

How turning parking spaces into tiny parks could ease Toronto's public space shortage

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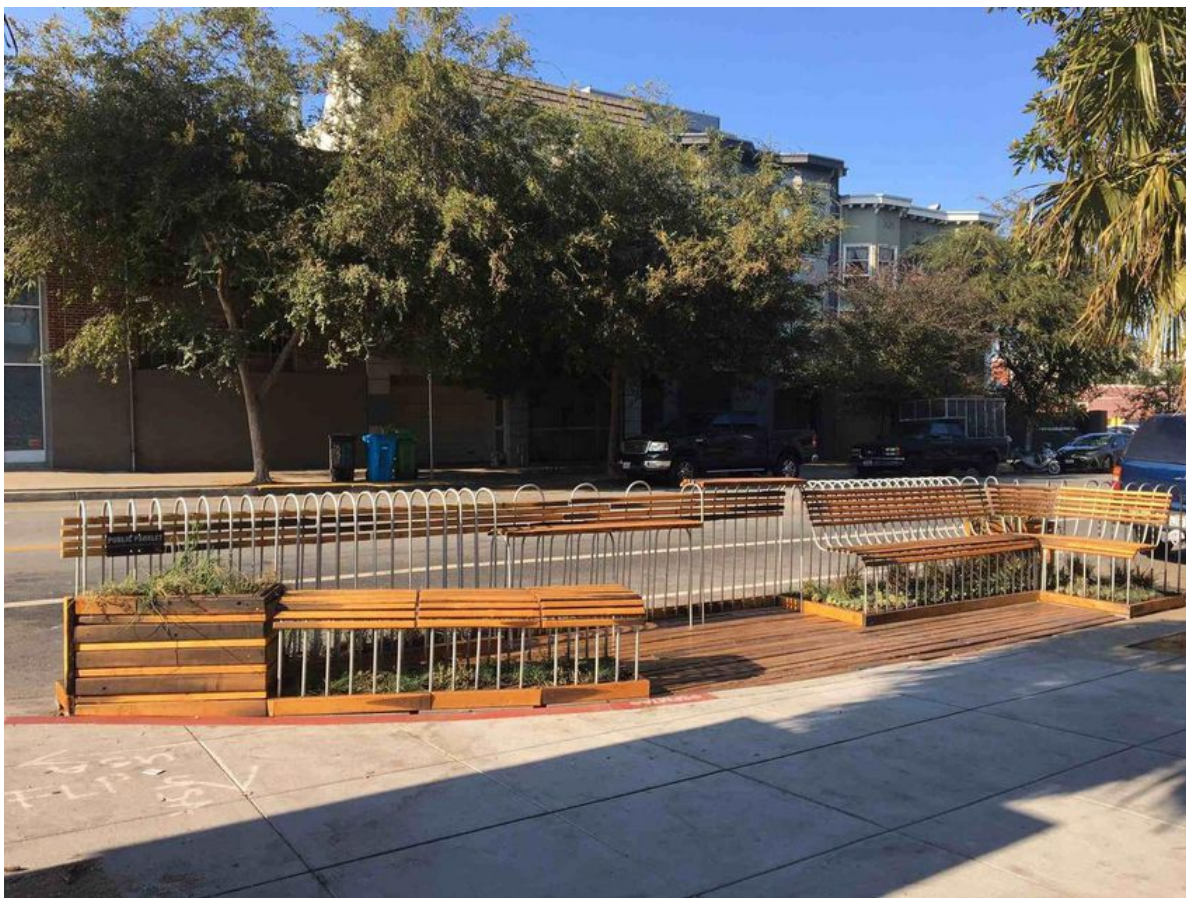
In a weekly series the Star seeks simple, affordable solutions to the problems faced by Torontonians and the city as a whole.

The problem: *As Toronto's population grows and becomes more dense, parts of the city are suffering from a shortage of parks and public space.*

In the Mission neighbourhood of San Francisco lies a tiny oasis made of bent pipes and reclaimed wood — complete with benches for weary pedestrians and plants that give the sidewalk a pop of green. It's squeezed into two former parking spots.

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The "Pipelet parklet," across from a high school, was designed and built by students through the non-profit Youth Art Exchange and installed in late 2017. It's one of 59 "parklets" across the Northern California city, the result of a push to turn street parking into micro parks.



“The city kind of embraced the concept of creating small public spaces,” said John Francis, manager of the parklet program, over the phone from San Francisco.

“We’re just storing cars in those places otherwise.”

As Toronto deals with a growing population, sky-high prices, and fierce competition for land, finding room for large public parks is increasingly difficult, especially downtown. This well-documented lack of parkland is coupled with a large city investment in parking. The Toronto Parking Authority is the biggest supplier of municipal parking in North America — managing 19,000 on street parking spaces and 22,000 off-street spaces offered at below-market rates.

