

# TEMPORARY URBANISMS

BY  
MARGARET CRAWFORD

Urban life takes place in time as much as space. The natural rhythms of day and night, the changing seasons and even the far longer passage from birth to death have always structured our experience in cities. In modern cities, the daily and weekly cycles of the workday and the week-end and the yearly schedule of events, holidays and vacations shape not only urban experience but even urban space itself. Cities are built to accommodate these functions but their physical forms, constructed for permanence, rarely acknowledge their temporal dimension. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that every city has a unique rhythm, shaped by its history, geography and culture. He warned that cities that focus on space while ignoring time risk losing their souls and turning into generic and dead places.

Recently, artists, planners, city governments and urban activists all over the world have awakened to the possibilities of urban time. In response, they have started encouraging and orchestrating a multiplicity of temporary urbanisms. These events and practices are the products of many different impulses, ranging from oppositional politics to the purely commercial, and from DIY provocations to top-down planning. Yet, at the end of the day, the city's inhabitants play the central roles in this public drama; their engagement, in small or large numbers, gives public significance to what might otherwise remain private gestures. This exhibition highlights several genres of temporal urbanism particularly resonant in San Francisco. As the hometown of Critical Mass, the city isreceptive to creative bicycle activism, combining performance art and politics to reclaim the streets. With diminishing numbers of children in the city, reintroducing play, long banished from city streets, makes a poignant statement. Local artists who are highly attentive to the specificity of urban phenomena have moved into the street in significant numbers, actively intervening in public spaces.

Commercial activities such as street markets and vending, although not new, produce other types of temporary spaces. Purists might wonder if such moneymaking activities address the public good, but by attracting and bringing together large numbers of people in sociable circumstances, food trucks and vendor carts can also transform city spaces. Even without overt political goals, mobility allows them to create instant public spaces in almost any street, sidewalk or parking lot. Their activities reverse bicycle activism, which brings citizens to the city. Instead, they bring the urban experiences of food and eating to the city, particularly in underserved parts of the city. It is no accident that Portland, Oregon, a pioneer in urban biking, also encourages all kinds of food trucks and vendors.

All of these practices and activities illustrate the transformative possibilities that temporary uses can generate. Orchestrated in time, a single space can acquire multiple identities, adding new and unexpected meanings without distogding existing ones. Such shape-shifting urban spaces are flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. As ad hoc urban laboratories, they are ideal experimental venues to test different locations, activities and schedules. The multiple publics they serve are ultimate arbiters. Events and activities that don't interest them or serve their needs will quickly vanish, while those that do are likely to endure.

After teaching a course about temporary urbanisms, my personal collection of examples now fills two large boxes and over a gigabyte in my computer, demonstrating the proliferation and bewildering complexity of such practices. A recent New York Times article complained

that Manhattan pop-ups (both for- and nonprofit) are now so ubiquitous that they no longer possess any "alternative" cachet. How can we make sense of this vast array of interventions and activities? The French philosopher Michel de Certeau divided urban practices into two opposing trajectories: strategies and tactics. He defines strategies as the ways those with power own, occupy and control space. Tactics are the opportunistic practices the weak employ to temporarily hijack these spaces for their own use. According to de Certeau, tactics, although often remarkably creative, are always ephemeral, inevitably eliminated by strategic power. But his pessimistic formulation is too simple, ignoring another form of temporality: repetition. Repeated many times, by many people, tactics can turn into strategies, thus ensuring their long-term survival. A good example is the way in which the tactical activity of PARK(ing) Day inspired the more permanent and official planning strategy of parklets. Now, both coexist on the streets of San Francisco without apparent contradiction.

Defamiliarization is another relevant concept. By "making strange," this modernist artistic technique forces the audience to see common things in new and unfamiliar ways. This strangeness opens us up to reconsider existing circumstances, question the status quo and imagine other possibilities. After seeing hundreds of bicyclists take over a street normally occupied by cars, we'll never that street the same way again. Defamiliarization often takes the form of inversion. Visiting a farm on the Champs-Elysees or sunbathing on Paris Plage turns urban experience upside down, placing the countryside and the beach in the middle of an environment normally devoted to work, shopping and tourism. Temporary urbanisms can also remanifestize urban space. By injecting human presence and meanings into alienating urban spaces, they render them more welcoming and comfortable. People and objects come to life. A woman wearing an apron selling homemade tamales summons up images of domesticity and family life, rather than the anonymity of the street or the impersonal exchange of a commercial transaction.

