THE PARK(ing) DAY MANIFESTO

User-Generated Urbanism and Temporary Tactics for Improving the Public Realm

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REBAR

The PARK(ing) Day Manifesto

Remixing niche spaces in the urban ecosystem and how artists contribute to the health of the public realm.

Park(ing) Day is typical of the medium in which Rebar works: "niche spaces" are undervalued, or valued inappropriately for the range of potential activities within them. We believe that such niches—once identified—can be opened up to re-valuation through creative acts. *Park(ing) Day* identifies the metered parking space as just such a niche within the urban landscape, and redefines it as a fertile terrain for creative, social, political and artistic experimentation. It was only through the replication of this tactic and its adoption by others that a new kind of urban space was measurably produced, as it was in the several years following Rebar's first *Park(ing)* experiment in 2005. With Rebar providing others with "permission" to act, new users rushed into this niche, challenging the existing value system encoded within this humble, everyday space. The parking space became a zone of potential, a surface onto which the intentions of any number of political, social or cultural agendas could be projected. By providing a new venue for any kind of unmet need, re-valued parking spaces became instrumental in redefining "necessity." Thus the creative act literally "takes" place—that is, it claims a new physical and cultural territory for the social and artistic realm.

As artists, the *Park(ing) Day* phenomenon ignited our curiosity about the composition of the street. We saw that the street could be defined as a territory inscribed with a greater number of interests than the landscape has room to accommodate. It is only by the tacit undervaluing of certain activities (such as, say, play or eating or socializing) that other activities (such as parking and driving) can thrive. *Park(ing) Day* sets up an operational precedent for intervening in such a contested, value-laden space and propose a new system of valuation. Embedded within this approach are what have emerged as four core strands of our practice so far: tactics, generosity, authenticity and absurdity.

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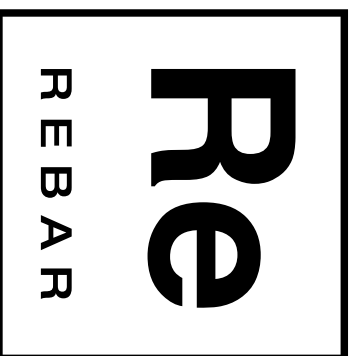
2.1 Tactical Urbanism

Rebar defines *tactical urbanism* as the use of modest or temporary revisions to urban space to seed structural environmental change. Our use of tactics is based on a belief that deep organizing structures (social, cultural, economic and otherwise) have a two-way relationship with the physical environment: they both produce the environment and are re-produced by it. Rebar has been consistently interested in the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the *doxa* and *habitus* as ways of explaining how we perceive this highly-coded landscape. According to Bourdieu, "every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness."[1] These doxa are deep, self-evident beliefs that not only explain the way the world works but are reinforced by the physical environment and our ways of operating within it—that is, *habitus*. "The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be nonetheless 'sensible' and 'reasonable.'"[2] Doxa favor the power relationships of the *status quo* because it is those relationships which have produced the landscape itself. The landscape's apparent neutrality requires justification—the doxa. Thus when Rebar considers a parking space, the allocation of space to sidewalk or utilities, or the vocabulary of materials and symbols in the city, we think of these things as engaging in a dialogue with the doxa. The environment and habitus are locked in a mutually reinforcing and self-referential cycle. This is the field in which tactical urbanism, as an interruption of habitus, operates.

There are also ways in which institutions and other actors, such as government and corporations, actively reinforce the doxa. Michel de Certeau, borrowing from military history, contrasts two ways that power is exercised in space: *strategies* and *tactics*. Strategies "conceal beneath their objective calculations their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own 'proper' place or institution."[3] Artifacts of strategies, for example, are the painted markings in the roadway, the invisible boundaries of property, or the

zoning laws that control whether a neighborhood is made up of houses, factories or brothels. In other words, strategy is power working at a distance upon the landscape. This power in turn shapes the doxa and reinforces our perception of the "neutral landscape." Because it both projects power and obscures its source, strategy depends on contriving a convincingly self-evident environment. In contrast, tactics "are isolated actions or events that take advantage of opportunities offered by the gaps within a given strategic system. ... Tactics cut across a strategic field, exploiting gaps in it to generate novel and inventive outcomes."[1] A tactic (deployed, for instance, in an urban niche space) "insinuates itself into the [strategy's] place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance."[2] Deploying a tactic means one "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that ... open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them."[3] In doing so, the tactic disrupts the doxa and temporarily projects a new set of values onto a space. Rebar's choice tactic has been to remix environmental signs and symbols, often within the official vocabulary that gives doxa its force and meaning.

