

VIEWPOINT

Canberra's first ever Parklet

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Abstract

In the spring of 2016, The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Planning Institute of Australia's Young Planners had an idea, to create Canberra's first parklet. Finally, in June 2018, the Parklet was built! It was a long and complicated journey to provide an urban renewal idea into the ACT, the result was a well utilised and loved piece of Canberra furniture. Although 4 minutes after the last barrier was removed, a car drove into the car space and it was as if the project had never happened! This article will explore the Canberra context, the feedback, how a temporary structure can change the urban fabric of the city and how Canberrans can learn from this experience.

Keywords: Canberra, parklet, pocket park, public intervention, Planning Institute Of Australia, Young Planners

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*A parklet:
'A pavement/sidewalk extension repurposing 1-2 car spaces back into public space.
A parklet includes seating, planting and lighting and provides a space
for people to enjoy their city'*

Introduction

The ACT Young Planners of the Planning Institute of Australia took it upon themselves to create Canberra's first ever parklet. It has been a two year process with several setbacks but for four weeks in June 2018, the ACT was home to its first ever parklet. It was an interesting journey, as well as a great insight into the governmental processes at work; with the young planners navigating separate government departments and negotiating political willpower to achieve what the ACT Young Planners thought would be a simple goal. The Parklet took over one car parking space, with a hand built wooden structure providing seating in an L shape, surrounded by concrete barriers. Planting was incorporated into the back of the Parklet to allow for a visual softening of the barriers and small LED lighting provided some ambiance.

The Canberra Context and Location

Canberra is located within the Australian Capital Territory in Australia; three hours' drive inland from Sydney and seven hours' drive north of Melbourne. In a Capital city with only 350,000 people, a variable weather system with sweltering summers and freezing winters and a sprawling city with a number of suburbs, Canberrans have taken to be heavily car dependent. A city that boasts of only having a twenty minute car commute in every direction perpetuates this thought.

Canberra's first parklet was chosen to be located on Lonsdale Street in Braddon. Braddon is known as the 'hipster' centre of the City and located a stone throw from the geographical core of the city, it has an eclectic mix of cafes, bars and restaurants adding to its enticing charm. There are several residential dwellings throughout the local area, as well being close to employment centres. All of this means there is high foot traffic throughout this area, and it provided a great spot for the Parklet to be situated. Lonsdale Street has a 50km p/h (30 miles p/h) speed limit, with two lanes of traffic and three rows of on street parking bays on either pavement edge, and through the centre of the two lanes. This location is heavily dominated by cars and pedestrians weave through cars to cross the road, as formal road crossings are quite far and few between. Lonsdale Street has no public seating available down either sides of the pavement. The only seating available is linked to commercial entities. Consequently, it creates an atmosphere of commercialising public space, without any ability to use the space unless there is an exchange of money. This was one of the initiators for the parklet, showcasing a lack of public infrastructure and how that can highlight how people use space. One of the main comments received about the parklet was that people never realised Lonsdale street had no benches, they had grown so accustomed to knowing they had to use a commercial tenancy to access seating they never questioned that that could be changed. All these factors encouraged the ACT Young Planners to make Lonsdale Street the natural choice for a public intervention to give the space back to the people. Lonsdale street makes sense to be more pedestrian friendly, it is the main area for dinner and

nights out within Canberra, and the lack of public infrastructure makes it exclusionary for certain sections of society. The key to public space is to allow a mix of people to interact both directly and indirectly, and the Young Planners found the parklet was a great way to start this process. We took inspiration from Times Square in New York and the impending close of Oxford Street in London on how to reclaim car dominated spaces back for pedestrians.



Figure 1. Parklet in Lonsdale Street, Canberra, Australia.

Government Response

The ACT Young Planners found the ACT government to be divided about the idea of a parklet. The City Renewal Authority (CRA) who provided the funding are focused on providing urban intervention initiatives within the city and therefore were heavily supportive of the initiative. Politically, the project was well received, with the project team receiving support letters from several ministers within the local assembly. Although Transport Canberra City Services (TCCS) who provide Canberra's municipal services and engineering services were weary of the project and provided a number of Australian Standard adherences to the project.

