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Parklets, Network Spaces

FRANCESCO ARMATO

FRANCESCO ARMATO

Architetto e PhD, Professore Con-
tratto | Dipartimento DIDA Scuola
di Architettura Università di Firenze
(Italia)| francesco.armato@unifi.it

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Abstract

Parklets are urban products that regenerate portions of asphalt in green areas dedicated to meetings , social and ecosustainable sharing platforms. They are Intelligent systems to conduct outdoor community practices, while maintaining and developing environmental, social and economic qualities. The research deals with the issues of living together with others, it studies the conversion of small spaces and surfaces, and of the boundary between the street and the sidewalk of cities, Real Social Network, sharing moments of life.

Parklets, Network Spaces are new strategies for Smart Cities through small-scale projects populated by eco-sustainable and interconnected products, with the aim to activate new social practices, share information, by strengthening the social fabric.

Introduction

Cities with the appearance of cars, cities have changed their urban layout, urban public open spaces have been adapted and designed for both public and private transport: the car.

For decades the urban fabric has been structured to facilitate the vehicular flow, streets have become larger and larger, the parking lots have increased dramatically, occupying even the spaces that were previously destined to be together like the squares and the contained spaces located between the buildings of the city.

The vision of the car as a means of Smart transport, a concept which is widespread and shared by many, ends in the eighties and nineties, as we become aware that cars are «products» which create inconvenience, slowdowns due to the traffic, to the lack of parking, and to the air pollution.

In recent decades, the idea of the automobile has undergone a radical transformation, going from being considered an object of worship we cannot separate from, to be seen as bad for society, the days begin with the blockage of circulation of the older vehicles, the restricted traffic zone areas are born, the pedestrian areas, the cycle paths, the new tram networks and the undergrounds increase.

Even today, automobiles are part of urban furnishings, the metal "boxes" of various colours occupy and colour every corner of the city, creating a physical-visual discomfort and a lack of security, dissuading people who could move on foot or by bike to reach places which are not so far.

These considerations have created the need to find solutions that can contribute to improve people's life, in the public open spaces of our cities, through minute interventions, on a small scale which cover the entire urban fabric.

The research focuses on Parklets, urban products that take parking spaces in public car parks to give comfortable space to pedestrians, a phenomenon that was born in San Francisco in 2005 and is now developing in different parts of the world.

Through a critical observation this new typology of aggregation and sharing spaces facilitates pedestrian movements. Furthermore, a survey on the services and usefulness that the community can receive from Parklets, has revealed how people's habits and way of life have changed.

Literature review

It is not easy to structure a Literature Review on Parklets, the available material is little and in some ways limited, being a phenomenon born in the last decade.

This literary review on Parklets analyzes small urban spaces in terms of social and temporal aspects, how it has changed and conditioned people and what it has generated over time, uses and habits.The physical-volumetric aspect of these installations that recline along the sidewalks and gnaw the asphalt improve the urban visual impact, the space dedicated to the vehicles is given to the people, a relaxation area that invites to rest and stay together with the others (Armato, 2018).

This research studies and analyzes the Parklets in San Francisco and in London, different from each other both in terms of culture and tradition, and where local governments have structured real programs that regulate the implementation of these artifacts. A study on the strategies of choosing the places and the criteria to formulate the request for a new installation, the approval of the projects, the types and classification of the functions that these installations must develop, born to slow down the flow of vehicles and increase the Walk On Sidewalks.

Research on Parklets has focused on the use and process of design to know the current limitations but also potential future developments, such as the ability to network them and make them Smarter. Studies and surveys carried out in 2010 by the San Francisco Planning Department show that when welcoming Parklets were created, with seating, the surface of the pavement was freed from the pedestrians who stopped there, facilitating walking and the movement from one place to the other of the neighborhood. People who were not interested in stopping or walking in an open public space before were "enchanted and fascinated" by the beauty of the new installations.

Parklets

In 2005, a group of designers from San Francisco, the Rebar, decided to help alleviate city traffic, to reduce smog, to make more beautiful and more welcoming streets, to stimulate economic activities and to facilitate socialization.

On a pick-up, they load a potted tree, a carpet of natural grass, a bench and a sign with an inscription: "sit down, and enjoy moments of relaxation in a micro-garden along the road"[1] (fig.1).

