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# The Utility of Parklets and City Projects

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Professor Pooley

Senior Thesis

## The Utility of Parklets and City Projects

Cities are always looking for ways to make their city more appealing: whether that is through a boost to the cities economy, different attractions to bring in more people, or city beautification projects. With these city projects, there are fads and new 'fashions' to try out different things to make a city more appealing. A recent popular trend has been Parklets. A Parklet is a sidewalk extension that provides extra space for people to relax, grab a bite, or just take a load off and sit down for a few minutes. They typically are built in a parking space and have many uses. They can be viewed as a mini park, or large bench/seating area. It is supposed to be an inviting space, typically with benches and maybe a table, but also with lights, plants, and other trinkets that make it an attractive sidewalk extension. They are typically build in large cities, especially cities that dont have enough room for full parks. They are a miniature Parks. Parklet's are typically designed to be easy to set up and dismantle, as many situations such as emergencies or needing to clear the streets of debris or snow, require them to be removed. Also, Parklets can be either semi-permanent, or just up for a few months (typically summer) or even just a few weeks. Parklets are a very recent trend, as they are credited with showing up around 2010, and starting most notably in San Francisco.

This year, I joined a team of students in creating a Parklet for our very own city, Bethlehem. We are constructing it in front of Joe's tavern, as they have agreed to help and pay for the parking meters to be rented out for a few months. Joe's had a Parklet for a few weeks last summer, and they enjoyed a lot of success and enjoyed having it. So this version is supposed to be longer lasting, as it will be there for most of the summer, but still be extremely low-cost and useful. In larger cities Parklets can range from \$15,000 to \$40,000, as larger cities

can afford to commission these big projects. But we are testing the utility of Parklets in smaller cities that don't have the budget the larger cities do. This means it is significantly cheaper, so our task is to be able to develop one for an extremely low budget, and still make sure that it provides utility and a good atmosphere for the community. Parklets in smaller cities is just starting to become its own fad, as smaller cities are starting to experiment with them. This is why our operation is important, to see if smaller city Parklets are viable going forward.

Lehigh and specifically mountaintop has been working on Parklet research for a few years now, as for the past couple summers they have had teams working on constructing and doing research on the viability of low budget Parklets. One of the largest reasons so much time is going into researching low budget Parklets are because cities with low budgets are some of the ones that need the most help. Smaller cities and poorer neighborhoods would especially benefit from having Parklets, as Parklets are designed to to increase walkability in the community, walkability being, "The extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people living, shopping, visiting, enjoying, or spending time in an area"(Dictionary). This means there are more people out and about in the city, and therefore more eyes watching everything, making the space feel safer or more comfortable, and increase economic activity in the town.

The process of creating a Parklet takes more than one might think. You have to petition to the city, and discuss it with multiple different people in the city government. The parking director must approve to lose a parking spot or two, the traffic director must make sure there is enough space for the Parklet, and that it won't disrupt traffic, and the city government must approve of the design, aesthetics, as well as what materials are being used. You must also file for insurance for the spot. We also obviously had to talk to Joe's tavern about funding the parking spaces, and them taking certain actions, such as liability and insurance themselves, filling an outdoor liquor license, and making sure someone is taking care of the Parklet once it is constructed.

For our specific Parklet, another student in my group composed the design, as she figured it was the best utilization of the small space we had to work with. There are two benches with a small table between them, as well as a high topped table, for people who would rather stand and enjoy the atmosphere. There is a frame around half of the Parklet, the side that is against the street, and open on the sidewalk side for entry. Along the top of the frame, we have it set so Joe's tavern will supply us with some greenery, as well as some lights to make it attractive. We are making the entire floor out of pallets, as they are extremely cheap and being supplied to us for free. But they are typically not aesthetically pleasing, so were using 2 x 4's and a plastic paneling for the frame of the Parklet. Our design is coming out to around \$500 total. Which is within a reasonable range for a cheap Parklet that could be used in less affluent communities. This process took about 9 months from start to finish. But in the fall we only had one and then two people working on it, whereas the spring we did a lot of work and had all four of us working on the project.

It is very difficult to measure the utility of the Parklets. Many people claim that they attract people and are good to have outside your business, but quantifying that can be difficult. Most of the positive support is anecdotal. University City District did a study on Parklets, trying to put the effects of Parklets around their city into quantifiable data. From their data, the Parklets do seem successful, but a lot of it depends on what kind of store the Parklet is located outside of. The University City District has a few Parklets, outside of places such as Japanese restaurants, a sandwich shop, a cafe, a taco shop, an ice cream shop, and a middle eastern restaurant. Between 11Am and 3PM both the cafe and Taco shop had a lot of people using it, about 10 patrons per hour. But other places such as the middle eastern restaurants Parklet and the Japanese restaurants' were not used much, with about 1 person per hour. But that is mostly counting people who are patrons of the stores they are outside of. When looking at who is just sitting there to get a breather or enjoy the atmosphere, there are 3 or 4 different Parklets that have shown to have 3-6 people there every few hours.

From these observations it shows that Parklets are being used in the city. While it depends on the store they are outside of, people are definitely using, sitting out on the parklets, and enjoying the atmosphere they exhibit. In addition to this study by University City District, there is also an article by Robert Steuteville, also talking about more anecdotal evidence about Parklet utility. The city, with help from a private organization, put a few Parklets along a street in the south side of Chicago, on 75th street. Since them being there, business owners have raved about their success, and have even petitioned to keep them for a longer duration. Speaking with some business owners, they have said that their patrons view the street as both more lively and safe, with are two or the larger goals of having the Parklets. There was even a class of nursery school students who came down to have lunch on one of the parklets, which a business owner said, 'I have never seen before'.

There is no comprehensive number on the effectiveness of Parklets. But i believe it is some combination of the increased business, number of people sitting there during the day, and public perception of an area before and after the Parklet(s). The third one has to be conducted through things such as public opinion polls and asking people who frequent the areas, but the other numbers you could quantify by having businesses keep track of sales. A bakery on 75th street in Chicago says the Parklet increased her business by 25-30% initially, and moving forward about 12%.

Parklets are very important for business services, but as I have said are very useful for the city and community as well. They help make an area seem more vibrant with more people walking around, as well as make the area safer.

Parks, on the other hand, while offering similar advantages, can be much more costly. Parks in Urban neighborhoods can cost millions of dollars, and cities such as LA and New York can spend 150-200 million on creating parks. These do gerate money themselves and help nearby businesses a lot, but smaller cities just can't afford projects that costly(Newcombe). The money put into parklets and the revenue associated can be greater based on ratio, if these low

cost parklets do work. Parks do often make a lot of money but have high costs both initially and in repairs and maintenance. I believe if there are enough Parklets they can have a very similar effect on a community as one community park. It will probably be slightly less, but will be significantly cheaper, so I believe it evens out.

**Sources and People who helped contribute:**

Alexandra Rankin, Annaliese Fernandez, Zach Drake

Karen Pooley

Nate Hommel

Shelly from Joe's Tavern

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