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TO CITE THIS PAPER | Quentin Stevens. "A Brief History of the Short-Term Parklet in Australia." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 38, Ultra: Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis*, edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan, 323-334. Adelaide: SAHANZ, 2022. Accepted for publication December 1, 2021. DOI: 10.55939/a4018pognw



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PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ) VOLUME 38

Convened by The University of Adelaide, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Adelaide,
10-13 November, 2021.

Edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan.

Published in Adelaide, South Australia, by SAHANZ, 2022.

ISBN: 978-0-646-85443-4

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A Brief History of the Short-Term Parklet in Australia

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Keywords

Parklet
Park(ing) Day
Temporary urbanism
Pop-up urbanism
Tactical urbanism

Abstract

This paper examines the history within Australia of the 'parklet', a small architecturally-framed open space installed temporarily on an on-street car-parking space. The paper traces parklets' varied and evolving forms, materials, production processes and functions. It examines how parklets have adapted to rapidly-changing social needs and priorities for economic activity, health, safety, socialising and on-street parking, and changes in street function.

The contemporary parklet began in 2005 as a localised, grassroots activity to temporarily reclaim street space for public leisure, as part of the wider movement of 'tactical urbanism'. Parklets rapidly became a worldwide phenomenon. Starting in 2008, parklets were absorbed into institutional urban planning practice, as a strategic tool to enhance community engagement, test possibilities, and win support for longer-term spatial transformations. From 2012, commercial parklet programs were developed in Australian cities to encourage local businesses to expand into street parking spaces, to calm traffic and enhance pedestrian amenity. A new generation of commercial 'café parklets' has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated by local governments, to support the heavily-impacted hospitality industry. Their design and construction show ongoing innovation, increasing scale and professionalism, but also standardisation.

This paper draws on diverse Australian parklet examples to chart the emergence of varying approaches to their design and construction, which draw upon different materials, skills, local government strategies and international precedents. The findings also illustrate several convergences in the evolution of parklet design across different Australian cities, due to strong similarities in the spatial contexts, needs, risk factors, and technologies that have defined this practice.

Introduction

1. Dan Hill, "A Sketchbook for the City to Come: The Pop-Up as R&D," in *Pavilions, Pop-Ups and Parasols. AD Profile. No 235*, L. van Schaik and F. Watson eds, 2015, 32–39, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.1898>.

This paper examines the evolutionary history of the 'parklet,' a small open space installed temporarily on an on-street car-parking space, which started to develop its contemporary form in 2005. Research into the history of parklets can contribute to the history of architecture in several ways. Much architecture begins from, or is inspired by, simple, temporary, makeshift and vernacular constructions, and is then refined. Many parklets are designed by architects. The parklet is, like other furniture and temporary pavilions, a mode of spatial practice where architects can have complete hands-on control over the details of a built outcome, and can explore creative possibilities. Parklets also allow architects to explore design in the public domain, with broad public use. Because they are built in the street, parklets allow architects to demonstrate design ideas about the allocation, form and use of street space; extending their influence beyond the boundaries of individual properties and buildings. Like furniture, a well-designed parklet can also become a mass-produced object. As a low-cost, short-term pavilion within a tightly-defined spatial envelope, the parklet encourages architects to experiment with new forms.¹

In terms of architectural history, the short time frame and ready transformability of parklets, and the rapidly-changing economic and policy contexts around them, makes it possible to chart within a very compressed time frame - 16 years - many of the evolutionary aspects of designing built form, including understanding the context and limits, experimentation, standardisation, social acceptance, regulation, commercialisation, and local variation in their architecture. This paper examines varied developments in the parklet across four key phases: its emergence as a guerrilla appropriation of street space; its formalisation as a strategic tool by local governments; creative exploration of its design and construction potentials in the contexts of four different Australian cities; and its standardisation for the outdoor hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws upon the few existing academic studies of parklets, and grey literature from government sponsors, the popular press, and published statements by parklet designers themselves.

The Emergence of Park(ing)

2. Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change* (Washington, Island Press, 2015).