The success or failure of temporary urbanisms can be difficult to determine. Even popular events can vanish in an instant, victims of their own ephemeral nature. The energy required for continual improvisation often exhausts sponsors and volunteers, leading them to abandon their efforts. Other events outlive their time, becoming routine and calcified, such as Manhattan street fairs. Once vitally local, they became generic and predictable. At a moment of fiscal crisis, low-cost and impromptu public activities appeal to planners, but maintenance and permanent changes will require far greater public commitment and expenditure. But these are minor concerns. Time, now recognized as a dynamic force in urban life, will continue to reshape cities and enrich urban life.

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Permanent Breakfast held in the Czech Republic, 2009. Photo: Permanent Breakfast.

## PARK(ING) DAY

**Location:** Initiated in San Francisco, CA  
**Size:** 2-3 parking spaces  
**Cost:** \$7,000-\$40,000 to 2 or 3 spaces  
**Duration:** The duration of paid parking on a parking meter  
**Year:** 1996-present  
**More Info:** [parkingday.org](http://parkingday.org)

PARK(ing) Day is an annual daylong global event where citizens, artists and activists collaborate to temporarily transform metered parking spaces into "PARK(ing)" spaces: temporary public places. The project began in 2005 when Rebar, an interdisciplinary art and design studio, converted a single metered parking space into a temporary public park in an area of San Francisco that is underserved by public open space.

A quintessentially "open source" project, PARK(ing) Day has since been adapted and remixed to address a variety of social issues in diverse urban contexts around the world. Over the years, PARK(ing) Day has expanded to include a broad range of interventions well beyond the basic "tree-bench-sod" park typology first modeled by Rebar. Participants have created interventions ranging from free health clinics, urban farming and ecology demonstrations to political seminars, art installations, free bike repair shops and even a wedding ceremony!

Occurring annually on the third Friday in September, in hundreds of cities around the globe, PARK(ing) Day has effectively re-valued the metered parking space as an important part of the commons: a site for generosity, expression, socializing and play. And although temporary, PARK(ing) Day has inspired direct participation in the civic processes that permanently alter the urban landscape. In San Francisco, it has inspired the city's official parklet program and is a model for how artists' interventions can help to provoke official city policy.



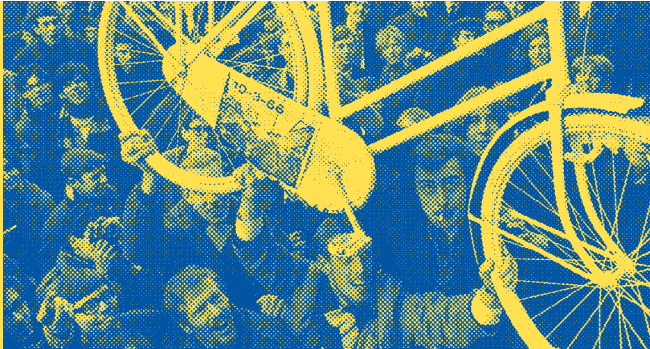
Artist Anne Rosenthal's 2009 PARK(ing) Day installation, "Working Not Park," which includes two attracting plants installed on Valencia Street in San Francisco. Photo: Allison East.

**Location:** Public spaces chosen by participants. Initiated in Vienna, Austria  
**Size:** 5 people  
**Cost:** Variable  
**Duration:** The length of a meal  
**Year:** 1996-present  
**More Info:** [p-breakfast.net](http://p-breakfast.net)

Initiated in 1996 by artist Friedemann Derschmidt in Vienna's Schwarzenbergplatz, Permanent Breakfast is a temporary urban intervention in which participants are invited to a public breakfast and then asked to continue the action by staging breakfasts of their own. By occupying public spaces, participants change the nature of the places they are in, converting sidewalks, plazas and parking spots to spaces of food preparation, eating and conversation. According to the snowball concept of the project, 1.6 million people would have participated in a public breakfast by the 10th day of the project. The event has been staged in many cities, including Prague, Berlin, Oslo and Melbourne, and hundreds of breakfasts have been documented since the project's inception.

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The 1965 event in which Provo placed 50 free white-painted bikes on the streets of Amsterdam. | Photo: Provo

## WHITE BICYCLE

**Location:** Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
**Size:** 50 bicycles  
**Cost:** Unknown  
**Duration:** 1-day event distributed bikes that remained in circulation for approximately a month before most were stolen or missing  
**Year:** 1965  
**More Info:** [tinyurl.com/3oen5ez](http://tinyurl.com/3oen5ez)

The White Bicycle program began in 1965 as a guerrilla event, staged by an Amsterdam anarchist collective called Provo. Conceived of by Provo member Luud Schimmelpennink, the first White Bicycles were 50 white-painted, secondhand bikes placed anonymously in public places. The event was designed as a provocation, to question the need for private automobiles and stress the practicality of free, public modes of transportation.

