

Recent Interventions in (and about) San Juan, Puerto Rico

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Figure 1. Banana Republic, ©Karlo Ibarra

The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places — these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account. —Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*

Park (ing) Day, a yearly and unique event that appropriates itself of paid metered parking spots in public streets and ways, and Desayuno Calle, roughly translated as 'Street Breakfast', a recurring event that encourages social interaction by activating public spaces in disuse, are two recent interventions in and about San Juan, Puerto Rico that operate on both a global scale and a local context. They both use social networks to organize and mobilize their members, emphasize the use of infrastructure

networks and public transportation, and are intended to raise awareness among participants on the alternatives that exist for the use and occupation of public space in Puerto Rico. The island's context in the Caribbean, as a previous colony of Spain, and now territory of the United States, often makes it fertile ground to receive and bridge trends and ideas of both European and American provenance, as exemplified by these two cases.

DESAYUNO CALLE

Begun in November 2008 as a local extension of the international efforts of the permanent breakfast group, Desayuno Calle consists of interventions in a variety of public spaces in Puerto Rico in order to stimulate social interaction, and establish contact with the outdoor surroundings of the island. The collective's self-imposed challenge is to gather a group of people, known or unknown, to have breakfast in a previously agreed upon public space. The first experiment of this type was conceived in 1996 by the Austrian artist, Friedemann Derschmid, and its basic guiding principle was to discover and occupy unusual and uninhabited public spaces in the city under the basic function of breakfast as a leisurely activity that everyone must perform.

Following permanent breakfast, the local collective led and encouraged by Andrea Bauzá and Mayté Bayolo gathers in places of the city usually lacking in clear function or activity, or whose original function is not clear but whose goal is to bring a group of

people together under these requirements, to re-appropriate public space that is currently unused or abandoned, re-interpret the space at the time of occupation and create awareness of the infinite possibilities inherent in these undefined spaces. In urban areas, these spaces are often non-places, terrain vague, with no default programmed activity. On occasions, they are interstitial breaks, within a change in the urban fabric of San Juan's urban and suburban extensions.

Often, descriptions of how to get to these places are obtuse, as 'non-places' have no physical address and tend to be spaces that our psycho-geographical map omits or underestimates. The use of apps, blogs and other online social media are of utmost importance in mobilizing members and pinpointing locations, and as such leave little or no paper trail relating to the activity. On each occasion, participants are asked to bring food to share, and also asked to be aware of the environment and bring their own utensils, silverware, and chairs or blankets to sit on from home. So far, every meeting has been a light and spontaneous activity which attempts to minimize the amount of waste and the surface is not recorded with the ephemeral and transient activity that takes place; once the activity has concluded, there is no trace or evidence that the event even took place.

For instance, the first Desayuno Calle (DC) event took place at the intersection of Roosevelt and Muñoz Rivera Avenues, on a lot left vacant as the spatial remnant resulting from the tabula rasa demolition and construction of public infrastructure for rapid transit built in 2004-5. Opposite the station, conceived as part of the initiative to promote public art in Puerto Rico and as an attempt to offset the absence of program and use underneath the train tracks, local authorities placed a group of containers by LOT-EK. Accessibility to the site was difficult to find, the site was abandoned and there, under the railroad tracks and between latent spaces of illicit activities, a small group decided to have breakfast.

Desayuno Calle (DC) has expanded its mission of social interaction to include a variety of issues of local current affairs, and each event has an implicit theme. For example, DC-6 joined the Urban Dance Company Soplo in the courtyard space that serves as the Arsenal of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Likewise, DC-11 took

advantage of the festival of trash brought by the Spanish group Basurama to the island. Other events, such as DC-14 at the public beach in Isla Verde, DC-15 to collect essential items for our neighboring Haiti, and DC-8 to support residents of the Martín Peña shantytowns in their struggle to maintain collective ownership of the land through the Land Trust, established in 2004, have all had a component support the processes of development and self-management of other community groups. By adopting these and other local activists' causes, the DC collective manages to diversify and contextualize its occupation of public space. This initiative to search for a regional link is essential in localizing the permanent breakfast global efforts.

