Spectacle in the New Green City

By Ethan Lavine

Abstract

Nation-states have been criticized for their collective failure to aggressively combat climate change. Amid the foot-dragging, many cities have styled themselves as climate insurgents, 'taking the lead' through bold, creative efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Emerging from these efforts have been high-profile, highly symbolic projects: the green roof atop Chicago's city hall, New York City's MillionTreesNYC program, and San Francisco's network of parks reclaimed from parking spaces (called 'parklets'). This paper argues that such projects represent a new "mobilization of the spectacle"—a reflection of a popular desire to reimagine the city, but produced on the terms of (and even on behalf of) market forces and neoliberal reason. With the parklets of San Francisco serving as a case study, this paper attempts to reveal the influence of the neoliberal economic order in the production of the green urban spectacle.

Introduction

In the age of climate change, many people have come to see the city in a new light. As public awareness of the consequences of autocentric, sprawling development patterns has grown, so has the cachet attached to city living. How did this new understanding of the city come about? How has it taken on prominence alongside contradictory yet widely held views of the city as a place of pollution and overconsumption?

One source has been the widely repeated argument that dense urban form results in greater energy efficiency, an idea at the root of recent best sellers by David Owen (2009) and Edward Glaeser (2011). This is a measure of 'greenness' that contrasts the carbon footprints of city dwellers with their suburban or rural counterparts. The city dwellers – who tend to get around more often on foot or by public transit, and who tend to live in smaller spaces that require fewer resources to heat, cool, and supply with electricity– are seen as less complicit in the dangerous accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The emerging "green urbanism" agenda is also built upon the belief that cities can be a positive force for sustainability, especially through the incorporation of programs and designs to reduce their ecological footprints (Beatley 1999).

Yet the idea that dense urban form is inherently more sustainable than other development patterns in an era of climate change only partially explains this new understanding of the city. Another factor has been the active efforts undertaken by many cities to mitigate the threats posed by climate change through an array of policy initiatives and capital projects. These efforts, especially viewed in contrast to the frustrating lack of a coordinated response by nation-states, have aided the city's 'green halo' to burn more brightly.

Of course, many mitigation efforts undertaken by cities, such as infrastructure upgrades and retrofits, go unseen by the public. This paper is concerned with a different sort of effort. It is concerned with the high-profile and highly symbolic projects that have been successful in capturing the collective mind's eye, which have allowed cities to redefine themselves as the ultimate green spaces for the 21st century. Such projects, I will argue, represent a new "mobilization of the spectacle" (Harvey 2005). To borrow the words of Walter Benjamin (1999), these spectacles reflect the "wish images" of our society in a time of great anxiety about the environmental sustainability of our economic, social, and spatial arrangements.

However, just as with the spectacles of Paris that captivated Benjamin, the new green urban spectacles are a marriage of a utopian wish and the forces exerted by the dominant economic system of the day. The mobilization of the spectacle in ancient Rome as part of the "bread and circuses" strategy of governance was designed to mollify the masses and maintain imperial power. By opening up Paris for the construction of dazzling spaces of consumption in the form of department stores, cafes, and theaters, Haussmann's reorganization had a similar effect (Harvey 2005). Likewise, the influence of the neoliberal economic regime can be observed in the production of today's green urban spectacles. Importantly, the ways in which these spectacles serve to promote its interests must be considered alongside the effect they might have as agents of climate change mitigation.

Wish Images for a Greener City

A common expression of this critique is the symbolic retaking or occupation of a space that "belonged" to the automobile, industry, or another marker of environmental unsustainability. In recent years, New York City has closed off sections of Broadway and other busy thoroughfares to create pedestrian plazas. Paris and many other cities have launched major bike-sharing programs, every day sending thousands of custom-designed bikes onto city streets now less dominated by automobiles. Perhaps the best example is the green roof installed atop Chicago's city hall by Mayor Richard Daley in 2001. The roof has been endlessly cited by the media in stories about

the emerging trend of sustainable urbanism, a green roof atop the locus of political power being too perfect a metaphor to go uncommented upon.

