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February 2018

PARK(ing) Day and the Problem of Public Space in Downtown St. John's, Newfoundland

It's the third Friday in September, and you are driving around downtown, scouring the streets for an available parking spot. You notice what looks to be an empty spot ahead and accelerate to claim it before someone else. You're about to pull into the spot when you notice that although the spot is free of another vehicle, it is filled with what appears to be plants, sod, benches, and people. You're shocked. Why is there a park in your would-be parking spot?

Drivers in the San Francisco area were treated to this very scenario back in 2005 when Rebar; a design studio; launched the first-ever PARK(ing) Day event. They transformed a single metered parking space into a temporary PARK inclusive of some sod, a bench, and a tree. Their goal was to examine the range of possible activities for a two hour time period, which was the maximum time on the meter, to provoke an examination of the values that generate the form of urban public space. It was a huge success.

PARK(ing) Day is now an annual global event where citizens, artists, designers and activists collaborate to temporarily transform metered parking spaces into temporary public spaces. It has evolved into a global movement, where every year on the third Friday in September, organizations and individuals create new forms of temporary public space in urban contexts around the world. The mission of PARK(ing) Day is to call attention to the need for more urban open space, to generate critical debate around how public space is created and allocated, and to improve the quality of urban human habitat. Although the projects are all temporary, they are meant to help inspire others to participate in the civic processes that permanently alter their own urban landscape. Landscape architects have especially embraced this mission, and are some of the top participants and promoters of PARK(ing) Day.

Downtown St. John's, Newfoundland is currently lacking when it comes to urban public space. There is a public park on the West End of downtown; Victoria Park; and a public park on the East End of downtown; Harbourside Park. However, as you move between those two points along the main artery that is Water Street, you will be hard pressed to find any public open space, or even a public bench for that matter.

In the Fall of 2015, the City of St. John's embarked on a project that would see the replacement of aging infrastructure beneath the road that would involve the tear-up of Water Street. Along with this project, they also announced that a design team had been hired to look at streetscape improvements along Water Street, as it only made sense to put back something better after the renovations. This was great news, and many citizens and designers alike were excited about this long overdue revitalization of North America's oldest street. However, in early 2016 after pushback from Water Street business owners about what construction would mean for their businesses, the city began exploring a "trenchless" approach to the renovations that would limit tear-up in the area. Although this approach would mean less disturbance and lower cost, it also meant that the streetscape improvements might not occur.

At the same time as these developments, a few local landscape architects in St. John's had been brainstorming ways to raise awareness of the profession in the province. The majority of the general public in Newfoundland is unaware of the role of a landscape architect, which makes the act of securing work a constant process of not only explaining the profession, but selling the benefits of having a landscape architect on a design team. Past initiatives to raise awareness during World Landscape Architecture Month had been successful; but it was time for something bigger. And so began the planning of Newfoundland's first PARK(ing) Day.

The main goal of the first ever PARK(ing) Day was to create a fun and interesting public space as close to Water Street as possible, that could be enjoyed by any and all passersby. Secondly, the PARK was to be a creative platform where the landscape architects involved could connect with the general public to promote the importance of the profession. Water Street

was the ideal location for the PARK not only because of its lack of public spaces, but because of its close proximity to restaurants, shops, and businesses. Considering the fact that the much needed streetscape improvements were now on the line, it was noted that the PARK would demonstrate the impact that good public space can have, especially where none currently exists. After attempts to secure a spot on Water Street were unsuccessful, a parking lot on a side street was chosen. The installation included a seating area, a lawn for bocce, and plants. Throughout the day, members of the public were drawn to the PARK, as the green stood out in the sea of grey that was the rest of the parking lot. Visitors played bocce, ate their lunches, and chatted about the importance of green space and public space in the context of St. John's. Then, by dusk, the PARK was gone, and a vehicle stood where it once had. Overall, the event was a great success. The PARK had been well-used throughout the day by many different people, and much of the feedback was that they were sad to see it go. The PARK also received media attention from CBC and a local newspaper, and both outlets awarded great praise to the initiative.

With the first event in the books, focus shifted quickly on how to make PARK(ing) Day 2017 bigger and better. The organizers approached the Atlantic Provinces Association of Landscape Architects for funding help, as they now had a precedent to present to the Board, and were planning to expand the event as much as possible. APALA was impressed with the initiative and committed money to the Newfoundland event; while also pledging to make funds available to groups in the other Atlantic Provinces who were interested in creating their own PARKs.

After gaining the backing of APALA, the organizers were approached by a local architect who was interested in partnering for event, by including their initiative called The Wandering Pavilion in the PARK. The Wandering Pavilion is a steel and canvas "structure" that moves from place to place in the province, catering to different public user groups as it goes. Its goal is to promote an appreciation and understanding of architecture and urban design, and to give a

platform for people to test their ideas about how to make our city better and build community. The goals between The Wandering Pavilion and PARK(ing) Day have much in common, and it was decided that collaboration on PARK(ing) Day would be the best approach to ensure overall success of the event.

The second PARK(ing) Day saw better collaboration with the City of St. John's and local business owners. A city councillor and business owner were essential in securing a parking spot on Water Street where the PARK could be located. With the ideal location locked in, plans were made to create a PARK with lots of colour and activity for maximum impact and interest. The Wandering Pavilion, which is mostly white canvas, was set within a PARK that incorporated a lawn area, a patio space, seating, and colourful raised planters. It was placed beneath a rare street tree, and was a pleasant space to be on a sunny and warmer-than-average day in September. Thanks to the more visible location, about four times the amount of people visited the PARK compared to 2016, with many asking questions about urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture.

One noteworthy success of the 2017 event was the way that programming was used to allow the PARK able to stay assembled for a full week. The organizers reached out to the different community groups, and created a schedule so that different groups could use the space on different days for their own activities and events. When the PARK wasn't being used by these groups, board games and reading material were left out to entertain any passersby that wanted to use the space. The temporary space and event that was once PARK(ing) Day had morphed into a space that met the needs of different user groups for an entire week. Besides the creation of an actual permanent park, a better result could not have been imagined.

Unfortunately, in January 2018, it was announced that the City of St. John's had scrapped plans to tear up Water Street, which include the streetscape improvements. Although this was a disappointment and a setback for the much needed improvement of public space in

downtown St. John's, PARK(ing) Day intends to keep growing; striving to provide good public space to the people of St. John's; even if only for one day a year.