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Parking spaces become 'parks' — for a day

Movement aims to 'reimagine the possibilities of the urban landscape'

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LOS ANGELES - Activists across the U.S. parked themselves curbside Friday, taking up spaces reserved for cars and transforming them into mini parks with sod, potted plants, lawn chairs and even barbecue grills to raise awareness about how the auto has won the battle over public space in big cities.

On a busy street in Los Angeles, a neighborhood association took up seven parking spots and set up a hangout with a grill, a children's wading pool and a gardening workshop to teach people how to grow drought-tolerant plants.

In Chicago, an architecture firm turned two parking spaces into a pit stop where bicyclists could chill out on a grassy knoll and refuel on drinks and snacks.

In New York City, theater students from Fordham University staged a "Shakespeare in the Parking Spot" festival. Construction workers on their lunch break sat on cardboard chairs and watched the students read "Romeo and Juliet," "Richard III" and other plays from a portable stage.

"I was impressed," said adjunct professor Sandra McKee. "They did some interesting interpretations and they projected their voice well. Of course, they had to compete with the cars."

'PARK(ing) Day' movement

Those were some of the pocket parks created for "PARK(ing) Day." The movement started as a single installation four years ago in San Francisco and has become a worldwide event reaching more than 100 cities on four continents.

Matthew Passmore, who helped start PARK(ing) Day, said the concept strikes a chord with urban dwellers everywhere because they're dealing with similar issues of traffic congestion and pollution. The temporary parks highlight the fact that curbside parking "results in increased traffic, wasted fuel and more pollution," Passmore said.

He cites a study by Donald Shoup, a professor of urban planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, that found drivers spent an average of 3.3 minutes, or half a mile, circling the block in search of a parking space. Over a year, vehicles traveled 950,000 miles — the equivalent of 38 trips around the Earth — just looking for a parking spot. Shoup said many drivers would rather cruise for open spots on the street than park in higher-priced lots and garages.

"Converting a parking space into something else challenges people's assumption about how space is used and allows them to reimagine the possibilities of the urban landscape," Passmore said.

Activists keep coins handy

Organizers said many cities have been supportive, even when mini parks occupy a parking space beyond the time limit.

"Parking enforcement is well aware of what we're doing and they look the other way," said Alfredo Hernandez, who has staged mini parks in Los Angeles for three years.

But just in case, he said he keeps plenty of coins in his pocket to feed the meter.

Motorists and police slowed as they passed three such parks in Los Angeles to check out the scene. Some stopped to ask what it was about, then put their thumbs up before driving away.

At one park in downtown's arts district, an affordable housing advocacy group set up a lounge area over two parking spaces with chairs, tables and a lamp covered in artificial grass. A few people played Scrabble while others

chatted with curious onlookers.

"When we cut out the AstroTurf to lay on the ground, we didn't realize how big it was," said organizer Marla Alvarez. "This shows how valuable a parking space is as a piece of real estate. Hopefully this will start a dialogue about what you can do beyond just parking a car here."

Melissa How, a designer who works nearby, said it's usually tough to find a parking space in the area but she didn't mind losing two spaces to a temporary park.

"I think it's good. This doesn't happen everyday," she said.

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