A Parklet is not a new idea, it's been around for about ten years now from San Francisco to Sydney, as well as in Melbourne and Adelaide. Other Australian jurisdictions were able to work within the legislative framework and find a workable, suitable solution to the idea of a parklet. The ACT Young Planners found TCCS were incredibly weary of providing support for a project such as a parklet on a 50km/ph road, next to traffic, and found it difficult to fit the project into their current framework. Even with Australian examples of cities that had worked through the same issues TCCS were discussing. It was a battle to bring them to the table and allow the Young Planners to execute a public space intervention that will improve the locality. After 8 months of discussions TCCS were willing to accept three concrete crash barriers surrounding the parklet. For anyone who's

ever been in contact with concrete barriers, they are very big, not very movable and quite expensive to hire and manoeuvre. The cost of installing the barriers was roughly 60% of the entire parklet budget. This highlighted the disconnect between the two different government departments. One promoting international examples of excellence and public interventions, and one department providing parameters which, while ultimately workable, stunted the overall possibilities of the project.

Local Business Response

Speaking to the local bar, restaurant and shop owners before the parklet people seemed supportive of the initiative. The main hesitation was over the loss of the one parking space. In discussions it was discovered that the local workers held spaces for each other on Lonsdale Street, and it wasn't usually the public who utilised the spaces. Therefore, it wasn't necessarily a loss of general, public parking, but spaces for the workers of the local establishments this parklet was altering. This initiative removed one parking space from use for 4 weeks.

While a temporary inconvenience, the overall benefit for the locality was highlighted in the overwhelming positive vibe the planners received while building and using the parklet over the month. Other business owners stopped the planners who were making the parklet to ask if they could get a parklet built outside their business, or how could they get involved with the parklet.

Ultimately the proof was in the pudding, having the parklet built and functional allowed people to understand how the space was being used and what the benefits were for the locals and the businesses. People were able to see how the parklet encouraged people to dwell, and to experience their public space differently than they had thought they could.



Figure 2. Parklet in Lonsdale Street, Canberra, Australia.

Parklet Use

The parklet was used as it had been intended, a lunch spot, a coffee point and a meeting place. Workers nearby would use the parklet to eat their lunch in the sun, within Lonsdale Street there are no close places to eat in the sun while still being close to the offices. The parklet filled a much-needed gap in the amenity for locals. And on one instance had been used as a stop for Canberran to check their blood sugar level in a quiet space without having to resort to entering one of the establishments. It's the unexpected use of space that the Young Planners applauded, the parklet really become a part of the fabric of Braddon, people used it as they felt fit. Children climbed on the seating and played with the plants and parents could take a quick break without having to sit in a specific café.

The bar where the parklet was situated in-front of had some fantastic insights into the parklet use after dark. Unexpectedly it had also become an evening collection point of smokers from the nearby bars. One of the main improvements the business owners found was with smokers having a stable, permanent place to congregate while on a night out. Before the parklet, the local bouncers would see people disperse through cars, ultimately endangering themselves and potentially causing accidents. When the parklet was in situ, the smokers stayed within the space, caused less safety issues, decreased overall litter as they used the cigarette butt bins provided, and were safer than before. These predicted and organic uses were a great testament to the usability of the parklet, and the suitability of the chosen location. The organic footfall of people walking from the city centre into Braddon and the change in user demographics between the morning coffee crowd, the lunch crowd and the evening entertainment crowd meant an almost round the clock parklet utilisation. There were two separate tables and four chairs left out with the parklet, and for the whole parklet timeframe, none of these extra parts of the parklet were stolen or damaged. A great testament to the design and use of the parklet.



Figure 3. Lonsdale Street, Canberra, Australia, after the parklet.

Future

Canberra will not suddenly stop being car dependent, but with this public intervention, the Young Planners have started a conversation about utilising space differently.

Encouraging people to see space not in its designated use, but as a place where change could happen.

Canberrans are proud of their capital, but there is a large contingent of people who are afraid of change or effecting the status quo. Introducing new ideas will always have opponents, but it is key to drill into the reason of the opposition. Canberrans like the ability to park outside the establishment they're visiting, and removing a parking space, even if the public rarely were able to use it, challenged this notion. There will always be people who will never agree with the utilisation of public space in this manner, although providing opportunities for people to use and think about public space differently will enable more people to be open to change in the future.

The ACT Young Planners are hoping to create a simple step by step guide to undertaking a parklet in Canberra. They want to make sure that these types of interventions are replicable and any groups who would like a parklet within their locality are able to do so.

The Young Planners have a design, a proven budget, and most importantly have already navigated the governmental processes and this should pave the way for future parklets.

Making our communities better by small, innovative interventions is what makes our cities different and interesting. While the process may have been long and challenging at times, there was a great sense of achievement when the parklet was built. This achievement has spurred the Planning Institute of Australia ACT Young Planners into thinking of the next public space intervention they could undertake. Although with the last two years having taken a mammoth effort, a break is probably in order to allow for the passion to grow again.

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