The green roof on Chicago's city hall has also been invoked as evidence that cities have 'taken the lead' in efforts to combat climate change, a narrative popular both in the media and among city officials. At the kickoff for Climate Week NYC 2011, Mayor Michael Bloomberg echoed this now common refrain, adding that "while nations may talk about a global response, cities act locally" (Office of the Mayor of New York City 2011). As evidence, Bloomberg pointed to PlaNYC, New York City's celebrated strategy document on sustainability. PlaNYC covers a wide-ranging set of policies, both visible and outside the public eye, but its spectacular elements are the most aggressively promoted, particularly its MillionTreesNYC street-greening project.

As these examples show, the green urban spectacle conjures up an image of a more sustainable future in part by visually and viscerally representing a break from a less sustainable past. Be it through the literal greening of a space dominated by concrete, or through the metaphorical 'taking back' of a space that had been ceded to an unsustainable activity, the spectacles are effective because of the meaning with which they are imbued. Yet cities are unmistakably playing an active role in amplifying these messages—few mayors, tourist boards, or economic development directors allow the metaphor to go unexplained or the dots to go unconnected. 'Greenness' is a valuable commodity to the cities of our day. How has 'greenness' become so valuable to cities? I have asserted that the rise of green urban spectacles must be understood not only as the manifestation of a collective wish for a more sustainable city, but also as an undertaking shaped by the forces of neoliberalism. To begin to explain these forces it is useful to examine the hand of neoliberalism in the production of a previous iteration of the urban spectacle: downtown entertainment and cultural meccas such as Boston's Faneuil Hall, New York's South Street Seaport, and Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

Cities and the Commodification of Green

David Harvey (1989, 1990), charting the redevelopment of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, explains how the increasing mobility of capital beginning in the 1970s forced cities into fierce competition with one another for a favorable position in the global economy. Baltimore's goal was to recast the city as a destination for leisure, entertainment, and culture. In a time when the popular image of Baltimore and many other American cities was that of decay, crime, and neglect, this goal of a redeveloped harbor simultaneously answered the wish images of its day to remake the city in a form hospitable to skilled workers and their families. Built in a "post-

modernist style that explores the architecture of festival and spectacle, with its sense of the ephemeral, of display, and of transitory but participatory pleasure," the Inner Harbor contrasted the image of Baltimore as run-down, dangerous, and divided (Harvey 1990).

The model was considered to be a success, and the project bred imitators. Entrepreneurialism became the "main motif of urban action" and economic development in the 1970s and 1980s, cities having little choice but to adopt measures seen as business friendly, lest they witness firms gravitating toward more attractive cities (Harvey 1990). Corporate taxes were lowered, new business ventures were heavily subsidized by municipal funds, and cities worked to define themselves as cultural and consumer 'destinations.' Thus began a process in which cities attempted to create the conditions that would help them to maintain (or obtain) firms and jobs.

Urban spectacles—in the form of cultural and entertainment attractions—were perceived of as possessing the potential to remake the city, especially in the eyes of increasingly mobile skilled workers and transnational firms. Such interventions allayed popular fears about the city, answering popular desires for what the city might become: a place of play and cultural amenities. Intercity competition and one-upmanship are useful in explaining the production and proliferation of today's green urban spectacles as well. In recent decades, fears of an 'urban crisis' have ebbed, but the specter of climate change has presented a new crisis and a new set of opportunities to the city. The new wish images reflect fears of reaching a 'tipping point' on climate change (Hansen 2008), and allow the public to imagine a greener iteration of the city (often both figuratively and literally). Still facing fierce competition over access to capital in a system of flexible accumulation, cities have greened the urban spectacle to reflect the new wish images, and have produced and promoted spaces and projects that suggest solutions to the problem of climate change.