The contemporary parklet was born on 16th November 2005, in San Francisco. Design collective Rebar 'rented' an on-street parking space for two hours by feeding the meter and informally installed a temporary park using a roll of live turf, a potted tree, a bench and a sign inviting passers-by to sit and relax.² After two hours, they returned the space to its former condition. This one-off event, christened Park(ing), was shared several weeks later on one participant's personal blog. The post attracted worldwide attention from bloggers and high-profile design websites.

Park(ing) differed in two key ways from many preceding critical movements that temporarily and tactically re-appropriated street space for broader public enjoyment, such as Ciclovía, Critical Mass and Reclaim the Streets. It claimed just the part of the street used for

3. Rebar Group, Inc., *The Park(ing) Day Manual*, 2011, https://www.asla.org/uploadedFiles/CMS/Events/Parking_Day_Manual_Consecutive.pdf.

4. Catriona Stuart, "(Park)ing Day—September 21, 2006," *Places* 18, no. 3 (2006): 76–77.

5. Rebar Group, Inc., "PARK(ing) Day 2011 Participation List", 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120407025914/http://parkingday.org/parking-day-2011-participation-list/>.

6. GroundplaySF, "A Look at the Human Impact of Parklets and the People Who Make Them" (San Francisco, 2020), <https://groundplaysf.org/wp-content/parklet-impact-study/index.html>.

7. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Madeline Brozen, "Reclaiming the Right-of-Way: A Toolkit for Creating and Implementing Parklets," *Transportation Research Board 92nd Annual Meeting* (Washington, DC, 2013), https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/reclaiming_the_right_of_way_brozen.pdf, p. 109

8. GroundplaySF, "A Look at the Human Impact of Parklets and the People Who Make Them."

9. Sarah Mirk, "From Cars to Carts," *Portland Mercury*, September 7, 2012.

parking, rather than the travel lanes. It introduced stationary elements such as seating and greenery, instead of promoting non-car forms of mobility. These factors gave Park(ing) a distinctive capacity to introduce new landscape and architecture elements into street space. This context offered new constraints and opportunities. In early 2006, Rebar published a how-to manual on their website,³ and announced the first international Park(ing) Day for the third Friday of September. San Francisco's Mayor and one district councillor 'donated' their permitted on-street parking spaces outside City Hall.⁴ Park(ing) Day 2006 was also celebrated in London, Manchester and Rio. By 2011, Park(ing) Day involved 975 sites in 162 cities worldwide.⁵

The Formalisation of Parklets

Widespread experimentation through the Park(ing) Day event was fundamental to the development emergence of the contemporary parklet. Park(ing) Day's global impact inspired San Francisco's city government to facilitate several longer-term pop-up park installations. In 2008 it commissioned Rebar and architect Riyadh Ghannam to prototype two more permanent Park(ing)-style installations, to be sponsored and occupied by local businesses while maintaining free public access.⁶ Rebar's model was comprised of various modular programming elements on a deck adjustable to varying kerb heights. The city then launched a permit program allowing businesses and residents to convert parking spaces into parklets. In 2010, the term 'parklet' was first used, by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, when unveiling the world's first commercially-oriented parklet, outside Mojo Bicycle Café. Designed by Riyadh Ghannam, it consisted of a timber platform level with the sidewalk and planter boxes linked by a steel-cable perimeter safety barrier. This project illustrated two key developments: an architectural distinction that '[p]arklets have a... platform to create a flush and safe extension of the sidewalk into the street right-of-way;⁷ and a functional focus on hospitality business. Between 2010 and 2019, 76 publicly-accessible parklets were built in San Francisco.⁸ Portland, Oregon's 2012 'Street Seats' program was the first to allow businesses to install parklets for exclusive commercial use, "and pay the city market rate for any lost metered parking."⁹

Parklets in Australia

10. Yen Trinh, personal interview, 18 May 2021.

11. Rebar Group, Inc., "PARK(ing) Day 2011 Participation List"

Park(ing) Day was celebrated for the first time in Australia in 2007. The first Park(ing) installation, outside Brisbane's Urban Grind Café, emulated others overseas, featuring grass, many pot plants, chairs and a table. Brisbane's involvement in Park(ing) Day 2008 was the third largest worldwide, involving 47 sites.¹⁰ In 2011, Park(ing) Day's website documented 86 Australian projects across most major cities.¹¹ Despite Brisbane's early enthusiasm for Park(ing) Day, and its benign climate, the city and its businesses have never erected any longer-term parklets.

