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San Francisco's Street Parks: On the Power of Small Nature Spaces

By Tim Beatley

San Francisco has long been at the forefront of creatively capturing and repurposing small spaces. The city has become famous for its “parklets” of course, permitting the conversion of two or more on-street parking spaces into small public parks. This is an idea that has made its way to cities around the world. But this is only one of several such efforts the city has undertaken that involve multiple different city agencies.

There is also a living alleys initiative and an innovative sidewalk landscaping permit that allows residents to take up some of the pavement in their neighborhoods and replace it with biodiversity-enhancing flowers and greenery.

One equally innovative space-

repurposing program that we have admired over the years is the city's Street Parks program. Managed jointly by the City's Public Works department and the nonprofit San Francisco Parks Alliance, it takes small spaces owned by Public Works and makes them available as small parks and gathering places. Neighborhoods are required to step forward and propose a plan for a space, and one or more designated stewards must agree to tend and look after the space over time.

Many of the spaces are median strips in the middle of busy roads, and many are impossibly small or misconfigured in awkward ways. According to Julia Brashares of the San Francisco Public Works Department, who has been involved in running the program

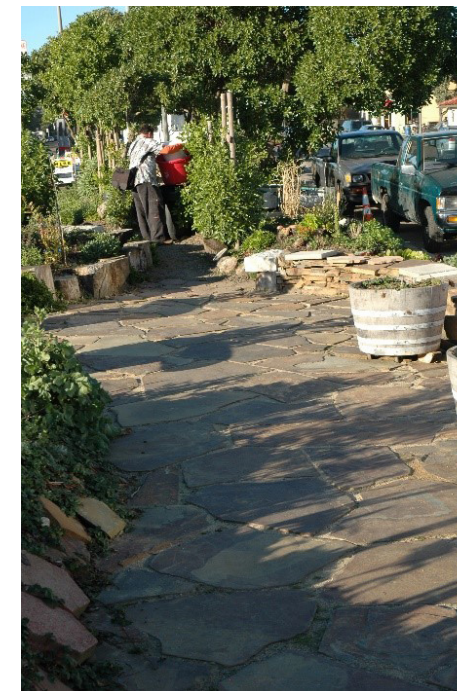
for several years, the number of Streets Parks as of February 2020 is an impressive 210. By her count about 70% of these spaces (around 140 of them) are “active” in the sense that there are residents caring for and using them. There is a kind of “ebb and flow” to these spaces as some residents move away, and others discover the spaces anew. Overall, Brashares feels strongly these spaces and the program which helps to engage residents, create friendships and form social connections, as well as bringing nature and public space into these neighborhoods.

Over time, she tells me, “the sites are getting more complex and interesting.” There are now a number of tiled stairways in the program, for example, adding elements of color and beauty

to the neighborhood. There are often both natural and artistic elements to the spaces and they provide locales for a multitude of different uses and activities.

One of the newest street parks is called Ridge Lane. It consists of five narrow parcels the neighbors are working to connect via a public pathway. These are currently spaces that Brashares describes as “weedy and inaccessible.” Often what happens is that one neighborhood connects with another and is inspired by its work. That is happening in this case, as two nearby street parks groups are already working together to imagine how their respective spaces could be connected into a larger, longer “walking loop.”

The program is cultivating an engaged citizenry to help manage, care for and defend these community spaces, and to be involved in the larger politics of a city. Twice a year, Brashares tells me, the Parks Alliance puts on “Capacity Building Workshops” where groups network and learn more about each other as well as how the city works. “It does seem like there is more civic engagement,” Brashares tells me. “They get awareness about how the city works by participating in the program.” The process encourages neighbors who may not even know each other to begin to connect and build working relationships. “People get out of their houses, they talk to each other.” One group's work inspires another; there is a kind of important sharing and mentoring happening between the neighborhoods.



To help get residents started there is a Street Parks Manual, which lays out the process and steps needed to establish a Street Park, including sample site plans, a list of the responsibilities of street park stewards, and the street parks application and agreement.

It was good to hear the latest from Brashares about a street park I visited several years ago, La Playa, in the Sunset District, right on the city's Pacific edge. It was a very narrow median, but one that had been reconfigured to accommodate both native plants and a bocce ball field. It is going strong as an important community gathering space, she tells me, and there are now discussions with local merchants about how they can further improve and pedestrianize the larger area around it (the end of the street car lines, where the cars turn around).

I asked Brashares whether this very narrow but quite interesting

park was actually being used. Indeed, she tells me. Many residents visit the popular coffee place across the street and walk to the median street to sip and relax. “You see people reading, hanging out, talking, playing bocce ball,” she tells me, “It's very social, people are out there all the time.”

It's easy to underestimate the value of these kinds of small urban spaces, and the human connections and lasting power of the moments of community engagement and activism they represent. It is highly likely, as Julia Brashares confirms, that the program is a kind of training ground, a dipping of the toes (and perhaps a headlong plunge) into the world of city politics and local governance that will pay lasting dividends for the city.

Resources:

Groundplay. Parklets. <https://groundplaysf.org/parklets>.

San Francisco Dept. of Public Works. Sidewalk Landscaping Permit Application and Approval Process. <https://www.sfparkalliance.org/our-work/programs/street-parks>.

San Francisco Parks Alliance. Street Parks. <https://www.sfparkalliance.org/our-work/programs/street-parks>.

sfbetterstreets. Living Alleys. <https://www.sfbetterstreets.org/find-project-types/reclaiming-roadway-space/living-alleys>.