In one of its most successful events, the ninth Desayuno proposed a meeting in the green area which is the turning radius surrounded by Avenida Piñero and the expressway. This meeting brought together the principles of sustainability and landscape architecture, encouraging interaction with this space to the human scale - and not the speed of the car- thereby slowing the speed of acceleration with which we are accustomed to perceive the place. This change of pace, the variation in the visual field and the displacement of its perfunctory use - infrastructure to park - supplants the experience in the city, to one with the city.

The choice of location for both DC-8 and 9 demonstrate a certain consistency with other areas that the collective Desayuno Calle identifies: areas where the city and its elements of landscape architecture become fragmented, as in the case of Caño Martín Peña, or of infrastructure, such as Avenida Jesús T. Piñero, cut and pass through the city's urban fabric. By focusing events on the event Desayuno Calle recurrent breakfast in society, the group lends itself to an inclusive and open to a massive attendance. For some 'callejeros', the purpose is to share their first meal of the day, for others it serves as a snack to their meandering Saturdays, and yet to others, to incite a better understanding of their environment and promote a meandering of social energies that contributes to the daily urban experience within the city.

PARK(ING) DAY

On September 18th, students of the Ecology Chapter of the Río Piedras campus of the University of



Figure 2. Park(ing) Day, 2008. San Juan, Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico, students of the landscape architecture program at the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico and the members of an organization called MASS gathered to peacefully occupy the parking meters located on Rosales, Aguada and Saldaña streets in the area of the city known as of Río Piedras.

This event, known as Park(ing) Day is part of an overall activation of public space, where each year - and for one day - various artists, activists, citizens and passers by temporarily transform parking spots parallel to public roads into one linear public park. Conceived in 2005 as constructive criticism to the lack of public space in the city of San Francisco, California, by art and design collective Rebar, Park(ing) Day offers a fresh look at these spaces, imagining the potential of use and program in considering public parking to be an extension of the sidewalk, and therefore of the city's public realm. The last global event brought together participants from 140 cities, 21 countries and 6 continents around the world.

The newly installed city parking meters allow city dwellers the possibility of leasing two hundred square feet of real estate in high demand in the short term. The challenge then is how to transform these occupations and what are the possible parameters for multiple viable creative engagement and civic participation, critical thinking, without interactions revealing potential default of space.

Unlike other cities where the sidewalk is intended as an extension of the building, Park (ing) Day invites reflection on the reverse possibility, and asks us to understand the parking lot as an extension of

the sidewalk. Thus, extending the area ready for public, pedestrian use.

In Río Piedras, Park(ing) Day gave way to re-conceptualizing the priority given to cars in the planning of our cities and the space usually designated for the vehicle became an alternate space that could enhance pedestrian leisure and life latent in each unit. The members of the event had the generous participation of the Conservation Trust, who in their active investigation of raising awareness of environmentally-friendly issues, provided seedlings and young trees to shelter pedestrians; these green areas - usually inexistent in our urban fabric - were welcomed by passers by. In addition, many of the spaces were customized by incorporating inflatable pools, games, beach chairs and other portable items that were ready for occupancy and later removal. Among the many utopian visions contained in the parking space will be interesting to see in the future actions of major proportions to reach urban community.

In evaluating the success of Park(ing) Day in our local context, it would seem that the street vendor is such a common occurrence in everyday San



Juan, that the visual impact of the informal re-appropriation of the space for the car is not of such great consequence. However, in Puerto Rico, where the Department of Transportation and Public Works indicates that there are 1.8 cars per inhabitant of the island, it is essential to dream of a future with less dependence on the automobile and greater priority for pedestrians. We must further encourage inclusive events such as these, which incite and cause the active participation of enthusiasts who wish to rediscover the living spaces of the city and the alternatives offered by our surroundings. Hopefully, Desayuno Calle and Park(ing) Day are only the beginning of yet more interesting interventions in and around San Juan.