While Park(ing) and San Francisco's first parklets provided the initial external stimulus and examples for Australian practice, parklet development has occurred independently within each Australian city's local milieu of ideas, needs and opportunities. This section will thus

examine the individual histories of parklets within four major Australian cities, to chart the innovations and limitations of various architectural experiments with parklets across their varying urban, governance and funding contexts.

Perth

12. Michael Swanepoel, "Pavement to Parklets Freo style," 7 March 2012, <http://thefremantledoctor.blogspot.com/2012/03/>.

Australia's first relatively-permanent commercial parklet was erected outside Moore and Moore Café in Fremantle in late 2011 (fig. 1).¹² It had a timber deck custom-built to match the kerb height and was soon afterward protected from traffic by three prefabricated corrugated-steel planters. It still stands. Fremantle published a parklet policy in 2013, which defined them as publicly-accessible amenities which could also be associated with hospitality businesses, and confined them to low-traffic streets. In 2015, Fremantle's council debuted a mobile parklet, designed by tiny-home manufacturer We Are Tiny, built on a standard car trailer, which could be trialled short-term by businesses considering hosting on-street parklets. This was towable but only provided steep stair access.



Figure 1: Australia's first parklet, outside Moore and Moore café, Fremantle, September 2011. Source: Fred Oostyck (Wiki Takes Fremantle participant) - CC BY 3.0.

13. David Bell, "ORCs invade precious bays," *The Perth Voice*, 28 September 2013, p. 4.

14. NOMA, "Angove Street Off-Cut Parklet," 2016.

Perth's parklets illustrate rapid innovations in funding, design and construction approaches. From 2013, the inner-suburban City of Vincent trialled four council-funded public parklets to test ideas and promote business-funded parklets.¹³ These public parklets did not have to maximise space for café seating. The Angove Street Parklet, designed in 2016 by Simon Venturi of NOMA, used a 30°/60° geometry. Its sculptural form was assembled from many timber off-cuts from the architect's larger project, a waterfront boardwalk, and triangular folded-aluminium planters.¹⁴ Another pair of angled parklets, in Hampden Road, Crawley, designed by landscape architect Joel Barker of Seesign for Perth City Council in 2019, were designed to fit between existing 45-degree kerb extensions within parallel street-parking bays. They were planned to be relocatable and reconfigurable, composed of twenty bolt-

15. Joel Barker, personal interview.

together modules, including angled benches, small, easily-transportable plastic plant tubs, street-library shelf units and preformed rubber kerb crossover ramps. This example shows parklet design pursuing adaptability as well as portability.¹⁵

16. Laura Gartry, "Pop-up parks prove popular in Perth," *ABC News*, 30 September 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-18/pop-up-parks-catch-on-in-perth/6788094>.

For Park(ing) Day 2015, residents Jean-Paul Horr  and Annie Matan, a sustainability researcher, developed a one-day installation outside a caf  on Fremantle's Wray Avenue and a proposal for a solar-powered community parklet, which was completed through a city solar-power generation grant and crowdfunding in 2017.¹⁶ Also designed by Seedeign, this angled parklet had a custom welded steel frame and steel-sheeted planter barriers and solar panels. It was designed in two pieces shaped around the site's existing street trees and the adjacent pedestrian crossing, to which its deck was linked by a built-in ramp.¹⁷ These examples all explored parklets as sculptural landscapes for community leisure, rather than platforms maximising outdoor dining capacity.

