US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Frida Timan

Project title: Governing homelessness in San Francisco's parklets

Summary of project:

In 2010 so-called parklets started to appear along the sidewalks in San Francisco. Parklets are small leisure spaces built on transformed parking lots, often placing benches, seating structures, greenery and some form of protection against car traffic around its edges. A sponsor (often a local business) is responsible for building and maintaining the space. The city program grew out of PARK(ing) Day, when several city residents paid the parking meter and created temporary spaces for leisure or political causes to illustrate what uses of urban space were possible if the city's car-centric nature was challenged. At their inception, parklets were public spaces, and no one could be turned away for not making a purchase from the sponsoring business. With COVID-19, parklets became the architectural model for the city's Shared Spaces program which allowed businesses to utilize and establish structures in the public right of way for outdoor dining and commercial activities. Unlike the early parklets, shared spaces were explicitly for paying customers, and often closed at night. As such, shared spaces have been critiqued for privatizing public space, and for regulating public space in a manner that supports businesses rather than the city's homeless population who depend on public space for survival. Importantly, parklets have gained global recognition and implementation, and are, thereby, an urban architectural influence of the US on the world.

Governing homelessness in San Francisco's parklets

Introduction: In 2010 so-called parklets started to appear along the sidewalks in San Francisco. Parklets are small leisure spaces built on transformed parking lots, often placing benches, seating structures, greenery and some form of protection against car traffic around its edges (Littke, 2016). A sponsor (often a local business) is responsible for building and maintaining the space (ibid). The city program grew out of PARK(ing) Day, when several city residents paid the parking meter and created temporary spaces for leisure or political causes to illustrate what uses of urban space were possible if the city's car-centric nature was challenged (Thorpe 2020, Douglas, 2018:129-63). At their inception, parklets were public spaces, and no one could be turned away for not making a purchase from the sponsoring business. With COVID-19, parklets became the architectural model for the city's Shared Spaces program which allowed businesses to utilize and establish structures in the public right of way for outdoor dining and commercial activities (Gunderson, 2020). Unlike the early parklets, shared spaces were explicitly for paying customers, and often closed at night. As such, shared spaces have been critiqued for privatizing public space (Mandhi and Kelly, 2023), and for regulating public space in a manner that supports businesses rather than the city's homeless population who depend on public space for survival (Gunderson, 2020). Importantly, parklets have gained global recognition and implementation, and are, thereby, an urban architectural influence of the US on the world.

Images by author, 2023.

Research focus and question: The parklet has received some attention in scholarship, such as the evaluation of governance obstacles for different forms of parklets to proliferate (Quentin, et al. 2023), how residents perceive them (Jarman & Stratford, 2023), what learning can happen between parklet programs in different locations (Littke, 2016, Bermúndez & König, 2022), what sidewalk and road design features facilitates their implementation (Quentin, et al., 2022), and how parklet experiments can impact mobility patterns (Bertolini, 2020). This scholarship shares fairly positive or neutral views of the parklet. In a different vein, Douglas (2018:156-60) argues that the design of parklets may signal that they are not for public use, but are geared towards a white, middle- or upper-class user. This aesthetic appearance can, according to Douglas (2018:156-60), also contribute to increasing property values and gentrification (with negative effects such as displacement) in the areas where they proliferate. Douglas (2018:158-60) further notes how the official city support of parklets may foreclose opportunities for other spatial remakes that

invite other publics (particularly people of color) to shape and use public spaces. Additionally, Littke (2016:169-172) argues that the sponsor's maintenance activities of the space may obscure the fact that parklets are open for everyone.

The impact of this maintenance on social belonging in the parklet beyond perceptions of publicness have not been explored in previous scholarship. This research seeks to fill that gap by asking: ***How and why are parklets socially ordered by sponsor maintenance?*** I draw on critical legal geography and socio-legal studies of licenses (Hubbard et al., 2009, Levi & Valverde, 2006) to explore how parklet sponsors navigate and utilize the capacities and requirements they are granted, and face, given their role as parklet sponsors stipulated in their permits.

