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## CALIFORNIA SEEN

# A green idea blossoms in the streets

**MARK RECHTIN**  
**AUTOMOTIVE NEWS**  
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San Franciscans have a funny knack for civil disobedience. In trying to make their point, demonstrators tend to create a situation as inconvenient for as many people as possible.

Witness the Golden Gaters' attempts to persuade their fellow man to ride bicycles to work. A mass-cycling demonstration is scheduled during rush hour, snarling traffic and infuriating car-bound commuters, rather than enticing them to change their ways.

However, a more gentle gesture in the Bay Area may be catching on globally.

Last week marked the fifth anniversary of Park(ing) Day, where ecology-minded activists take possession of metered parking spaces and fill the areas with sod and potted trees, plants and shrubs. Nevermind that street-side parking spaces are at a premium in most urban areas. A point has to be made, if only for a day.

The idea behind Park(ing) Day is that our cities have become endless square miles of concrete and asphalt; the soothing effect of greenscape has been lost. Hardened ground means hardened people. Mix that with the idea that parallel parking on the street is a particularly inefficient way to store vehicles, and you get Park(ing) Day.

Matthew Passmore, the 39-year-old principal artist at a Mission District studio called Rebar, started Park(ing) Day in 2005. It consisted of an art installation in a single parking space. At the time, his gesture was mostly ignored.

But thanks to the Internet, Passmore's seed has sprouted. This year's Park(ing) Day, held Sept. 18, blossomed to 70 "parks" in San Francisco, as well as 500 parks in more than 150 cities worldwide.

"Cities experience a similar set of conditions and problems with congestion and pollution. It hits a nerve," Passmore said. "The idea was to create an experience in a single space."

In the Castro District, 29-year-old Amber Hasselbring and several friends had placed 150 potted plants in their parking space, from ceanothus to *Prunella vulgaris*. The space was a forum for Hasselbring's effort to create sidewalk gardens connecting the concrete mile of 19th Street between Mission Dolores Park and Franklin Square Park.

"We want to cut away and excavate some of the sidewalk, while still leaving plenty of room for pedestrians to walk," said Hasselbring, who splits time as a photographer, artist and garden designer. "We could have three or four feet of wildlife gardens in place of cement, with nectar plants, host plants and rock gardens."

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Mark Rechtin is West Coast Editor of *Automotive News*.

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Not that everyone involved in Park(ing) Day is so politically minded. One group created a minigolf course just for fun (putts tended to break toward the sidewalk). Another space hosted shirtless dancing, hula hoops and general bacchanalia -- after all, it was a sweltering Friday afternoon.

Some businesses got into the act, though tactfully. Sarah Appleman of the pro-bono Free Design Clinic set up a stylish booth consisting entirely of repurposed materials, offering her company's architecture services to nonprofits and small businesses. In painfully trendy Hayes Valley, man-bag retailer Timbuk2 offered free bicycle maintenance at its conquered parking space.

Most people gave the parks a good-natured smile. Passers-by often fed the parking meters, even though the meter maids tended to wink at the exhibitions. Some folks (often driving full-sized pickups or SUVs) shouted nasty comments, showing that not everyone in San Francisco is an Earth First vegan.

But for the most part, the parks gave off a friendly, welcoming vibe, an emotion painfully missing in most American cities. Matthew Passmore may be on to something.

You can reach **Mark Reichtin** at [mreichtin@crain.com](mailto:mreichtin@crain.com).

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