17. Joel Barker, personal interview, December 2019.

18. Rafael Lamounier Pedrosa, "Mini Gabion Parklet pops up in a Brazilian neighbourhood," *Inhabitat*, 2 March 2016, <https://inhabitat.com/mini-gabion-parklet-pops-up-in-a-brazilian-neighborhood/>.

Other innovative construction approaches included Fremantle's backpacker hostel, which in 2016 installed a parklet deck protected by limestone-filled gabions, resembling a breakwater (fig. 2). The gabion parklet, while rare, was also separately trialed by Quadra Est dio on a sloping street in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 2016.¹⁸ Also in 2016, a local Perth community organisation, The Vic Park Collective, self-built a parklet with a reading nook outside Crow Books. It combined diverse elements including converted, purple-painted shipping containers, re-used window security grilles and picket fences, and seating and planters constructed from salvaged timber. This tall parklet was subsequently removed because it blocked views to the business frontage.



Figure 2: Parklet made of gabions, Fremantle Hostel, 2016.
Source: Eric Fidler / Flickr – CC-BY-NC 2.0.

Adelaide

19. Adelaide City Council, "Parklet Program Review" (Adelaide, 2015).

20. Taylor Cullity Lethlean, "Bank Street Parklet," 2013, <https://tcl.net.au/projects-item/bank-street/>; Damian Holmes, "The Bank Street Parklet Project" July 18, 2014, <https://worldlandscapearchitect.com/the-bank-street-parklet-project-adelaide-australia-taylor-cullity-lethlean/#.YOaWZW6ubOY>; Ben Hyde, "Bank St parklets doomed for failure from outset," *Sunday Mail* (SA), October 11, 2014.

21. Adelaide City Council, "Parklet Program Review".

22. *The Advertiser*, "City's Yobbo Central to be given the Heave-Ho," January 30, 2016.

23. Renewal SA, "First Stage of Laneways Transformation Completed," 2017.

Australia's second formal, temporary parklet was installed in January 2012 on a low-traffic city-centre laneway outside Adelaide's Historian Hotel as part of 'Splash Adelaide,' a city-sponsored program encouraging short-term experiments that enlivened city streets. This was not designed and constructed as an architectural whole, but assembled from separate prefabricated elements: precast kerbs, 1000-litre plastic containers filled with water and trees as crash protection, and prefabricated sectional timber platforms. It had no balustrade. Its success precipitated a 12-month pilot program in 2013.¹⁹ In February 2013, the South Australian government installed a row of 15 parklets along Bank Street, a busy, partly-pedestrianised laneway connecting Adelaide's railway station and nightlife precinct, West End, to enhance inner-city pedestrianisation and provide public seating. Designed by landscape architects Taylor Cullity Lethlean, this million-dollar project was robustly constructed with a welded steel frame.²⁰ It was designed as a set of linked modules terraced incrementally down the street's incline, and was carefully detailed, providing several standing-height bar-style ledges, and steel ramps and steps with handrails connecting onto the street, footpath, and between the modules.

Under Adelaide City Council's 2013 commercial parklet program, four new privately-financed parklets were erected, and the Historian Hotel's was reconstructed, following San Francisco's original model, with timber planters, steel fence, and fitted timber deck.²¹ The award-winning parklet of the 'Food for Life' café, designed by Troppo Architects in a similar conventional format, and installed 100m from the Historian Hotel in March 2013, is Australia's second-oldest semi-permanent commercial parklet. The Bank Street parklets also won design awards, but received much media criticism for attracting drunk, fighting youth, loiterers, "junkies," take-away food rubbish and rough sleepers, and being used as toilets.²² As a salutary lesson for today's pandemic parklets, by 2017, Adelaide's City Council had paid \$200,000 to remove them.²³ Relatively few parklets have been built in Adelaide since.