Fieldwork/research summary: To answer the research question, I interviewed parklet permit holders. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on their everyday maintenance of the parklets. I most often conducted interviews in person, and either in, or adjacent to, the parklet in question. Sponsors ranged from business owners to local organizations to BIDs (Business Improvement Districts), the number of parklets they oversaw (with BIDs overseeing the largest number of parklets), and the areas they operated in. To contextualize their narratives and inquire into how the parklet program has travelled globally, I interviewed city staff at the Planning Department and the Municipal Transportation Agency. Unfortunately, a representative of the Department of Public Works could not participate in this study. Further, observations were carried out to see the maintenance described in action. To ensure the anonymity of parklet sponsors, I have not stated the specific parklets researched in this report, but indicated their location, how many times they were visited, and at what time of day I observed them. To care for my own safety, I did not conduct any observations during nighttime. Together, the data that emerged from this research highlight how and why parklets' social character are impacted by sponsor maintenance. As this research approach is qualitative, my analysis reflexively assessed how my presence impacted observations and narratives shared. I utilized purposive sampling to select interviewees and parklets to observe.

Results and findings: In this section, I focus on how and why permit holders vacate the city's homeless population to go into depth on one theme that emerged during the research.

a) Some parklet sponsors view the presence of homeless people as a problem in parklets: From interviews and observations, it became clear that some parklet sponsors viewed the presence of homeless people in the parklet as a problem. They justified this position by saying that the homeless acted unpredictably, were dirty, interacted with customers and other users of parklets in unwelcome ways, and left behind trash and needles. They situated the homeless population as illegitimate users of parklets which motivated them to intervene.

b) *Homeless presence is countered through design*: One way to exclude the homeless was through design. For example, one parklet sponsor told me how they had gotten rid of one element of the parklet design that protected it against the elements (particularly rain) to deter homeless presence. Another sponsor planned to redesign the parklet he sponsored by getting rid of a planter structure he believed attracted the homeless as it provided a location where needles could be disposed of out of sight.

c) *Homeless presence is countered through verbal interaction:* The most common way to discourage homeless presence was through telling homeless people to leave. This particularly happened at the time the sponsoring businesses opened. Parklet sponsors described how they could not impact who dwells in the parklet overnight, but that they asked homeless who may have resided in the parklet overnight to pack up their belongings and leave to make way for other users during the day. Parklet sponsors described that most

often, such exchanges proceeded without confrontation, although conflict was reported occasionally. Importantly, such verbal advising utilized the legal medium of use, and was motivated by the homeless performing a use of space that was not allowed (e.g., sleeping, and storing belongings).

d) Homeless presence is countered by mobilizing the San Francisco Police: Where verbal interactions fail, parklet sponsors reported that they contacted the city's police force to vacate the homeless from parklets. The police were also called on when illegal (or what were believed to be illegal) activities were observed, such as drug use or physical confrontations.

e) Homeless presence is countered through acts of 'care': Some parklet sponsors described how they aimed to help homeless people residing in their parklets to find access to shelters and other forms of support systems. While their intent was to help, these accounts did not include parklet sponsors asking the homeless in question if these services were wanted. As such, 'care' operated more to manage and exclude the homeless from the space, as opposed to carefully supporting someone living through homelessness in a manner that they consented to.

f) Frustration with regulations that stand in the way of countering homeless presence: While parklet sponsors do utilize design, verbal interaction, acts of 'care', and the police to vacate homeless people from parklets, several express a frustration with regulation that states that parklets must be publicly accessible for all which legally forecloses legitimate exclusions. They argue that for exclusion to be lawful, the homeless must perform an activity that isn't allowed in parklets, such as camping, using illicit drugs, smoking, or engage in interactions that people experience as aggressive. This was perceived as a boundary to creating an "orderly" parklet space.

g) An opposing perspective: One interviewee, a long-time organizer for the homeless in the city, presented an alternative perspective. She described how the parklet she sponsors had been the location of a guerilla art-installation, created overnight, that juxtaposed the city's facilitation of parklets and the illegalization of life-sustaining practices in public space which the homeless depend on for survival. She described the ambivalence she felt when taking down the installation as she agreed with the art installation's message yet was required by the city to uphold aesthetic standards that deemed it graffiti and unpermitted objects placed in public space.

