CHAPTER 4

Taking place

Rebar’s absurd tactics in generous urbanism

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On a sunny October day in 2005, Rebar, the San Francisco-based collective of artists, activists, and designers, paid a curbside parking meter in downtown San Francisco and built a temporary park within the white lines of the parking space – complete with lawn, a large shade tree, and a park bench (Figure 4.1). For the legal duration of our “lease,” we reprogrammed the public right-of-way: no longer a space dedicated to the movement and storage of private automobiles, for two hours this seven by twenty-two feet of street became a place for rest, relaxation, and socializing in an area of downtown San Francisco previously underserved by public open space.1 At first, passersby reacted with a mix of indifference and curiosity. Eventually several people ventured into the “park,” found a place to sit and took advantage of the novelty of cool grass and shade. Some of the strangers enjoyed

Figure 4.1 This image of Rebar’s first experiment in Park(ing) quickly circulated through the blogosphere and became a readily transmittable meme. Source: Rebar.
some unplanned social interaction by exchanging a few words with each other; others took the occasion to rest or read. After two hours and having generated 24,000 “square foot-minutes” of public open space, Rebar dismantled the park and returned the space to its normative function. All that remained of the incident were the photos and video footage shot. We posted these on our website as a record of the experiment.

Within several weeks a seminal photo had appeared in dozens of references on the Internet and news stories. Within six months Rebar had received hundreds of inquiries about the project, which we dubbed Park(ing), from individuals and groups around the world. The combination of the iconic image of parking-space-as-park and its accompanying descriptive name created a “sticky” idea that transmitted readily across electronic media. Without much explanation, other groups disposed to guerrilla intervention quickly grasped the basic tactic. Still, the amount of interest Rebar received warranted some codification of the idea, so we posted a short “how-to” manual on our website to help others get started. The essence of the tactic was to legally claim a parking space using materials that were symbolically associated with parks: trees, lawn, and a bench. Rebar treated the idea itself as open source and applied a Creative Commons license: as long as it was not used for profit, we encouraged people to replicate and reinterpret it.2

The following year, Rebar organized a one-day, global event in which participants – mostly in San Francisco but now joined by groups in other cities around the United States and Europe – built temporary parks in parking spaces, in a coordinated effort to produce a greater critical mass and to demonstrate solidarity with the effort to reprogram urban parking spaces. In each of the forty-seven cities where Park(ing) Day took place in 2006, different legal codes had to be negotiated by the participants: the traffic codes in San Francisco were different from those in London, New York, or Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Nowhere, however, did participants meet with significant opposition to their installations, which ranged from a do-it-yourself lemonade stand through stormwater demonstration gardens to a seed giveaway (Figure 4.2).

The event effectively operated within an undervalued niche space and successfully exploited a legal loophole – a tactic at once radical but superficially unthreatening to the system of spatial commodification it critiqued.3 Although the space we collectively allocate to parking – how much, where, for whom, and at what cost – is usually hotly contested, Park(ing) Day operated within a discrete unit of that contested terrain, neutralizing potential backlash with a sense of humor and the honest application of a simple and uncontested market rule: just as it is completely within the rights of individuals to buy up shares of a publicly traded company, Park(ing) Day participants paid meters and exercised their option to do something other than park cars in real estate that they, for the moment, owned.

In 2007, ongoing widespread interest in Park(ing), concentrated in San Francisco but also now coming from Europe and other American cities, led us to organize an even larger scale event when people around the world would temporarily turn parking spaces into parks. With help from partner organizations such as The Trust for Public Land and Public Architecture, Rebar set a date for the event and facilitated the participation of hundreds of volunteers by holding community organizing
sessions in San Francisco and distributing how-to information on the web. Rebar itself built the Parkcycle (Figure 4.3), a human-powered “park” that could deploy 250 square feet of green open space at the whim of its pilots, and we took the day to visit some of the fifty-eight parking space parks built around San Francisco.

In all, more than 200 parks were constructed on September 21, 2007 – entirely by volunteers – in over fifty cities worldwide. The installations ranged from dinner parties to croquet courses, dog parks to massage parlors, community health clinics to urban micro-farms. Some participants did insinuate advertising and business promotion into their installations (in Florida, for example, a Starbucks set up a park). But what most of the Park(ing) installations had in common was a sense of humor and the promotion of some kind of artistic, ecological, social, or cultural agenda (Figure 4.4). The playful yet passionate tone of the event first set in 2005 continues to resonate each year.