Sydney

24. Sam Crawford Architects, "Creating edible outdoor rooms", <https://samcrawfordarchitects.com.au/portfolio/edible-gardens/>; Amelia Thorpe, *Owning the Street: The Everyday Life of Portery* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

Sydney has had few conventional timber parklets. Designers there have explored several alternative structural formats. In 2012, completely separate from Park(ing) Day, Sam Crawford Architects led development of three small parklets adjoining narrow footpaths in Surry Hills, with volunteer support from local professional consultants, residents and businesses and a City of Sydney grant. In a unique approach, these parklets were formed from bitumen poured onto a fabric sheet laid directly on the street, framed within temporary concrete kerbs. Large concrete stormwater pipe sections were installed as planters and seats (fig. 3).²⁴ These parklets' heavy three-dimensional forms and lack of tables prevented their commercial appropriation by local businesses, or relocating them. In 2013, Waverley Council installed 'Urban Lounge,' a temporary demonstration project designed by Drew Heath Architects, within its major activity centre, Bondi Junction. Its two parklets featured custom-cast concrete jersey barriers with complex imprinted surface

25. CoDesign Studio and Street Plans Collaborative, *Tactical Urbanism Vol. 4: Australia & New Zealand*, 2014. <http://tacticalurbanismguide.com/guides/tactical-urbanism-volume-4>.

designs supporting cantilevered timber seats and tables, and concrete stormwater-pipe planters. They also incorporated bicycle racks, phone charging outlets, wi-fi, and a solar-powered light installation.²⁵ These innovative design approaches were both more complex, heavy and expensive, and much less easily replicated, altered or relocated, than the simple timber-deck-and-barrier parklet solution used by Australia's longest-lasting café parklets.



Figure 3: Edible Outdoor Rooms, Surry Hills, 2012.
Source: 'Newtown grafitti' / Flickr - CC-BY 2.0.

26. Good Design Australia, "Parklet," 2016.

27. SAMA Design, "Parklets," n.d., <http://www.samadesign.com.au/#/parklet/>.

In 2014, Sam George of SAMA Urban Design developed a parklet system pre-fitted with timber benches, planters and artificial turf inside the cut-down bottom half of a crane-liftable steel shipping container, first installed in Clovelly Road, Randwick.²⁶ Six units were subsequently moved to 14 locations across Sydney, including replacing Waverley's Urban Lounge.²⁷ In 2015, the Glebe Chamber of Commerce President, Kris Spann, initiated a local trial of the container parklets. In 2016, Spann and Sydney architects Alexander Symes and Branko Jaric formed People Parkers, and designed a parklet based on a standard car trailer with stabilisers, which could simply be towed. This obviated

28. Kris Spann, "2018/19 - People Parkers", 1 April 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/201819-people-parkers-9years9days-kris-spann/>; Cameron Jewell, "What's a parklet and how can it boost business?," *The Fifth Estate*, 26 July 2016, <https://thefifthestate.com.au/innovation/design/whats-a-parklet-and-how-can-it-boost-business/>.

29. Urban Commons, "Parklet at Wide Open Road," 13 March 2013, <https://urbancommons.tumblr.com/post/45227970433/parklet-at-wide-open-road>

30. Moreland City Council, "Parklet Program," <https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/aboutus/projects/shoppingareaandstreetscapeprojects/parkletprogram/>, accessed 28 November 2018.

31. Urban Commons, "Parkscape," <https://www.urbancommons.com.au/systems/#parklets>

32. Moreland City Council, "Parklet Program;" Moreland City Council, Annual Report 2018-19, p. 17.

33. *LG Focus*, "Parklet Pods," <https://www.lgfocus.com.au/editions/2014-11/parklet-pods.php>, November 2014.

34. Louise Cheer, "Skipsters! Melbourne Hipsters Create Mobile 'park' in the Street Using a SKIP Bin as an Alternative Place to Hang Out," *Daily Mail Australia*, May 2015.

the need for cranes and traffic review. The parklet shell is made from recycled plastic.²⁸ This shows independent, convergent design evolution with Fremantle's trailer-parklet example, emerging from identical site conditions and user needs.