The White Bicycle program was the first of many bicycle share programs. The concept has been referred to by a range of names including community bicycle programs, public use bicycles, free bikes and bike libraries, among others. Although originally organized mostly by local community groups or nonprofit organizations, many of these programs are now being implemented by municipalities, governmental agencies or public-private partnerships.

Bicycle shares allow anyone to pick up a bike, ride it a short distance and leave it at the destination for others to use. Current programs typically use "smart bikes," which can only be unlocked and ridden with personal identification through magnetic cards. Users typically pay a fee (either per-use, like a subway ticket, or by credit card) to use the bikes, which helps cover the program cost.

Large-scale bike share programs have been launched in many cities, including Vélib' in Paris (2007), Bixi in Montreal (2008), Capital Bikeshare in Washington, DC (2008), OVBike in London (2010) and EcoBici in Mexico City (2010). In 2012 San Francisco will launch its own bike-sharing program. The \$7.9 million pilot program, funded by the Metropolitan Transit Commission, will create depots for 1,000 smart bikes around the city and at Caltrain stations on the Peninsula.



San Francisco's Critical Mass ride along Powell Street in San Francisco. Photo: Chris Gagliardi

## CRITICAL MASS

**Location:** Initiated in San Francisco, CA, and hosted in over 300 cities worldwide  
**Size:** An average of 1,500 riders  
**Cost:** None  
**Duration:** 1 evening a month  
**Year:** 1992-present  
**More Info:** [foundsf.org](http://foundsf.org)

Critical Mass is a mass bike ride scheduled during rush hour on the last Friday of every month. This bicycle transit movement began in San Francisco in September 1992 with 45 riders, and has continued every month since, growing to an average of about 1,500 riders and topping 5,000 on several occasions. Since its inception it has spread to over 400 cities around the world. Critical Mass offers itself as "an antidote to the elimination of public space," and, in making bicycles become the traffic, upends traditional hierarchies of cars and cyclists.



Rebar's "parklet," a modular parklet system installed on 22nd Street in San Francisco's Mission District. | Photo: Rebar

## PARKLETS

**Location:** San Francisco, CA  
**Size:** 1 or more standard parking spaces  
**Cost:** \$1,000-\$40,000  
**Duration:** 1-year renewable permits  
**Year:** 2010 onward  
**More Info:** [spavementparklets.sfplanning.org](http://spavementparklets.sfplanning.org)

Parklets offer a fast, inexpensive way to create long-desired pockets of open space on city streets, relieve sidewalk crowding and boost local businesses. They are modular, removable open spaces that usually occupy one to three curbside parking spaces, thereby extending the open space of city sidewalks. Parklets often include seating areas, planters, bike racks and cafe tables. Inspired by Rebar's guerrilla art intervention PARK(ing) Day, parklets began being implemented as part of San Francisco's Pavement to Parks program in 2010. The Department of Public Works has created a public approval process for new parklets. In 2011, more than 70 individuals and businesses applied. There are currently 14 completed parklets, with more approved and on their way to construction. Typically, the parklets are erected and maintained by local citizens and businesses rather than the city government.

Parklets are an innovative way to create new public green space, incrementally and inexpensively. While engineering a sidewalk can cost \$1.5 million per city block, parklets are inexpensive and can be added or moved sequentially. Perhaps not surprisingly, the concept is spreading to other cities around the country and world; parklets have been called San Francisco's "most intriguing urban design innovation" by the San Francisco Chronicle.



Transit rider enjoying the swing installed at the Remoth Market bus stop in London. | Photo: Bruno Taylor

## SWING BUS SHELTER

**Location:** London, England  
**Size:** 1 bus shelter  
**Cost:** Variable  
**Duration:** Temporary  
**Year:** 2008  
**More Info:** [tinyurl.com/4465b23](http://tinyurl.com/4465b23)

The Swing Bus Shelter was created by industrial designer Bruno Taylor for London bus stops. Noticing that "71% of adults used to play on the streets when they were young, 21% of children do so now," Taylor asks, "Are we designing children and play out of the public realm?" Taylor's objective was to make public places more playful by incorporating incidental play into existing streets. This is perhaps the most extreme version of bottom-up, guerrilla tactics: each individual rider can contribute to the formation of a tangible bike network, simply by following his or her preferred route.