Conclusion: As the findings above illuminate, parklet sponsors turn to design, verbal interactions and the police to exclude the homeless from parklets across the city. This demonstrates that parklets are not publicly accessible but produced sites of leisure for the housed population **by** excluding the homeless population. While some scholars focus on the design of parklets as the cause of social inequity, (Gunderson 2020, Douglas, 2018), this research finds that while that aspect of parklets surely impact their social make-up, sponsor maintenance activities actively contribute to producing parklet spaces inaccessible to homeless individuals. This is enabled by the legal requirements and capabilities associated with possessing a parklet permit, which hold similar capacities as urban licenses (Hubbard et al., 2009, Levi & Valverde, 2006). This further reveals how exclusion unfolds in parklets, through the capacities and requirements specific to parklet permits. It illuminates one specific element of the punitive landscape that San Francisco's homeless dwell in in the everyday, and how parklets participate in the making of an unequal San Francisco where leisure is reserved for some at the punitive expense of homeless people's denied access to public space.

Networking: This research further allowed me to connect with local scholars at University of California at Berkeley, and San Francisco State University.

Bibliography

Bermúndez., J. C. Caravajal., König, R. 2022. Can digital technologies for city-making engage its users to build parklets in Vienna? - Citizen participation in the context of the platform city. *Journal of Urbanism.* Vol. [unavailable]. Pp. 1-27.

Bertolini, Luca. 2020. From "streets for traffic" to "streets for people": Can street experiments transform urban mobility. *Transport Reviews.* Vol. 40(6). Pp. 734-753.

Douglas, Gordon C.C. 2018. *The Help-Yourself City: Legitimacy and Inequality in DIY Urbanism.* Oxford University Press (New York).

Gunderson, Ariana. 2020. The illegitimate tent: Private use of public space at a San Francisco Restaurant. *Food and Foodways.* Vol. 28(4). Pp. 321-331.

Hubbard, Phil., Matthews, Roger., Scoular, Jane. 2009. Legal geographies – controlling sexually oriented businesses: Law, licensing, and the geographies of a controversial land use. *Urban Geography.* Vol. 30. Pp. 185-205.

Jarman, Nicholas., Stratford, Elaine. 2023. Against the grain: Public interests, the parklet, and the university. *Australian Planner.* Vol. 59(1). Pp. 52-63.

Levi, Ron., Valverde, Mariana. 2006. Knowledge on tap: Police science and common knowledge in the legal regulation of drunkenness. *Law & Social Inquiry.* Vol. 26(4). Pp. 819-846.

Littke, Hélène. 2016. Revisiting the San Francisco parklet problematizing publicness, parks, and transferability. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening.* Vol. 15. Pp. 165-173.

Mandhal, Sneha., Kelly, Gregg. 2023. Managing the curb – Public space and the use of curbside cafes during the Coronavirus pandemic. *Cities.* Vol. 132. Pp. 1-16.

Quentin, Stevens., Leorke, Dale., Thai, Ha Minh Hai., Innocent, Troy., Tolentino, Carlo. 2023. Playful, portable, pliable interventions in street spaces: Deploying a 'playful parklet' across Melbounre's suburbs. *Journal or Urban Design.* Vol. (unavailable). Pp. 1-21.

Quentin, Stevens., Morley, Merrick., Dovey, Kim. 2022. Understanding the capacities of urban street spaces by mapping Melbourne's parklets. *Journal of Urbanism.* Vol. [unavailable]. Pp. 1-24.

Thorpe, Amelia. 2020. *Owning the Street: The Everyday Life of Property.* The MIT Press (Cambridge)

Appendix I: List of interviews and observations.

Observations:

Area where parklet observed was located	Number of morning observations	Number of noon observations	Number of	Number of evening observation