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1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), p. 164.

2 Ibid., p. 79.

3 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Univ. of California Press, 1984), p. xx.

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1 Tactic (method) – Wikipedia. Retrieved June 8, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tactic_%28method%29>

2 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. xix.

3 Ibid., p. 37.

2.2 Generous Urbanism

Contemporary industrialized societies have generally accepted the banishment of unscripted, generous exchange in the public realm in favor of a hypercommercial alternative. In this preferred mode of relationship-building between strangers in public space, generosity's converse is omnipresent in the signs and artifacts of economic transaction. When the transaction is complete, the voluntary bond between buyer and seller is severed; both go their separate ways without obligation. In the North American city, public behaviors unrelated to commercial exchange or economic production fall into two basic categories: loitering or other illegal and disruptive activity; and assembly, celebration and cultural spectacle, which are heavily scripted and contained by permits and other official permissions. ("Leisure" pursuits are another possible exception, but do not necessarily involve relationship-building between strangers.) When an unregulated act of generosity is interjected into this environment of commercial consensus, the result is a cognitive disruption—a "blow against the empire."[4] Offering the public something without expectation of anything in return is at once subversive, suspicious—and potentially profound and transformative. Stripped of commercial adornment, the "generous" public act foregrounds its own assumptions: it says, *this is possible, and it need not be bought or sold.*

Rebar defines *generous urbanism* as the creation of public situations between strangers that produce new cultural value, without commercial transaction. This isn't to say that money doesn't play a role in the execution, since materials may still be bought, and grants or commissions distributed. However, the ultimate value is produced independently of commerce. It is possible to call this activity art production ("art" being a convenient category for cultural goods which are ends in themselves), but there are no absolute "consumers" or "producers" for this type of art, only participants with varying levels of responsibility for instigating the situation. This kind of cultural practice has an established pedigree in San Francisco, and includes activities of groups like the Diggers, the Free Stores movement and even the more recent free summer bluegrass festival in Golden Gate Park. A notable example of generous urbanism is *Critical Mass,* which began as a spontaneous group bike ride and

4 Ted Purves, "Blows Against the Empire," in *What We Want is Free* (State Univ. of New York Press, 2005), pp. 27–44.

has swelled, in the last fifteen years, to a monthly global event. There is always the danger among the more successful forms of generous situations that they will be absorbed by the dominant cultural milieu and once absorbed, their critical dimension diminished as they join familiar, acceptable and potentially commercial categories of festival and spectacle.

Rebar has benefited from the level of authenticity and "street cred" that the framework of generous urbanism imparts on a creative act, but to be motivated by the knowledge that generosity is a powerful and transformative tactic is not to say that we use it cynically. Most of what Rebar does takes place outside galleries and outside of traditional valuation systems for art, design and urban infrastructure. We "give away" our work (that is, set up situations for people to use and enjoy, or to fulfill an unmet need) for anyone nearby enough to experience it because that is the only way we can do our work. The primary recipients are the inhabitants of the public realm, but there are many more who will experience this non-commercial transaction through images and descriptions of the work. This secondary, mediated experience is likely more important to the goals we are trying to achieve. Simply by communicating that such an exchange took place, the work influences people's notions of what is possible and acceptable in public space, far beyond what was communicated at the moment the work is made. If generosity is the medium of this kind of work, then the medium does indeed become the message.

2.3 Authentic Urbanism

Despite our intermittently successful efforts to interrupt the typical urban situation with moments of tactical generosity, the hypercommercial urban ecology maintains a thriving visual culture that reinforces the perception of its own authenticity and correctness. The typical urban environment is saturated with advertising messages that tantalize, fascinate, seduce and are, at their core, lies. We inhabit this world as it inhabits us: Our heads are crowded with unreachable utopias, unattainable standards, inauthentic modes of communication and powerfully romanticized images that refer to a world that does not exist outside of the boundaries of the image itself. This visual culture is the triumph of powerfully superficial form over any substance, the

degree zero of meaning, of decontextualized images "without a past, without a future, without the possibility of metamorphosis."⁵ This cultural situation, part of what Guy Debord called the *spectacle*, "is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."⁶ This visual culture of the urban outdoors, and the social relations engendered by it, are deeply, overwhelmingly *inauthentic*; they are motivated by something other than the desire to create genuine connections between the city's inhabitants.

