the project. A protest stopped the freeway from happening, but little could be done in the way of reparations for these displaced families. Half a century later, some of those families are getting their yards back — though now they’re out front.

(Click to enlarge.) Intersection of San Jose/Guerrero before the park. Photo (c) Google Maps.

(Click to enlarge.) Left, San Jose/Guerrero park; right, Showplace Triangle park. [Landscape architect Jane Martin](#), who designed the San Jose/Guerrero park, had no problem finding treasure in the city’s trash: her park plan uses trees felled in a storm and old air ducting made from stainless steel as giant planters for a broad array of plantings ranging from agave to apple trees. Similarly, [REBAR](#)’s design for the park — REBAR is, not incidentally, the creator of Park(ing) Day — at lower Potrero’s Showplace Triangle

transforms dumpsters into planters for its South African palette of plants, and uses old surplus granite countertops for bench seating. The first of the three projects involved the least intervention: **Public Architecture** at 17th and Castro transformed an unsafe and confusing intersection into a sidewalk café by simply blocking the area off with planters.

Though two pedestrian islands were depaved for the Castro project, the Pavement to Parks model is designed to be reversible, and pavement is typically undisturbed. The effort reflects a “renewed interest in what our streets might look like,” says Power, as well as “a pent-up desire to create public space.”

These plantings and plaza aren't just about aesthetics: the 17th and Castro park. expanding array of planting projects along with other traffic calming measures, dedicated pedestrian enforcement stings and new traffic signals, the collision rate for the 11 blocks on Guerrero between Cesar Chavez and Randall Street, where the San Jose/Guerrero park is located, has been reduced by 53 percent since 2004.

Of the two major public space projects in New York City this year, certainly the **High Line** has received the most press — and its near-universal praise is well-deserved. But it is the Green Light Manhattan project and Pavement to Parks that I think will have the greatest legacy. The High Line took 10 years and \$152 million dollars to complete — that's not a criticism of the project, but of the systems in place nationwide that force these sorts of projects, and really just about any project, to proceed at a snail's pace and at astronomical cost.

Today, people and the cities they live in are short on cash but The High Line, New York City. long on ingenuity (and on boneyards full of discarded materials waiting for inventive reuse). Programs like Pavement to Parks and Green Light Manhattan have an irresistible immediacy to them, and while they may not rival Olmsted or Field Operations (who designed the High Line) in their aesthetic, they make up for it in spirit and sustainability. And remember, these are being done for next to no money.

But back to that land-bank tangent. I know what you're thinking: “Why give over valuable real estate for a picnic table and a couple of planters?”

You don't have to give it up; let people borrow it. The barely discernible footprint (and next-to-nothing budgets) of these parks allows for temporality. Just look at the deal brokered for the recently inaugurated **LentSpace** on Canal, Varick, Grand and Sullivan Streets in Soho. It's a model for citywide land use in New York and, indeed, any city or town cursed with empty lots; the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council has created an “in the meantime” activity for a vacant site awaiting future development. In the case of LentSpace, the developer, Trinity Real Estate, is providing a three-year lease — and receives a write-off in return. (One hopes Trinity will eventually give in to LentSpace's request to remove the chain-link fence that still surrounds the space.)

Courtesy Dean Kaufman View of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's LentSpace.

Some will continue to argue that no, Trinity and others will never get their land back, that this is too complicated, too risky. I'll argue that the alternative — to let us all live oblivious to the blight that surrounds us — isn't a viable one. And the idealist in me will point to France, where earlier this month Nicolas Sarkozy announced his championing of a revolutionary way for the world to measure a country's performance: quality-of-life issues like the environment, leisure time and health sharing the stage with hard economic growth data. I love the fact that this is entering into the global conversation for many reasons, not least that it acknowledges the importance of small yet impactful gestures in our daily lives, like the recent spate of public spaces, created on the cheap, and full of heart.

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