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Toronto has some parklets, mostly as part of the King St. transit priority project. But as part of its Pavement to Parks program, San Francisco has streamlined the process for getting them on the ground, co-ordinating across silos and providing a handy manual complete with notes like “consider the rainforest, no tropical hardwood.” The city, unlike Toronto where parklets are divided between public space and expansion for restaurants, is also determined to keep them open to everyone, not just customers of a particular business.

“In San Francisco we’re very clear that you don’t have to buy something from the sponsor’s business to sit in a parklet or enjoy the parklet. We have signs that say ‘this is a public space,’” said Francis.

“We feel pretty strongly that it should be a public amenity, particularly because you’re actually using public property to build something.”

It started with “guerrilla” pop-up parks — citizens took over a parking space or two for a few hours, put down some grass and fed the metre — which led to a 2010 pilot program.



In 2016 the board of supervisors — San Francisco's governing body — passed the Places for People Ordinance, legislation designed to help correct an imbalance in access to public space, by making it easier to create parklets and other urban parks, according to Robin Abad Ocuillo, senior planner and urban designer with San Francisco city planning.

“Not all citizens have equal access to open space and that is a historical structural problem that we face in our cities and in our country,” he said.

From environmental activism to the LGBTQ rights movement, the city has “always been a pioneer in terms of civic engagement and civic participation” and “the expression of our country's democratic ideals in public space,” he said.

For Abad Ocuillo parklets are “part of a long tradition in San Francisco around empowering citizens and empowering the public to shape civic life and shape our civic commons, our public realm, by making it easier, less expensive, less process-intensive, to go ahead and make these projects.”

Many are sponsored by restaurants and cafés, and customers are encouraged to enjoy a coffee or a bagel in street seating, as long as non-customers aren't kicked out. They can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$150,000 Francis said, but are usually around \$20,000 (U.S.).

They are technically temporary, and some have come and gone over the years. Others have changed in design.

There's not a maximum size but they usually don't take up more than two parking spaces, and the parking doesn't have to be replaced. Francis doesn't have any hard numbers but anecdotally has heard they're good for business.

"It couldn't not be," he said.

"It kind of does act as an expansion of your square footage, in a way."

The Mission's Pipelet Parklet cost about \$35,000, said Reed Davaz McGowan, executive director at Youth Art Exchange, and was funded by corporate sponsors and grants. It's one of three the non-profit organization has worked on, providing high school students with an opportunity to leave their mark on their communities.

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"We tend to work in neighbourhoods that are not the most well known parts of San Francisco and so otherwise might not be able to get the glory of having a parklet," said Davaz McGowan.

"We see them as opportunities to create gathering spaces, community spaces, cultural spaces."



People do complain about the loss of parking, she said, and there are also concerns about them becoming sleeping spaces for San Francisco's large homeless population. The parklet manual touches on this — not to the level of "putting pigeon spikes or anything on it, but they are concerned about long stretches of benches into the design and so those are things that do inform what the designs of the parklets are," Davaz McGowan said.

In Toronto, parklets are divided between "parklet cafés" (there are 15 including 12 that are part of the King St. project and "public parklets" (19 with 15 part of the King St. project), according to city spokesperson Eric Holmes.

Under it, café applications must be submitted through Municipal Licensing and Standards, and once approved owners can serve customers food and drinks in them. Public applications must be submitted through Transportation Services. A permit is required in both cases, but the fee for the public ones is lower as they're meant as space for everyone.

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Jake Tobin Garrett, policy and planning manager at non-profit park advocacy organization Park People, calls parklets a "delightful" idea and "really interesting way of adding public space."

But they are not an "end solution to public space in busy areas." The four small parkettes planned on side streets along Bloor St., as a partnership between the Bloor Annex Business Improvement Area and the city, are an example of a Toronto twist on it, he said.

"They're a way of expanding seating and trees and greenery and gardens in these sort of key locations along intersections along these streets."

A pop-up public space in Scarborough's Wexford Heights Plaza parking lot this summer, funded by Park People and a city grant, "basically takes the idea of a parklet and adapts it to a suburban strip mall context," Garrett said.

Owners of businesses in the strip mall gave up a few parking spaces "to create this public space for people in the community to use that now has seating and pollinator plants that have attracted butterflies and caterpillars to this parking lot."



It's not an either or situation, and different kinds of urban space are needed, he said. But they all take political will.

"The cities where you see these parklets and other kind of street plazas become more prevalent and dynamic are the ones where the city has put a lot of effort both in their own time and in funding to actually put these together," Garrett said.

Francis agreed parklets aren't a perfect or permanent solution. But they do offer a small way to "clawback space from the automobile" and make car-centric streets slightly more livable.

"In my perfect world we wouldn't need them, because our streets and public realm would be designed to a much higher standard," he said.

"But in the meantime we have this great program that let's us do that."

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