What, exactly, had taken place in these playful acts of transgression in the broader context and construction of urban landscape and the so-called public realm? How can we begin to articulate these actions and events as ways and maneuvers for repurposing the landscapes of our contemporary city? Can the tactical maneuver on the part of Rebar and the specific instances possibly becoming a turning point that could lead to larger changes in the way public spaces are used and perceived?

This chapter explores these questions by examining some core themes in Rebar's projects, including Park(ing) and other artistic work. Specifically, the chapter addresses these questions by relating the projects to the problems we have grappled with in our own understanding of public space and our agency within it.
Figure 4.3 The Parkcycle incorporated a water-storing skin and solar panels to power the brakes and lights, and used almost all recycled materials. Although pedal-powered, it used no bicycle parts. Source: Rebar.

Figure 4.4 This park built by volunteers/participants in San Francisco in 2007 explored a theme common to many installations: an interactive element (in this case, a library) to encourage social exchange. Source: Rebar.
Niche spaces

The evolving Park(ing) project 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 revaluation through creative acts. Park(ing) identified the metered parking space as just such a niche within the urban landscape, and redefined 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 two years following Rebar’s first Park(ing) experiment. 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, revalued 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) phenomenon ignited our curiosity about the street. We saw that the street could be defined as a territory inscribed by 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) set up an operational precedent for intervening in such a contested, value-laden space and proposing a new system of valuation. Embedded within this approach are what have emerged as three core strands of our practice so far: tactics, generosity, and absurdity.

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 other) have a two-way relationship with the physical environment: they both produce the environment and are reproduced 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” (Bourdieu 1977: 164). 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’” (Bourdieu 1977: 79). Doxa favor the power relationships of the status quo because it is those relationships that 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, an enclosed corporate atrium, 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 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" (de Certeau 1984: xix). 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" (Wikipedia 2009b). 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" (de Certeau 1984: xix). 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" (de Certeau 1984: 37). 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.

**Generous urbanism**

Contemporary industrialized societies have generally accepted the banishment of unscripted, generous exchange in the public realm in favor of a hyper-commercial 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" (Purves 2005: 22–44). 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’s possible to call this activity art production (“art” being a convenient category for cultural goods that 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 such as 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 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’s second major urban project, Commonspace, employed a generous urbanism by crafting eight experimental interventions in San Francisco’s privately owned public open spaces (or “POPOS”). With slight presumption, we guessed that a certain tolerance for generous urbanism was the acid test for true public space, and set forth to discover just how public POPOS were (Figure 4.5). The eighteen-month project began with a physical and social mapping of the spaces produced as a result of Section 138 of the San Francisco Planning Code. The code requires that new downtown developments make 2 percent of their area available “in order to meet the public need for open space and recreational uses” (San Francisco Municipal Code Sec. 138). The spaces take the form of rooftop terraces, corporate atriums, plazas and breezeways, and even some oddly shaped snippets connected to public streets where the “public” seems to be neither aware of POPOS nor in great need of them. We loosely positioned our approach within the Situationist tradition of detournement, the creative repurposing of familiar elements to produce new meaning (which is not that different from the remixing we’d been doing to date).

Working from our web-based survey of the physical and psychogeographic terrain of the spaces, we launched a series of events in them: public tours, rooftop kite flying, an interactive game of “Assassin,” a “Nappling” for underslept office workers and other accidental participants (Figure 4.6), a game of “counterveillance” in response to security cameras, and a public workshop for teaching Balinese monkey chant, or Kecak (Figure 4.7). In each instance, public participation was encouraged through outreach before and during the event. We saw the events as opportunities to recast spaces that had often become, by virtue of their literal
Warning
This building utilizes video surveillance. Any person entering the premises is subject to being monitored and recorded.

Figure 4.5 This POPOS in the headquarters of the C-Net building provides indoor seating in a corporate lobby. The privilege of public use comes with a caveat, though: Big Brother is watching. Source: Rebar.

Figure 4.6 Rebar advertised the Nappening on the street and by flyering the offices of the law firms above the POPOS. The free event quickly "sold out," and many participants inquired if it could be a permanent service. Source: Rebar.

enclosure in corporate space, de facto private realms. By deploying generous acts that fulfilled various unmet needs we had identified in our mapping (such as the need for rest, play or community), we created a "rupture between the expected and the unexpected" where participants might experience "not just the subject of the dissent, but also the structure that supports the world and worldview that contains both the dissent and the status quo" (Purves 2005: 28).