Contrails device traces a collectively used bike path. | Photo: Contrails

## CONTRAILS

**Location:** Brooklyn, NY  
**Size:** 2 inches x 5 inches  
**Cost:** \$40  
**Duration:** Several days  
**Year:** 2010-present  
**More Info:** [bikecontrails.com](http://bikecontrails.com)

Contrails are devices for marking bike lanes, conceived of by Pegín Cellardi and Teresa Herrmann of ULICU, a New York company. The device mounts on a bike and sprays a stream of water-soluble temporary paint on to the back wheel. This enables individual riders to leave colorful graphic traces of their paths. Contrails have the potential to create a truly emergent, crowdsourced model for creating bike routes. The aggregation of many individual traces can create a dense network of paths, diagramming the most popular and safe routes in a city. At the same time, they can discourage people driving motor vehicles from impinging on those routes. This is perhaps the most extreme version of bottom-up, guerrilla tactics: each individual rider can contribute to the formation of a tangible bike network, simply by following his or her preferred route.



New York City's separated bike path and greenway along Broadway. | Photo: Mia Katz

## NEW YORK CYCLE TRACK

**Location:** New York, NY  
**Size:** 80 blocks  
**Cost:** \$2.7 million per year  
**Duration:** Permanent  
**Year:** 2008-present  
**More Info:** [tinyurl.com/3muv3td](http://tinyurl.com/3muv3td)

Perhaps the safest way for people on bicycles to travel through cities is on cycle tracks—bike lanes that are physically separated from motor vehicle traffic. The concept originated in Europe and is popular throughout the world; in the U.S., it has been implemented most broadly in Manhattan. Cycle tracks can be separated from traffic by bollards, median strips, trees or most commonly-parked cars. In New York, the bike lane is located between the sidewalk and the car parking lane; the row of parked cars creates a physical barrier against moving traffic. In New York, over 80 blocks of cycle track have been implemented, with more planned. Since this approach typically requires adjusting the programming of the street, it has not been without controversy. However, extensive studies throughout the world have shown tremendous benefits for street safety and comfort for people on bikes, on foot or in their car.



Paris Plages installation in 2009. | Photo: Sarahbook Online Photo/Photo

## PARIS PLAGES

**Location:** Paris, France  
**Size:** 2 miles  
**Cost:** \$3 million  
**Duration:** 1 month  
**Year:** 2002-present  
**More Info:** [parisplages-paris.fr](http://parisplages-paris.fr)

First initiated in 2002 by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë, Paris Plages ("Paris Beaches") is a monthlong annual event where the City of Paris creates temporary urban "beaches" along the right banks of the Seine River. A major motorway clogged with heavy traffic most of the year, the Georges Pompidou Expressway transforms into an outdoor getaway. This temporary pedestrian promenade offers sand-filled beaches with deck chairs, palm trees, hammocks, a swimming pool that floats on top of the river and fine-water misters to cool off in. The beach is animated day and night with activity, including dance lessons, beach volleyball, music concerts and sand-castle building. Now, in 2011, there are three different beach areas along the Seine River running from the Louvre to Pont de Sully to the Port de la Gare and the Bassin de la Villette. The event has been duplicated in other cities, including Rome, Mexico City, Amsterdam, Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Vienna.



The pedestrian plaza in Times Square, 2009. | Photo: NY DOT

## GREEN LIGHT FOR MIDTOWN

**Location:** New York, NY  
**Size:** 23 blocks  
**Cost:** \$1.5 million  
**Duration:** Ongoing  
**Year:** 2009-present  
**More Info:** [tinyurl.com/dmjocx](http://tinyurl.com/dmjocx)

In 2008, as part of a commitment to transform the city's streets and sidewalks into new, lively public urban space, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) began the Sustainable Streets Program in close collaboration with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlaNYC, an overall initiative calling for long-term sustainability for the city. In 2009, the NYCDOT implemented the Green Light for Midtown as a temporary pilot project that aimed to improve mobility and safety in the city's chaotic Times Square District by reinventing underused and misused roadway space in order to create quality public space for residents and visitors alike.

Green Light for Midtown began as a series of changes to traffic patterns in the Broadway corridor of Midtown Manhattan. Certain sections of street were converted to pedestrian zones barricaded from automobile traffic, and these zones were filled with movable lawn chairs and shade umbrellas. The city has held public art contests to create pavement patterns and murals on the ground surface to visually set these plans apart from roadway traffic. Due to improvements in mobility along the Broadway corridor, and because of this new, improved quality of life, the city has plans to transform these temporary trials into a permanent plaza.