01
The first Park(ing), project RebarStudio designer, San Francisco, Photo RebarStudio
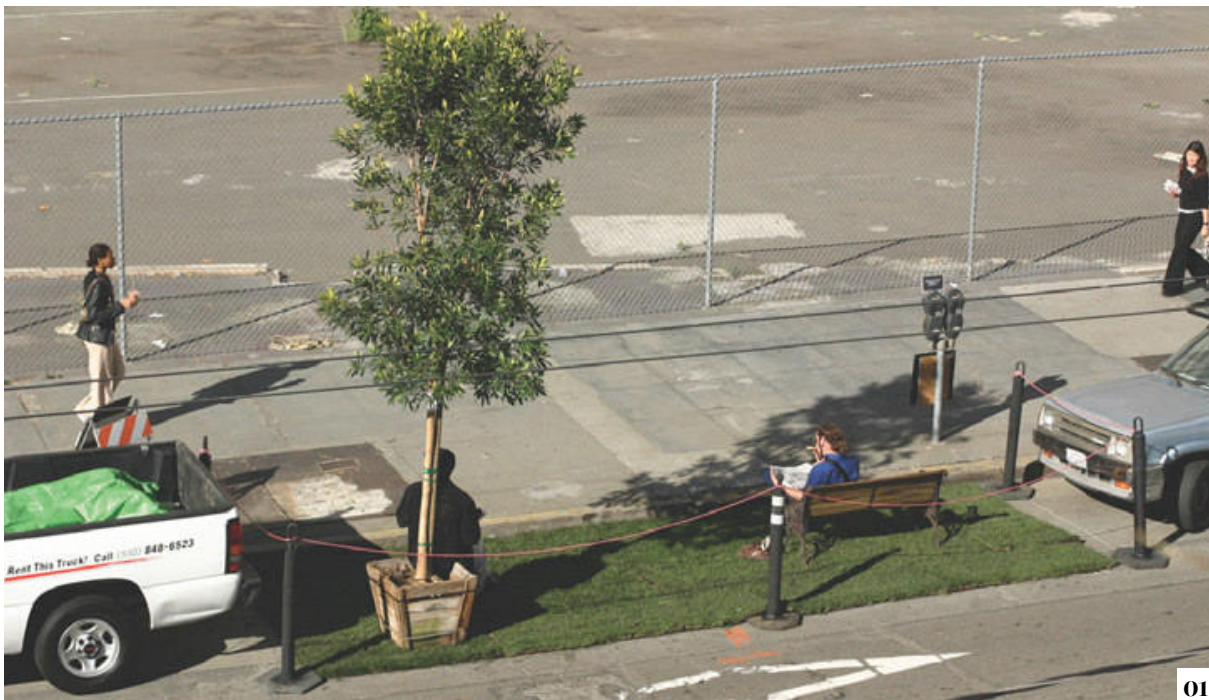
01

They head for a parking lot, pay for a a whole day stop, instead of parking the Pick-up they create an installation occupying two parking spaces: they spread out the lawn carpet, position the tree, the bench, the sign and invite passers-by to stop (Matt Passmore, 2015). After a few hours on the social media the news of the birth of the first Parklet had spread, today there are about fifty. In 2012, the Planning Department of the city of San Francisco, as far as Parklets are concerned, begins the first studies and draws up the first guidelines to regularize the presentation of the applications, but above all to give structured regulations for the installation.

A process to make the procedure more democratic, and to obtain standard types without the risk to create important environmental impacts or wild achievements. The first Parklets are created by private individuals who had an interest in increasing the flow of people around their activities, but right from the start the Green Association also became interested in their realization. It is important to remember that the Parklets offer a public service, even those financed by private entrepreneurs.

"The institutionalization of the Parklet is a good example of how a guerrilla action became a social movement, which in turn became incorporated into official public planning that then set rules to make Parklets or other forms of urban commons enduring, transparent, democratically accountable and organized to serve a wider population in the city"[2].

After the regularization of the Parklets, it was noticed that people are more motivated to take to the streets to walk, to live the open space, thus improving neighborly relations and public life. This new way of using public space has influenced the future choices of local administrations, when they were elaborating and planning public spaces, such as parking lots, bike lanes and sidewalks, they gave priority to the needs of pedestrians.

"Parklets are an important interim design that can provide necessary public space for pedestrian, bicycle and other nonvehicular uses. Parklets are valuable at locations where narrow or congested sidewalks prevent the full utilization of public space. They can be installed at the request of local businesses and residents to expand seating capacity in a certain area. In return for the approval to construct a Parklet, local property owners are often responsible for initial capital and maintenance costs. Parklets provide a unique opportunity to increase non vehicular public space while also promoting and supporting local businesses"[3].