Melbourne

Melbourne in 2021 has many more parklets than most world cities, but it was not a major early adopter or a significant formal innovator. Melbourne's first commercial parklet was designed by Urban Commons for Moreland café Wide Open Road, and installed for just one day in March 2013.²⁹ It consisted of an astroturf-covered plywood deck surrounded by a thick, freestanding curved plywood trellis with plant pots stacked inside it to form a 'vertical garden.' As an ephemeral installation, it did not provide any impact-resistant traffic barriers or signs. Urban Commons is distinctive among parklet developers in being founded by two industrial designers and focusing on product design of outdoor furniture units that integrate greenery. Their parklets are thus not designed as complete architectural envelopes. In 2016, Urban Commons designed a temporary parklet for Small Block Café and adjoining business Bikes Please in Moreland.³⁰ This featured their now-standardised kit of 'Parkscape' components: timber decks in prefabricated steel-framed lay-in sections, triangular concrete planters supporting steel-framed timber benches, and larger, multi-coloured stackable plastic planter boxes.³¹ It was only in June 2017 that Moreland City Council formalised a Parklet Program, after which longer-term parklets were installed by the council and by businesses, including two by Urban Commons on a cul-de-sac outside innovative residential developments The Commons and Nightingale 1.³²

In parallel to Sam George's creation of a shipping-container parklet in Sydney, landscape architect Matt York, of Spiire, developed a 'parklet pod' in September 2014 from a recycled rubbish skip, in Geelong, for a bakery. The design featured a perimeter timber bench, a narrow planter at one end, an anti-slip metal floor, and cut openings for footpath access and rainwater drainage. Parklets seek to provide comfortable outdoor settings, but they are rarely permitted to have roofs. Four corner jacks under this skip accommodated variations in kerb and road profiles. Although transportable, it still sits there seven years later. A second skip was soon thereafter installed 40m away outside a café.³³ In another example of convergent evolution, in May 2015, CoDesign Studio also experimented with a skip parklet. While clearing out their Collingwood offices, they hired a skip bin and ran a garage sale with neighbouring businesses. Before filling the skip, they converted it into a small park during the sale, with astroturf, potted trees, and milk crates and wooden logs as temporary seats.³⁴

Parklets only became common in Melbourne after 2018, following Moreland's successful trials. In December 2019, a five-month trial 'pop-up park' was installed across five parking spaces on Domain Road, South Yarra. Developed by The Place Agency, its purpose was to provide public space to compensate for the multi-year impacts of the nearby Melbourne Metro Tunnel construction. This large-budget parklet had timber decking and seating but extensive custom-fabricated

35. Rail Projects Victoria, "Domain CRG Meeting 16 August 2018 Presentation," p.19, https://metrotunnel.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/324042/MM-PRESENTATION-20180816-Domain-CRG-Meeting-9.pdf.

steel cladding and detailing, and a full-length heavily-landscaped planter. Despite this project's name and ostensible purpose, the client Rail Projects Victoria always intended that "Retailers [would] have the opportunity to extend footpath dining into parklet space for the length of the pop-up".³⁵ Its length was divided by planters into four sections aligned to the four adjacent restaurants. The parklet won a Premier's Design Award, and with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this trial was extended, and the parklet lengthened by two spaces.

Pandemic Parklets

36. Carlos Avila Gonzales, "San Francisco's Outdoor Dining Parklets," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 June 2021, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/projects/2021/visuals/sf-outdoor-dining-restaurant-parklets/>.

Following the declaration of the global COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, widespread 'social distancing' and lockdown orders had a massive negative impact on both car traffic and hospitality businesses. Pedestrians maintained safe distance by spreading onto streets. On 26th May 2020, San Francisco's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Task Force invited a massive expansion of kerbside parklets through the city's existing 'Shared Spaces' program. Pre-pandemic, San Francisco had 59 active parklets. There are now almost 1400.³⁶ Australia's state governments similarly launched COVID-19 recovery funding programs during 2020 to support hospitality businesses to activate footpath space, laneways and street parking for dining use. The pandemic drove further evolution and variation in parklet design, due to social distancing requirements, a boom in demand, and the prospects of longer-term, government-subsidised investment in parklets, including for winter operations.