And as Debord points out, the spectacular culture cannot be easily overturned: "the spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity."⁷ Though the spectacle may be a product of real activity (advertising creative directors are, after all, real people) we can perhaps counter the force of the spectacle by generating pockets of authentic visual communication, real-world interventions that are honest about their—and our—core motivations. We can create things within the urban ecology that, in fact, *are what they say the are*.

This has been the goal of *PARK(ing) Day* from the beginning and it is one of the central reasons we tightly limit commercial exploitation of the event. It is critically important that *PARK(ing) Day* installations contain no ulterior motive, no "catch." Though individual *PARK(ing) Day* participants may derive some ancillary benefit in the form of notoriety or issue promotion, the primary goal of every PARK—if its builders want it to be truly effective and successful—must be to provide an honest, generous public service, a temporary generative territory for unscripted social interaction, where experimental forms of playful and creative human social behavior are cultivated and allowed to emerge, unmediated and unshackled by commercial imperatives. It is in large part this authenticity of motivation, we argue, that has made the project such a global success.

PARK(ing) Day offers an experiential critique of the hypercommercial public realm.   Ideally, each PARK installation will generate many

5 Jean Baudrillard, "Absolute Advertising, Ground Zero Advertising" in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 87.
6 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Press, 1994), p. 12.
7 Ibid., p. 14.

moments of relief and respite from the grand inauthenticity of the spectacle, moments that are the lived experience of each PARK visitor. As more people experience the city in this unmediated (or differently mediated) way, as these individual moments begin to aggregate within people and across populations, we hope to see the emergence of a broad-based critical examination of the extraordinary transformative potential embedded in these tiny niches within the urban ecosystem.

2.4 Absurd Urbanism

Rebar holds that deep within every rational system holding societies together are assumptions that, if taken to their logical conclusion, trend toward absurdity. These assumptions generate highly fertile terrain for artistic exploration. To examine the embedded absurdity of the urban landscape, Rebar often uses a method of sampling and remixing. Similar to the method of a DJ who samples and remixes disparate sounds to generate new meaning, Rebar samples well-established tropes of the urban landscape—sod, a bench and a tree, for example—and remixes them into a new context, as a mode of critical analysis of the structures that generate the form and content of public space. A public park in a metered parking space is a spectacularly absurd, surrealistic interruption in the fabric of everyday urban life, and PARKs often elicit incredulous laughs from passersby. But there is a particular critical power in a public installation that is utterly absurd in its outcome but exhibits a thorough and rigorous process of planning and dedication to detail. In the instance of *PARK(ing) Day*, this rigor of process matched with the absurd outcome can create both a visually arresting installation and a critically rich commentary on the contemporary values and priorities that give rise to form in the public realm.

There are indefinite ways to critique the politics of public space. *PARK(ing) Day* has developed around the principle that an authentic critical message draped in absurd trade dress has a unique capability to reach people, to cut through the thickets of verbal chatter and visual clutter that suffuse the urban environment, and to propose—lightly and perhaps with a wink—that change is required.

2.5 Conclusion

Absurdity, authenticity, generosity and a tactical approach have been the hallmarks of *PARK(ing) Day*—and many of Rebar's projects in general—but hardly the test of an idea's validity prior to its execution. In fact, what seems to have driven Rebar's thinking as much as anything else has been the sense of niche, loophole and opportunity. These tantalizing gaps in the urban structure—these necessary pieces of the urban structure, as long as that structure is generated by strategic forces seated in power and authority—are what feed our practice and, we hope, will inspire you to further exploration. As long as we have the right eyes to see them, the cracks in the system will continue to elicit curiosity. The landscape itself is a field for experimentation and play about space but also about structure, one where the final results of that experiment can lead to broader conclusions.

We conclude, then, with a central questions behind *PARK(ing) Day*: can the result of this experiment become a tactical turning point in the urban structure itself, and become more than a distributed set of specific instances of spectacular absurdity in public space? We could judge this, perhaps, not by how many others engage in repeating the *PARK(ing) Day* spatial meme, but by how possible it becomes for anyone to use the public landscape as a field of experimentation and play. The rules of that game are an open secret.

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About Rebar

Rebar is an interdisciplinary studio working at the intersection of art, design and ecology. Based in San Francisco, the studio was founded in 2004.

PARK(ing) Day began in 2005 and is an open-source Rebar invention created by hundreds of independent individuals and groups worldwide.

rebargroup.org
parkingday.org