Parklets and the Production of a Spectacle

Jamie Peck (2010) emphasizes that on its path to power, neoliberalism has taken "many mongrel, shape-shifting forms." While its general trajectory is toward the expansion of market rule, neoliberalism has demonstrated an incredible capacity to adapt its project to suit various conditions and geographies. Perhaps this adaptive capacity explains the evolution of urban spectacles from the 1970s to today. As the popular 'wish images' (Benjamin 1999) for the city have morphed, so has the message of the spectacle. The previous iteration of the spectacle assuaged spectators' fears of urban crisis; the current iteration assuages spectators of the guilt and fear associated with climate change. Yet the market forces driving the mobilization of the spectacle remain largely the same. Entrepreneurialism continues to be the

dominant mode of urban governance, hence the eagerness of many cities to produce and promote spectacles that demonstrate their 'green cred.' As I hope to show below, through an examination of the 'parklets' of San Francisco, neoliberal reason continues to inform the production of the spectacle at the micro level.

Parklets are sites at which one or several parking spaces have been decommissioned and converted into a public space that contains plantings and seating. Cars are among the greatest contributors to climate change, and their eviction from the city street in favor of parklets is an unmistakable rebuke of the automobile culture and its discontents. The concept extends the critique beyond the pollution caused by the car to the social isolation fostered by car travel, and even to the aesthetics of the car-dominated street. The functionalist asphalt rectangle of the parking space is buried beneath the parklet. In its place goes a greened space, a site of socialization, and a work of aesthetic beauty by the standards of contemporary urban design.

Figure 1: One of San Francisco's early official parklets. Source: Ruth Miller, 2012.

Before they became a city-sponsored form of public space in San Francisco, parklets were a think-piece protest, the creation of a San Francisco-based art and design studio. In 2005, the studio installed its first parklet, trucking in and installing sod, a park bench, and a potted tree above a parking space. This demonstration lasted two hours, the maximum amount of time permitted by the meter (Park(ing) Day 2011).

In 2010, the city of San Francisco created a program allowing the installation of parklets on a semi-permanent basis. Based on a public-

private partnership (P3) model, parklets are maintained and installed by the city's Department of Public Works, but must be sponsored and designed by a Community Benefit District, storefront business owner, or a nonprofit institution or community organization. The application for parklets also allows other private parties to petition for permission to install a parklet, though the city-maintained Google Map of parklets lists only one (managed by a private citizen on Valencia Street). The same map showed 21 parklets maintained by storefront businesses (the majority being cafes and coffee shops), four by nonprofit or community organizations, and four by the Union Square Business Improvement District (San Francisco Great Streets Project 2011).

Private-public partnerships are a hallmark of urban development in the age of neoliberalism. City governments are forced to compete with one another on the basis of attractiveness to firms and the class of workers these firms employ, but they do so in a time of fiscal austerity in which the privatization of public services is generally seen as a virtue. Andy Merrifield (2002) calls the present incarnation of the city the "lean city," "a city that has been actively downsized, one now assuming the status of a business enterprise, typically measuring itself more by the ability to operate efficiently at minimal cost."

A common critique of private-public partnerships is that they are too often structured to resemble a taxpayer giveaway: the return realized by the private partner might greatly exceed the cost it pays to obtain the right to a public good. The initial application for a parklet lists the fees for one- or two-stall parklets (including a base fee, a parking meter removal fee, if applicable, and an inspection fee) at $1,632.50. There is an additional base fee of $285 for each stall beyond the first two, or $385 if additional meter removal is required. In addition, the city sets design parameters and weighs design proposals on the basis of aesthetics, suggesting that private partners will need to pay accordingly to achieve quality construction and design (San Francisco Planning Department 2011). The San Francisco Examiner reported that typical construction and design cost is between $5,000 and $15,000 (Seltenrich 2011).