This active, generous approach to urbanism contrasts with the paternalistic "generosity" implied in the wording of the plaque posted outside the POPOS at 235 Second Street:
The plaza and inside seating area of this building is provided and maintained for the enjoyment of the public. The interior seating area is open to the public Monday–Friday 8am–6pm. Warning. This building utilizes video surveillance. Any person entering the premises is subject to being monitored and recorded.

We discovered that some POPOS indeed warranted recent critiques of "institutionalized generosity on an unprecedented scale" that "revel[s] that when the act of giving is not only enforced but completely rationalized, the result is nothing more than a representation of the public sphere." All are highly socially codified spaces, and many seemed steeped in doxic expectation that "nothing is supposed to happen, apart from perhaps pondering the philosophy of all the distortion formats modern life makes us fit into" (Fowle and Larsen 2005: 23).

However, we eventually found the social dynamics of POPOS to be as complex and varied as the governance structures and publics that operated in each of them. Most are overseen by private security employed by the building management, and it was with these actors that we most often came into contact when trying to reach out to the "public." We realized that they indeed were a part of the public we were trying to engage. Whereas some were suspicious of our activities and even unaware of their obligation to provide an open space to the public, others responded positively to the generous spirit of the activities we initiated. In fact, it seemed that framing our activities as a "free" gift was so unexpected that it gradually overcame the institutional resistance by the management overseers to non-commercial acts in commercial space.

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 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 probably 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 become the message. Recently, other actors have taken up their own explorations of POPOS based on the groundwork laid by Rebar: the San Francisco Urban Research Association (SPUR) is engaged in an extensive evaluation of the spaces and is hosting public forums on their place in the downtown public space network, and several other individuals and groups have launched their own generous repurposing of POPOS, ranging from lunch-hour picnics to free figure-drawing classes.

Figure 4.8 Rebar’s Matthew Passmore inspects the contents of the Cabinet National Library, which includes a guest book, snack bar, and all back issues of Cabinet magazine. Source: Rebar.
Absurd urbanism

Rebar holds that deep within every rational system holding societies together are assumptions that, if taken to their logical conclusion, tend toward absurdity. As such, they are highly fertile terrain for artistic exploration. Property ownership, arguably the mother of absurd ideas, served as the jumping-off point for Rebar’s first project, the Cabinet National Library. For its Spring 2003 issue on “Property,” Cabinet magazine, a non-profit art and culture quarterly, purchased a half-acre of land site unseen for $300 on eBay. The land was part of a failed 1960s residential development called the Sunshine Valley Ranchettes, now a desolate tract of desert scrubland outside Deming, New Mexico. Cabinet dubbed their new purchase Cabinetlandia and divided it into manageable sectors: Readerlandia, Editorlandia, Nepotismia, and so forth. Magazine-sized parcels were offered to readers for a penny for a 99-year lease.

Upon our reading the Cabinetlandia article, it occurred to us that Cabinetlandia would obviously require a Cabinet National Library (i.e., a library containing all and only back issues of Cabinet). What better way to establish a civilization than to create a repository for its organizing documents (Figure 4.8)? Fortunately, we were the first to propose the idea to the magazine. The editors published our library proposal and a sketch in Issue 12 (Winter 2003–2004). From the outset, it was paramount to us that the project be an actual, usable library, aside from (or in addition to) being an odd spectacle and a play on words. Moreover, it was crucial that the project express its library-ness down to the last minute detail; this idea guided the project at every stage of its development. The Cabinet National Library is built from a three-drawer file cabinet and is laid out thus:

- top drawer – the Card Catalog, Guestbook, and Guest Services.
- middle drawer – the Collection: back issues of Cabinet.
- bottom drawer – the Snack Bar.

Among the strands of Rebar’s practice, absurdism often acts as the lightning rod; since its construction, the Library has attracted its share of pilgrims, detractors and even pillagers.5

In the summer of 2006 Rebar made its first foray onto the rarified world of the institutional art world with its EnCanment project. EnCanment was a performance installation included in the “Between the Walls” exhibition at San Francisco’s Southern Exposure art gallery, a non-profit art space with a thirty-four-year history and reputation as a perennial mainstay on the cutting edge of the San Francisco art scene. “Between the Walls” was the final show in 2006 before the gallery closed for seismic retrofitting and, given this, the gallery administration put the entire interior structure of the gallery up for grabs: the walls, the floor, the very space itself was offered up as an artistic medium. Participating artists were encouraged to consider ideas of migration, transition, improvisation, and community.