The fundamental objectives to be achieved in the new organization of open-air spaces are: functional, comfortable, ecosustainable spaces with a high aesthetic value.

Research

In the last five years there have been several studies on Parklets, a very important one was carried out by the students of Berkeley University, their research has been called Public Perception of San Francisco's Parklets, with the aim of understanding the different perspectives of thought that have the users who frequent the Parklet.
The students interviewed the managers of companies that sponsored the Parklets and the people they met along the roads, to have different perspectives of a small and welcoming place, so to contribute, through different opinions, to improve their functions and aesthetic aspects.
The Parklets taken as case studies are located in San Francisco, Covington Kentucky and in London, three cities which, with different places, history and design approaches, provide elements for a more structured and more complete analysis.
Sunset Parklets, designed by Interstice Architects, 2015, and Ourcadia designed by Ogrydziak Prillinger, 2018, made in San Francisco; and Wish Igloo Parklet designed by architects Harry Ross of fieldCRAFTstudio-Seth Trance, 2016, in Covington Kentucky; and Parkd Bench designed by WMB Studio, 2015, made in London Sunset Parklet is considered a great public attraction, the project was financed by two local companies to revive their commercial activities.
Designers develop the project idea through an analysis of San Francisco topog-

raphy which , although apparently regular and geometric , is famous for its undulations, like waves or sand dunes. Seats to read, to eat, to put up a computer, a space to reunite the community, a bicycle parking, a space for dogs, games for children, basic technology like, Wi-Fi and useful energy, an eccentric, playful and engaging place, made at a low cost (fig. 2).

02

Sunset Park, San Francisco, project Interstice Architect, Photo Cesar Rubio

"Like a coastal edge they continue flat, beach-like, until they suddenly diverge vertically to follow seemingly independent programmatic objectives. Each of the four "street" strips undulate and double back upon themselves becoming seats, lounge chairs, tables, benches, planters, and accessible areas of ground and circulation along the entire length of the Parklet until they all reunite to form a raised planter that shields the windward western edge like the prow of an ancient long-ship"[4].

Parklet Ourcadia was conceived as a Work In Progress space, it appears to our eyes as an incomplete work that is taking shape making space inside a lawn, an amorphous shape that follows the geometric shapes of a tape system, and it intrigues the passerby and welcomes him through sessions with variable postures (fig. 3).
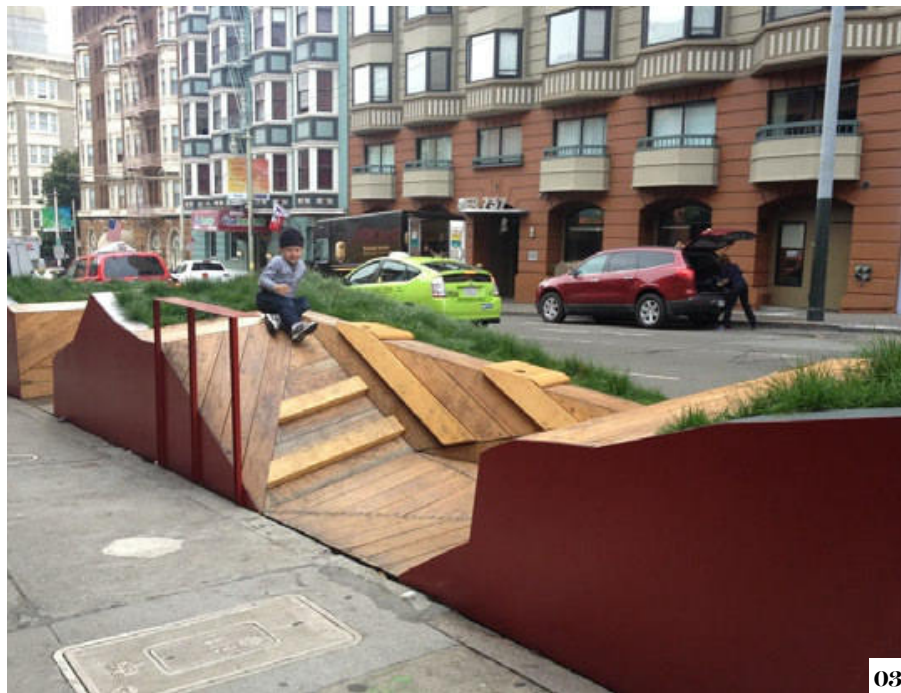
" […] is part of a series of projects has been developing which use computational design to control the behavior of slopes. Ourcadia was designed to optimize four types of desirable, objectively definable slopes: slopes for sitting, perching, lounging, and plant-