Cafes and coffee shops represent a majority of the private partners sponsoring parklets, suggesting that the lure of sidewalk spillover seating makes the cost of the construction worthwhile. Of course, it is impossible to determine who is getting the better end of the bargain, the city or the private partner. Indeed, it need not be a zero-sum game. The new green space is, as the mayor's 'greening director' Astrid Haryati told a reporter, "pennies on the dollar compared to a brand new park" (Knight 2010). Yet the reliance on private partners to sponsor parklets means that the city has less than total control over their siting. The city can – and to an extent, does– control where a parklet cannot be, but only that. Neighborhoods underserved by

green space won't gain any such space through parklets unless a private partner steps forward to install one. Jeremy Németh (2009) makes a similar critique of a zoning incentive in New York City that grants developers floor area ratio (FAR) bonuses in exchange for carving out onsite 'publicly accessible' spaces. Németh observes that the program "widen[s] the gap between more and less valuable neighborhoods and between upper- and lower-income residents" by concentrating the development of these spaces at "sites of interest to the private sector."

Where they are built, the tradeoff for the addition of public space through parklets might be the expansion of socioeconomic stratification. The production of spaces that blend consumption and leisure is a common form of economic redevelopment, as these spaces are generally more attractive to high-income earners. As rents rise, such neighborhoods can become less accessible to low-income earners (Fox Gotham 2005; Zukin 1998). The high design standards that are a condition of project approval may also have the result of aiding gentrification. The city's parklet application declares that parklets are intended to provide an "aesthetic improvement to the streetscape," and asks applicants to use "high quality, durable, and beautiful" materials in their construction. "Greening," it adds, "is an important aspect of this beautification" (San Francisco Planning Department 2011). Harvey (1990), invoking Pierre Bourdieu, points to embellishment decoration and ornamentation as "codes and symbols of social distinction" through which upper-class communities establish themselves.

Further, parklets send cues to the public about the 'appropriate' usage of the space. Parklets, including the seats provided within, are by law open to use at any time by the public, and San Francisco requires each parklet to bear a small sign indicating its 24-hour use. Yet because the majority of parklets serve the dual function of public space and overspill seating for cafes, a passerby might reasonably assume that use of the parklet is only for patrons of the storefront establishment. Whether the passerby will see the sign, or whether she will be comfortable in a space where he or she may feel cafe patrons should receive priority, will undoubtedly vary from case to case. Private partners have further influence on the eventual use patterns of their parklets through the layout of seating and the selection of seating materials. The choice to install the sort of chairs and tables often seen in use at outdoor cafes might serve to confuse or discourage a passerby who wants to sit down without making a purchase. As Margaret Kohn (2004) observes, barriers that discourage entry to public spaces needn't always take the form of a gate. Private forms of policing and unwritten rules can be effective mechanisms of excluding undesired users from a public space.

Conclusion

An important question I have not addressed in this paper is whether or not green urban spectacles will be effective as climate change mitigation projects. Are such spectacles a new example of 'greenwashing,' cities borrowing from the playbook of corporations that have learned how to profit from a green image without fundamentally changing poor practices? Or are they evidence that powerful interests are finally putting their considerable force behind mitigation efforts?

Quite likely, the answer to both of these questions is a qualified 'yes.' Images are easily co-opted and distorted. The world exhibitions of France's Second Empire, Benjamin writes, "open[ed] a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted." The price of this distraction was the "state of subjection which propaganda, industrial as well political, relies on." However, as Harvey (1990), quoting Guy Debord, found in the example of the revitalization of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, the spectacle is not just "the common ground of decided gaze and false consciousness," but also "an instrument of unification," capable of mobilizing powerful actors behind an ambitious agenda.

Today's green urban spectacles offer a sharp critique of the unsustainable practices that fostered climate change. Yet, as I argue above, they are intimately shaped by forces of neoliberalism. At the macro level, these spectacles reflect the influence of intercity competition for highly mobile pools of capital and labor. At the street level, they reveal the force of economic liberalization, privatization, and the retreat of government in the production of space in today's cities. For those interested in mitigating inequalities resulting from the neoliberal economic order, just as for those interested in mitigating the damage from greenhouse gases accumulating in the atmosphere, it will be necessary to unravel the spectacle. It is because spectacles can be so effective as a form of distraction, as "political pacification," that they must be challenged and critiqued (Harvey 2005). Absent of a critical eye, the spectacle might deny us a truly sustainable city by robbing us of a citizenry that is engaged, aware, and calling for action.

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