In response to the concept of the exhibition, and in celebration of Southern Exposure’s rich history in this space, Rebar created a temporary industrial canning operation that harvested, processed, and canned the gallery itself. Rebar systematically mapped and cored sections of the gallery wall and, utilizing traditional
assembly-line technology, canned the cores in metal cans on site during the opening and closing night events. Cans were then labeled and sold to support SoEx and Rebar. (EnCanment is situated in the historical context of the gallery, which occupies a former industrial site that once housed the American Can Company. The earliest incarnation of SoEx called itself the “American Can Collective.”

In extending the commoditization of art objects to its logically absurd conclusion, Rebar sought to industrialize the production of gallery art, and simultaneously to invert the traditional commercial art-world exchange: in EnCanment, the cultural value embedded in the gallery itself was offered as a commercial art object, draped though it was in the banal trade dress of a mass-produced, canned good. And, standing in open revolt to a system that prizes mystique, unmoored valuation, and, above all, unrestrained consumption, EnCanment was designed to reduce the art gallery, qua institution, to a fungible unit of general commerce.

And here one may find traces of a nascent insurgency. EnCanment sought, playfully and absurdly, to insert a sliver of democracy into an otherwise deeply hegemonic system. Rebar harvested the gallery wall together with its associated cultural value (and the insular space it encloses), and distributed the wall to the public in an easily transportable, affordable package: the tin can. As one purchaser remarked, “I’ve always wanted a show at Southern Exposure. I’m hosting an open studio this weekend and one of my photographs will be hung on a piece of Southern Exposure procured from the EnCanment project. My first solo show in an art gallery!”

Conclusion

Although we’ve identified some of the key themes in our work to date here, this is done winkingly ex post facto. We can’t pretend to have had any of this in mind during the work itself, except at the intuitive level fostered by the kind of late-night discussions that take place at Rebar’s choice meeting spot, a pub in San Francisco’s Mission District. Absurdity, generosity, and a tactical approach have been the hallmarks of our projects thus far but hardly the test of an idea’s validity prior to its execution. In fact, what seems to have driven our 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. As long as we have the right eyes to see them, the cracks in the system will continue to elicit our 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.

To conclude then, we come back to one of our early questions in this chapter: can the result of this play become a tactical turning point in the structure itself, more than a specific instance of absurdity in public space? We could judge this not by how many others engage in repeating a 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.
Notes

1 The San Francisco Planning Department’s Downtown Plan, Recreation and Open Space, Map 3 - Major Open Spaces indicates which areas of the city are considered deficient in open space. Rebar chose one of these areas in a highly visible part of downtown as an ideal test site for its first Parking intervention.

2 According to Wikipedia (2009a), “Creative Commons has been described as being at the forefront of the ‘copyleft’ movement, which seeks to support the building of a richer public domain. . . . [s]ome have credited Creative Commons with generating interest in the issue of intellectual property and contributing to the re-thinking of the role of the ‘commons’ in the ‘information age’. Beyond that Creative Commons has provided ‘institutional, practical and legal support for individuals and groups wishing to experiment and communicate with culture more freely’. Creative Commons works to counter what the organization considers to be a dominant and increasingly restrictive permission culture. According to Lawrence Lessig, founder of Creative Commons, it is ‘a culture in which creators get to create only with the permission of the powerful, or of creators from the past’. Lessig maintains that modern culture is dominated by traditional content distributors in order to maintain and strengthen their monopolies on cultural products such as popular music and popular cinema, and that Creative Commons can provide alternatives to these restrictions.”

3 In this and many other endeavors, we have been inspired by other artists whose work engages interstitial urban space, in particular Gordon Matta-Clark’s “Fake Estates” project.

4 In other words, each POPO has its own unique governing ecology to be uncovered, unlike a “properly public” city park in which the rules are public, codified, and relatively consistent (see Amoss 2007).

5 In spring 2007, art students from a joint program of the University of New Mexico and the University of Texas launched an attack on the Cabinet National Library in order to erect their own archive atop the site. They were repelled by a sudden storm, common in the area at that time of year. See Taylor (2007). In July 2009 Rebar returned to Cabinetlandia to repair and expand the Library, which itself had suffered from storm damage, and added a drawer-sized white-wall art gallery (for itinerant exhibitions). Rebar’s 2009 expedition to Cabinetlandia also included an experiment in projecting the dreamworld of the Library onto the upward-blown dust of the New Mexican desert at night: using a high-powered projector, fractured images of architectural speculation were cast onto/into a churning miasma of wind-borne sand, evoking the eerie specter of weightless and ephemeral libraries of fantasy.

Bibliography


