# Case study: PARK(ing) Day

### When:

Began October 2005 and now occurs annually on the third Friday in September

### Where:

Originated in San Francisco, California, USA and now practiced globally

### What:

Imagine you are walking down a busy city street. Cars zoom by, walkers navigate crowded and dirty sidewalks, and drivers vie for precious parking spots. Then you come upon a park. But this is not a typical city park. It is a mini park, slightly longer than car, nestled in a metered parking spot. You take a moment to sit down on its single bench. Perhaps you chat for a moment with another curious passerby. Or perhaps you simply think about the questions this little park raises, such as: Why is there so much space in our cities for vehicles and so little for public gathering? How might we rethink urban space and, given how big a job that is, where do we start?

This concept — a park in a parking spot — was the brainchild of Rebar, an organization working at the intersections of art, activism, and design. It became the initial spark for PARK(ing) Day, a worldwide movement to challenge and repurpose urban space through transforming metered parking spaces into temporary public parks. The first PARK was erected in downtown San Francisco in October 2005. Rebar filled the meter with coins and rented a seven by twenty-two foot curbside parking space in downtown San Francisco. They rolled out sod, added a potted tree, put out a bench, and created a temporary park for several hours.

The PARK capitalized on San Francisco’s legal code, which did not specifically state that parking spaces be limited to use by private vehicles. Co-organizer Blaine Merker described this performance installation as a “creative repurposing of familiar elements to produce new meaning,” using principles such as creative adaptation, absurdity, innovation, and beautification to change the way we think about metered parking spots and urban space more generally.[1] No longer just places to park automobiles, PARK(ing) spots become rentable public spaces, “temporarily expanding the public realm and improving the quality of urban human habitat, at least until the meter ran out.”[2]

Following the initial installation, a picture of the PARK in San Francisco was quickly disseminated through various electronic media. It became what Malcolm Gladwell, Chip Heath, and Dan Heath have called a “sticky” idea.[3] After seeing the circulated image, people from all over the world contacted Rebar to find out how to stage a similar event. In response, Rebar chose the third Friday in September as “PARK(ing) Day” and, starting in 2006, encouraged people to make their own creative, playful, artistic, tactical, and transformative PARK(ing) performances. PARK(ing) Day adopted a creative commons license and encouraged an open source ethic, so long as participants limited their events to the specified day and followed a few simple guidelines. PARK(ing) Day has become an international movement reaching hundreds of cities across the world. The initial PARK has become a meme that can be adapted to local situations, and used to raise awareness about a variety of issues facing urban residents.

In addition to creating ephemeral ruptures in the meaning of parking spaces through PARKS, the PARK(ing) Day movement has also resulted in more permanent changes in urban space. Several cities have created permitting processes for the creation of enduring “Parklets.” For example, a Parklet on 9th Avenue between Irving and Judah Streets in San Francisco’s inner sunset neighborhood offers several benches for passersby and patrons of nearby bakeries and shops to stop, take a rest, and question how we use urban space.

[1] Blaine Merker, “Taking Place: Rebar’s Absurd Tactics in Generous Urbanism,” in Insurgent Public Space: DIY Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities, ed. Jeffrey Hou (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2010), 51. [2] Rebar Group, Inc., “Portfolio: Park(ing),” 2010, <http://rebargroup.org/parking/>. [3] Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 2002); Chip Heath and Dan Heath, Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die, 1st edition (New York: Random House, 2007).

### Why it worked:

PARK(ing) Day works because it enacts what it professes. Instead of just talking about how to rethink the use of urban space, it performs a temporary disruption of the usual meaning of parking spaces (and the automobile-centric use of much urban space), enacting an alternative meaning. If someone encounters a PARK (whether in person or virtually), she or he cannot avoid noticing it. And that noticing provides the seed for more rethinking, repurposing, and revaluing of public space.

### What didn’t work:

The PARK(ing) Day movement is limited to one day per year. While this is reasonable from an organizing perspective, it does constrain the transformative possibilities of the movement on the other 364 days of the year. By specifying a particular day, this limits the movement from responding to timely, local circumstances that might call forth the need for a PARK. Further, the movement’s understandable directive to stay legal and avoid confrontational protest, limits the ability of the movement to engage in some of the more radical forms of dissent that might more fully disrupt the dominant patterns of urban space.