03

Parklet Ourcadia, San Francisco, project Ogrydziak Prillinger Architects, Photo

ing. It is only one step further to imagine the streets as fully lined with ribbon-like parks, a mirror of nature infiltrating the city. is an incomplete model park gesturing towards this fantasy. The organic forms offer a slice of 'nature' in contrast to the regular geometry of the urban streetscape, while the varied sloping surfaces are open to interpretation with regard to use. Raised garden beds envelope two seating areas, ParkLab, San Francisco creating immersive green clearings in the hard-edged Post Street canyon. Initially planted with grass to allow the soil to settle, the Parklet is now a varied landscape of drought-tolerant tall grasses, succulents and edible plants"[5].

Parked Bench appears as a singular sculptural body, defined by the designers as "the portable micro park" for its light shape made up of standard recycled and

coloured construction boards, with very low construction costs. The Parklet replaces two parking spaces with a long seat that develops along the entire length surrounded by an intense plantation that follows the entire perimeter and acts as a filter between the busy road and the seats, function: Urban Greening, the welcoming form «invites» people to relax and be together (fig. 4).

"The sculptural bench zigzags across the space and visually pops out from its surroundings thanks to the painted-red slatted board seating. Geometric galvanized steel plant pots filled with carefully selected plants that mitigate air pollution fit into the gaps[6]".

Within the surface Parklet , a monitor is placed and, in real time, it gives some information about the quality of the air in the different places in the city tank to an app linked to the Website projected by King College in London in the sphere of

04
Parkled Bench, London, project WMPstudio, photo WMPstdio

the iniziative French Air Squares , well-finished by the Team London Bridge and sustained by Transport for London Future Streets. Wish Igloo Parklet, compared to the aforementioned installations, which are structures that maintain a contained volume and a physical conformation that does not develop in height, has the possibility to let people live an immersive experience, to be inside the matter that constitutes it, involves physically and emotionally the people who frequent it (fig. 5).

"[…] by allowing people to leave personalized messages in the form of wishes. Inspired by traditional Japanese plaques called "emas", architects transformed a parking space into a unique temporary installation that facilitates socialization and creativity with a place where people can drink coffee, chat, create and relax"[7].

The Wish Igloo Parklet is part of the plan Renaissance Covington's Curb'd , for the redevelopment of the spaces which are destined as parking area in all the city and it has been chosen as the winner project of the competition Design-Build. The directions in the competition announcement were those to plan small fragments of urban public space which is involving and experimental.

Interview, listen to people

Interviews show that users of outdoor public spaces once again begin to feel like protagonists, as they have acquired an important role in urban space, a concept that had been forgotten with the advent of cars. Moreover, they think that the concept of the Parklet should be improved in the service it offers and should not be limited only to the sessions surrounded by greenery, to the parking for bikes, to Wi-Fi, [...] but it could be even more interactive, creating a network among the various Parklets present in the same city.

Interviews show that these small spaces designed for people should not be managed by private individuals, by those who have a restaurant or a Fronting activity because they could limit the development and the growth of a system born from the bottom up. Most of the interviewed people want to be more participatory expressing their thoughts from the beginning of the project to its installation, giving advice and communicating their needs, «they want to feel at home in the public space».

People expressed very much in favor of creating public initiatives of all kinds to ensure that the Parklet can be "enjoyed" with interest in the various time slots and where everyone, from children to the elderly, can find stimuli and a desire to share moments of relaxation, conversation, knowledge, to strengthen the sense of belonging and neighborhood.

It is interesting to note that a target of people, aged 30 to 50, hopes that more Parklets will be realized, people would be more stimulated to move in the city streets with the help of their own body because surrounded by beautiful and comfortable spaces, they would feel safer walking along the sidewalks, breathing a cleaner air.

05

05
Wish Igloo Parklet, Covington Kentucky, project Harry Ross of field-CRAFTstudio - Seth Trance, Photo Inhabit Magazine.

Parklets, Co-temporary and smart products

To understand what the possible technical-functional and expressive-communicative transformations of these micro urban spaces will be, one must project in the future, thinking that in addition to performing in an exemplary way the function of catalysts, or places of aggregation with a great functional aesthetic value, can also connect with each other creating a real Social Network; just look at San Francisco layout with its fifty Parklets.