37. People Parkers, "Our Products," <https://www.peopleparkers.com/products>.

In October 2020, Sydney's People Parkers launched a Perimeter Parklet System, with standardised 2m x 1.1m barrier modules built around standard water-filled, interlocking plastic jersey barriers, and a set of attachable elements including bicycle racks, self-watering planters, benches, and external cladding with recycled plastic or plywood, suitable for external decoration or advertising. People Parkers have also developed parklets with built-on pergolas.³⁷

Pre-pandemic, Melbourne had Australia's greatest number of parklets: 27. After several long-term lockdowns, Victoria's State Government allowed businesses to increase customer capacity by extending service areas onto neighbouring footpath and road spaces. They provided cash grants to businesses to develop safe outdoor dining spaces. This fostered production of many parklets. Greater Melbourne's parklets now number almost 600. The City of Melbourne purchased 200 standardised parklets, consisting of astroturf-covered timber decking, modular decking-faced barriers incorporating narrow shrub planters, concrete protective bollards and large concrete tree planters. Standard, modular solutions were also deployed by most other Melbourne councils. Yarra Council simply installed concrete bollards branded with distinctive pink and purple fabric covers, allowing businesses freedom in parklet design. Several high-end businesses have installed very luxurious parklets, including the RACV Club's, which has a steel frame, sliding glass windows, bluestone-tile flooring to match the footpath, retractable awnings, and a timber ceiling with recessed spotlights and heaters. To extend parklet use during cooler seasons, other businesses' parklets have added marquees, translucent plastic walls and heat

lamps. Three Melbourne businesses have adapted to sloping street sites by constructing parklets terraced lengthwise in separate level sections, each with step-free access, similar to Adelaide's Bank Street parklet. Some current commercial parklets are designed to match their host building's aesthetic, including a parklet made from two shipping containers outside a café in a former Richmond factory.

38. Urban Commons, "DIY Parklet," <https://www.urbancommons.com.au/systems>.

While Moreland's city council does not deploy a generic design, many of its individual pandemic-era parklets are produced by one firm, Urban Commons. They innovated beyond their kit-of-parts of 'Parkscape' approach to develop a second distinctive parklet aesthetic, their 'DIY parklet,' composed of lightweight, pre-cut marine-grade plywood elements, including planters, that can be flat-packed, palletised and easily assembled on site.³⁸ Refining the prototype of their very first parklet in 2013, this system consists of slot-jointed plywood ribs and rails, which can be shaped in cranked and curved profiles and also mounted with plywood face panels and decoratively painted. These DIY parklets were installed in late 2020 in several locations, including a 70-m long row of DIY parklets occupying 12 parking spaces on restaurant-filled Lygon Street (fig. 4). Neither of Urban Commons' parklet systems are very impact-resistant. They rely on slow-street locations, protection from existing kerb widenings, bicycle racks, adjacent parked cars and other parklets, and temporary transverse rubber kerbs.



Figure 4: 'DIY parklet' by Urban Commons, Lygon Street, Brunswick, 2021. Source: Philip Mallis / Flickr - CC BY-SA 2.0.

39. The Place Agency, "Urban Parker," PDF brochure.

40. <https://www.skiplet.com.au/>.

Melbourne's Place Agency has begun marketing a modularised 'Urban Parker.'³⁹ 'Parklet pod' developer Matt York founded supplier Skiplet in 2020, and installed 10 skip-based parklets throughout the Geelong region, also developing units with roofs and performance stages, and double-skip units for parking lots.⁴⁰ Skips - like shipping containers, which are also commonly used for temporary urbanism interventions - are industrially-fabricated items that designers can readily adapt into parklets because, as infrastructure units that facilitate transportability, they already conform to the dimensional constraints of road transport and parking spaces.

In both Western Australia and South Australia, which hosted Australia's first semi-permanent parklets, and in most other states, the pandemic has had very few impacts on hospitality practices, and there has been no focussed government promotion of new temporary parklets. Similarly, in Queensland, the starting point for Park(ing) Day in Australia, Park(ing) remains a one-day event.