### Key TACTIC used:

### Creative Disruption:

PARK(ing) Day uses alternative modes of communication such as visuals, performance, and the creative use of place in order to disrupt our common understanding of parking spots. This disruption is not targeted at a particular individual, but rather is more generally targeted at disrupting the way we think about urban space.

### Detournement/Culture Jamming:

Although Detournement/culture jamming is most often used to describe the appropriation of mass media, it can also be used to alter the meaning of a particular space or place. PARK(ing) installations critique the normal use and understanding of parking spaces while proposing an alternate meaning.

### Other TACTICS used:

Direct Action Distributed Action

### Key PRINCIPLES at work:

### Don’t Dress Like a Protestor:

PARK(ing) Day warns potential participants “Remember, you are not protesting” in its PARK(ing) Day manual. Importantly, they encourage participants to build temporary open spaces in which any passerby will be welcome to take part. Even though PARKs radially rethink urban space, they do so by offering a fun, welcoming, and legal opportunity to participate.

### Anyone can act:

PARK(ing) Day operates on the principle that anyone can create a PARK(ing) installation and adapt it for particular local circumstances. The PARK(ing) Day Website, Participant Guide, and Archives offer a variety of resources so that anyone from a newbie to a seasoned activist can construct a PARK.

### Enable Don’t Command:

PARK(ing) Day is an open source movement that calls on participants to alter and play with their creative commons license. The PARK(ing) Day Website and resources available there provide participants with tools to achieve their own vision as opposed to telling them what a PARK should be.

### Reframing:

PARK(ing) Day uses temporary parks as a way to reframe conversations about the use of public space. PARKs call our attention to the dominant frame of a car-centered mode of urban design and allow participants to envision alternative frames.

### Other PRINCIPLES at work:

Balance Art and Message Show Don’t Tell

### [Optional] Key THEORY at work:

### The tactics of everyday life:

PARK(ing) Day acts as a tactic that makes use of a “crack” in the strategy of urban planning in the form of the lack of specificity in the legal codes pertaining to metered parking spaces. PARKs tactically challenge the normalized use of parking spaces and temporarily offer alternatives.

### Other THEORIES at work:

N/A

### PRACTITIONERS:

PARK(ing) Day Rebar Group

### Learn more:

PARK(ing) Day Movement Website <http://parkingday.org/>

Rebar Group: Portfolio: PARK(ing) Day <http://rebargroup.org/parking-day/>

Merker, Blaine. “Taking Place: Rebar’s Absurd Tactics in Generous Urbanism.” In Insurgent Public Space: DIY Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities, edited by Jeffrey Hou, 45–58. Florence, KY: Routledge, 2010. See:<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415779661/>

Danielle Endres, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Brian Cozen, “Not Just a Place to Park Your Car: PARK(ing) as Spatial Argument, Argumentation & Advocacy (2015): 121-140. See:<https://www.academia.edu/9801529/Not_Just_a_Place_to_Park_Your_Car_PARK_ing_as_Spatial_Argument>

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### Description: [Generally tag-lines for websites, bylines for books, bylines with publication name for articles, and "Film by" or "Documentary by" for films. Adapt as appropriate]

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## Marginalia

### Tags:

[Tags for sorting/navigation purposes, drawn from the master list of tags (TK)]

### Pull quote:

“How might we rethink urban space and, given how big a job that is, where do we start?”

### Author’s bio:

Danielle Endres is a professor of rhetoric and argumentation at University of Utah. Her teaching and research examines discourse (verbal and non-verbal), persuasion (rational and irrational), activism, and social movements. Her research investigates climate change activism, Native American activism, and environmental justice. When not performing her day job, Danielle spends the majority of her time trying to encourage radical thinking and a sense of the possible in her two young kids.

### Images:

[http://api.ning.com/files/PZmd1I1GLRdEV0NLC\*-DoY2gW-CXy47X4QQN9s0R6ZDnGMsT8k70\*lEp5zmI0-30/rebar\_parkingday\_01.jpg](http://api.ning.com/files/PZmd1I1GLRdEV0NLC*-DoY2gW-CXy47X4QQN9s0R6ZDnGMsT8k70*lEp5zmI0-30/rebar_parkingday_01.jpg)

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