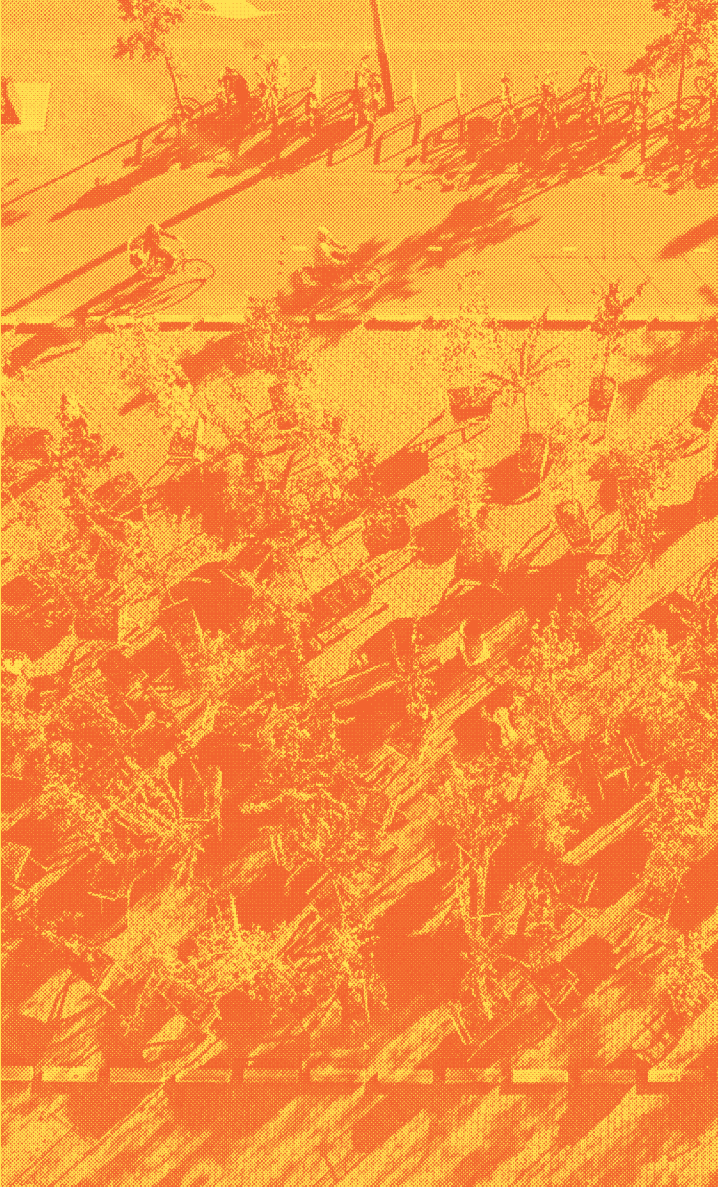
Kids playing in the Regisip Imagination Playground at Norling Slip in New York City. Photo: Alison East

## IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND

**Location:** Initiated in New York, NY  
**Size:** Approximately 225 square feet  
**Cost:** \$4,550 to \$7,600 per kit  
**Duration:** Variable  
**Year:** 2010-present  
**More Info:** [imaginationplayground.com](http://imaginationplayground.com)

Architect David Rockwell designed the Imagination Playground to encourage child-directed, unstructured free play. The playground is an assortment of "loose parts," a term coined in the 1970s by architect Simon Nicholson, who believed that inventiveness and creativity are directly proportional to the number of possibilities and variables children are given. In the Imagination Playground these "loose parts" include an assortment of movable objects, including blocks of different sizes and shapes, crates, fabric and carts.

In keeping with the tradition of the Adventure Playground, children are able to play in an environment they can manipulate and construct. Their play is monitored by "play associates," who enable children to direct their own play and maintain a safe and secure environment free of excess adult intrusion. The Imagination playground is constructed as a portable kit that allows it to be installed in diverse settings and at relatively low cost. This is appealing in areas of the city where there are not currently formal playgrounds. Imagination Playground box sets installed in publicly accessible play spaces all over the world, with over 50 in the United States alone.



Moving Forest installed in Amsterdam, 2008. | Photo: M. Schone

## MOVING FOREST

**Location:** Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
**Size:** A bunch of shopping carts  
**Cost:** N/A  
**Duration:** 1-5 months  
**Year:** 2008  
**More Info:** [droog.com](http://droog.com)

Moving Forest was a temporary mobile park designed by Dutch architects NL and Droog Design and developed for the 2008 ExperimentaDesign event in Amsterdam. Consisting of 100 trees planted in 100 shopping carts, the project proposed a way of making green space, with minimal materials and labor, in areas of the city that usually do not have them. The mobile trees were placed to allow playful interaction as visitors rearranged the temporary park. At the end of the installation, participants were encouraged to take the trees and plant them throughout the city.