The Evolution of Parklet Architecture in Australia

Australia's parklets evolved quickly from the playful, artistic, self-organised guerrilla interventions of Park(ing) Day into a series of local-government-facilitated, carefully-designed, long-term programs to commercially appropriate parking spaces and enhance pedestrianisation. The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed parklets' production and also their architectural evolution, from a temporary, stand-alone public space to more-durable outdoor extensions of hospitality businesses.

The diverse history of Australia's parklets shows that the deck-and-planter-barrier format established in San Francisco was not guaranteed to become the default typology worldwide. Designers explored several other sets of materials and techniques to meet specific needs for pedestrian access, traffic safety and transportability, and to fit parking space dimensions. Some approaches emerged independently multiple times across Australia and overseas.

Two main factors have shaped parklets' design evolution. The first is standardisation for the hospitality market. With the earliest parklets, architects and other trained designers used self-built approaches or local government budgets to explore creative options, experimenting with in-situ bitumen, concrete pipes and custom-cast barriers, welded frames, and gabions. But parklets' site conditions - street parking spaces - are very uniform. Subsequently, firms developed to provide parklets to hospitality-industry clients as a product or service; many of them founded by professional designers. These firms have realised cost, speed, quality, transportability and configuration benefits by developing standardised, mass-produced parklet elements and systems, using pre-cast concrete bollards, plastic jersey barriers, conventional timber-frame construction, and plywood, steel, aluminium and plastic sheeting. Pioneering, ostensibly short-term projects deploying the simplest and lowest-cost typology of a footpath-level timber deck and unitised planters as barriers have actually endured longest. These parklets best meet hospitality clients' needs for maximum flat floorspace and minimal barriers to maximise visibility. This standardised parklet type is durable enough and adaptable enough (for different widths, angles and slopes) to have become the common solution. Many Australian municipalities have mass produced such parklets to donate or lease to businesses.

41. Spann, "2018/19 - People Parkers."

Other standardised typologies include transportable, readily-deployable skiplets and trailers, which are entirely prefabricated, but much more expensive and complex to deliver and relatively inflexible. These meet a niche demand for clients where local time, skills and labour are scarce, or where parklets are deployed in short-term trials across different sites, for example during the incremental extension of Sydney' light rail lines.⁴¹ For

most practical applications, these types of parklets are over-designed and over-engineered.

The pandemic-era proliferation of parklets has also encouraged some diversification. Longer timeframes and larger budgets have stimulated development of weather-protecting roofs and walls, occasionally using modified shipping containers. Designs have adapted to site conditions including slopes and ninety-degree parking. Some parklets have had customised exterior decoration and branding applied. The angular, raised shapes of three different trial public parklets in Perth show there is scope for formal experimentation with geometry and landscaping, if parklet space does not have to be kept maximally clear for waiters, tables and paying customers.

The second key factor that has shaped parklet design is risk. The detailed attention to deck edging, jersey barriers, heavyweight planters and traffic signage emphasizes that parklet architecture has to address parameters rarely confronted by most architect-designed structures. Most buildings are well set back from streets. Parklets are buildings that stand on a space designed for, and used by, vehicles, and they need to withstand vehicle impacts. Parklets' main critics are traffic engineers and drivers. Low-traffic laneway locations allow more freedom in parklet design. From the footpath side, parklets have to invite safe access. Attention to railings, non-slip surfaces, steps and ramps highlights that parklet design has to address occupant risks associated with kerbs, rain, drunkenness, and parklets' narrow width. People Parkers' Perimeter Parklet System deftly integrates massive plastic crash barriers inside timber-clad planters, reconciling these divergent priorities of traffic managers and place-makers.

The short history of Australia's parklets shows both convergences and creative thinking in how designers address the needs, risks and opportunities framed within the very tightly-defined envelope of kerbside carparking spaces.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Australian Research Council (Project DP180102964). The author wishes to thank Ha Thai for his support with the research.