A decade ago, the idea of eliminating parking spaces to create spaces for parking and pedestrians could seem unattainable, yet in two hours the Rebar group helped change the planning system of many cities Parklets can be associated with a fluid, temporary and connected reality, a point system, liquid and technological. Nodes that expand in the area where they are installed due to their communicative influence, but if we put them online with the other Parklets in the same city or with the other cities of the world, a continuous and widespread diffusion would be created. A communication that transforms the concept of knowledge between people and different cultures in a very short time, would create an exchange of direct emotional experiences at the same time with a liquid diffusion (Bauman, 2011), which penetrates and expands to concretize another knowledge, another awareness. "Fluid communities, without which there is only the solitude of the connected individuality"[8]. (fig.6).

06

06
Yonge parklet on Elm Street, Toronto, project Interior Department Ryerson University, Photo BlogTo Toronto

An image, a lighthouse that allows you to move quickly and easily, a large system of references to organize daily activities, both individual and collective, Public Realm (Lynch, 1960). Parkelt, thanks to its intimate dimension, favors contact and becomes a place of contamination, of listening, exchange and opening towards the other(fig.6).

A place where to return to meet, to be surprised and excited, to be together that can be material and immaterial, to share experiences directly in the same place or at a distance, in a temporal space different from mine. A sharing of data and images, from the comparison of the quality of New York area with that of Shanghai to bringing to life events and moments of life in real time through videos and frames projected onto the surfaces of the Parklet.

The creation of a Digital Walk Map platform could be a Smart application that signals the location of the Parklets distributed in the city, the travelling time between a Parklet and the other on foot or by bike, the traffic situation and the type of services that they would meet along the way. This application would be useful for the user, he would be aware of important data for his health and the environment. To recover the right to walk surrounded by a creative and safe environment, to feel a sense of widespread well-being, Jane's Walk is a real example that has contaminated so many cities around the world to honor the memory of the anthropologist and urban activist Jane Jacobs, walking in the city with routes and distances on a human scale for urban "literacy". Parklets have an immediate success, people like them and are very popular, it is a highly contaminated design product that performs public functions for the entire community.

Her success can be explained through some reflections made by Jane Jacobs, she told very strongly that cities need something beyond parks and squares: commercial activity is a crucial component of public life. In fact, cafés are increasingly important places for interaction with the community, unfortunately banks, post offices, specialized shops, newsagents, obfuscated by the competition of large retailers and the digital market disappear. Another reason for the Parklets' assertion is due to the interaction people have with them, in many cases, participating in the meetings to make decisions about what the future Parklet will look like, the formal aspects, the use functions, a real planning participated where the community feels an active part.

The sidewalk expands on some points to give space to creativity, the loops that host creative installations and Smart where people can just sit and read a book, interact with each other even with computer systems inside the area.

Conclusions

The Parklets aim to activate and strengthen the socialization relationship among the inhabitants, to know each other and feel safer in their neighborhood. Tailored installations which, besides having the function of a space to stop, can shape the urban landscape in a pleasant and punt-point way. People are stimulated at the Walk On Sidewalks, as it increases the right to walk and meet the others in public spaces, right that often lacks as, , in medium and large cities, there are no human-sized places which are comfortable to see and use.

The surveys, Stakeholder Interview, made by a group of students directed by Professor Robert Harris, University of Southern School of Architecture, California, have shown that after the realization of the Parklets ,people are not only more encouraged to cross the threshold of their house, but they prefer to move on foot or by bicycle because they have the certainty of being able to meet someone "to chat to" Creating an informed and digitally enriched inhabited place, focus the attention on emerging and innovative initiatives, a Smart system that can be a contribution to the growth of environmental sharing spaces in order to improve cities.

Digital is not very present in the Parklet project, but it could be applied for new structures, technology can improve our cities; "The digital revolution didn't kill cities. In fact, cities everywhere are flourishing because new technologies make them even more valuable and effective as face-to-face gathering places"[9].

The Parklets connected to each other, in the same city and to other Parklets located all over the world, could provide fundamental information for city life and the environment,meeting places where to exchange ideas and share healthy ideals for the

environment through the installation of Smart Display; the presence of flow sensors, Array of Thing, to monitor the quality of the area, the stay of pedestrians inside Parklets and the movements along the sidewalks.

The collected information would be used both to improve the urban layout and for the use of public spaces by citizens. The Parklet is not and should not become an area where to find only seats because it would lose its vibrant energy, its identity as an open-air room and the connotation of space created to aggregate and share experiences and emotions.

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