

Technologies for a New Urban Agency: Instrumentalizing Activist Interventions in the Public Realm

In cities across the globe, temporary and bottom-up interventions for the activation of public space are proliferating. Reactive in nature, such interventions generally occur in response to urban vacancies and underused areas. Beginning as activist appropriations of city space by artists, designers, architects and locals, these short-term tactics have also become catalysts with their effects on the city space reaching well beyond their life-time and locale. While the phenomenon has been discussed critically with regard to its long-term gentrifying effect, on the positive side bottom-up urban interventions have often engaged a broader population in the production of urban space, and brought together a diverse community of people around shared interests. As temporary urban strategies are increasingly instrumentalized within top-down planning, architects find themselves confronted with a redefinition of their roles in relationship to these new participatory models.

ANTJE STEINMULLER
California College of the Arts

The paper puts forward an investigation of what constitutes a 'technology' that is emerging from, and conducive to working in this context. Through the lens of contemporary technicism, new technological developments tend to be perceived as a the drivers behind innovation in architecture and urban design. This paper considers the emergence of an inverse process: Architectural 'technology' - as the application of specific knowledge, methods and devices for practical ends - requires critical redefinition in response to this changing agent configuration in the production of urban space. As cities develop programs to build directly on community initiative in the production of urban space, architectural knowledge and the modes of its application are shifting and expanding - evolving between the poles of activism and entrepreneurship, between globally applicable techniques and extremely local involvement. This paper critically reviews architectural agency - and the methods and technologies employed - in relationship to three ongoing planning programs in San Francisco that combine bottom-up and top-down urban initiatives. It draws on a collaboration between architecture students, the local Planning Department, and a community partner within one of these programs to speculate on the tension between the global commonalities and local specificities that emerge in this new urban agency.

CONTEXT

The struggle to activate post-industrial urban space has been a global phenomenon for some time. A surplus of space left behind in the wake of disappearing industrial production facilities characterizes many cities across the globe. In cities like Berlin, it was precisely this surplus of space that catalyzed new models for the use of temporary interventions as a significant component in the process of transforming the city.¹ In other cities, population migration to new job markets and the economic slowdown of recent years have produced new types of scarcities: shrinking resources to be put into the development of public space, and inadequate spatial resources to provide multi-functional, adaptable, vital and activated urban space that reflects the diverse and changing needs of a new urban population.

In the same time period, architects, and architectural education, have seen a trend of increased specialization, manifest in the focus on digital technologies, and the emergence of specialized post-professional programs.² Yet, global economic change and ecological crises have brought about a redefinition of the architectural project that makes imperative a broad range of intersections with the knowledge of other disciplines. The resulting changes for how architects operate in the contemporary city not only challenge architects to increasingly borrow from methodologies common in other disciplines, but also produce an environment in which “autonomous expertise is traded in for reciprocal engagement.”³ Jeremy Till has argued that the scarcity of resources has moved architectural tasks out of the realm of the purely material (building new additions to the city), and into the realm of the socio-material and temporal.⁴ This necessitates understanding redistribution of material, adaptation, optimization, and the changing roles of material and people in a process over time. Moreover, this raises questions for what makes up a contemporary architectural ‘technology’ - defined as the sum of knowledge, methods and devices - that architects, and architecture students, need to have at their disposal in order to assume a catalytic position in this context.

This paper considers the make-up of this ‘architectural technology’ and the emerging roles for architects in the specific context of San Francisco. With its roughly 47 square miles San Francisco’s spatial resources are limited. Post-recession, the city has recently seen a new boom of the tech industry, whose specific impact on the city has been encouraged by tax breaks meant to attract tech companies to the Mid-Market area as a way to revitalize this derelict portion of the city. As companies like *Twitter*, *Salesforce*, *Zynga*, and *Dropbox* have relocated to the city proper between 2010 and 2013, San Francisco gained 21,672 tech jobs.⁵ Mayor Ed Lee credits the technology sector with “helping to pull the city out of the recession, creating jobs and nourishing a thriving economy that is the envy of cash-starved cities across the country.”⁶ At the same time, this ‘renaissance’ of run-down areas of the city has led to steep price increases in the housing market and high eviction rates for low-income residents so that former rental units can be turned into condominiums. While the resulting housing, and transportation scarcity has fueled the emergence of distinctly urban start-ups like *Airbnb*, *Uber* and *Campus*,⁷ the increasing loss of diversity in the city’s population that results from this housing crisis has had a significant impact. This impact is also felt in the scarcity of livable public urban space and its increasing homogenization. In addition, a high percentage of open space is dedicated to movement and storage of private vehicles. The city also has its share of privately owned public spaces whose role as active parts of the (truly) public realm has been problematic.

Yet, San Francisco's activist tradition has meshed with the entrepreneurial spirit of the city in recent years in the emergence of a typology of hybridized bottom-up / top-down strategies for the activation of the public realm - strategies that are deeply rooted in the specific local problems of its context, yet have proven to have potential for a global context: the *Parklet Program*, *Proxy SF*, and the new *Market Octavia Living Alleys* pilot program. All three represent instances in which the city administration is instrumentalizing bottom-up strategies for the activation of urban space. This paper draws on analytical and projective work conducted within an interdisciplinary graduate seminar with analytical and projective components to review the respective roles of the architect/designer in these recent efforts. It reflects on the expanded architectural 'tool set' that forms the basis for taking on a catalyzing role in the activation of urban space.

FRAMEWORK: REVEALING THE TERRITORIES FOR ARCHITECTURAL AGENCY

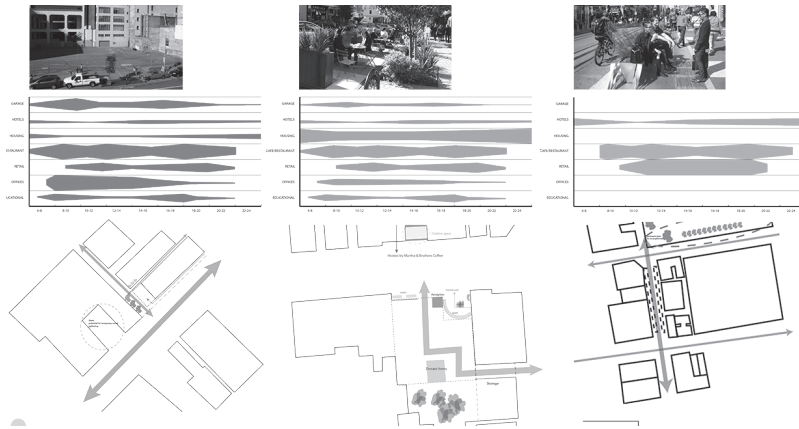
The *Parklet Program* and *Proxy SF* served as case studies for analysis in the beginning of the seminar, while students took on active roles within the *Living Alleys Program* in the second half of the course. The framework of both the analytical and projective portions of the course aimed to crystallize the expanded field engaged by the architect/designer through a series of simple questions that formed distinct phases in the development of the analysis (*Parklet Program* and *Proxy*) and the intervention (*Living Alleys*): these questions reached from the realm conventionally under the purview of architects - *where* (the project's context, urban/physical location(s), connections, range, and impact), *what* (configuration, organization, local/physical systems, materials) - to territory less well traveled - *when* (evolution, sequence, temporal structure, choreography of events, repetition, duration), *how* (legal frameworks, resources, funding mechanisms, economic model), and *who* (initiator(s), agent networks, benefactors/beneficiaries, stakeholders). This framework of questions pedagogically unpacked the local complexities, and allows for retrospective reflections on aspects and architectural 'technologies' - territories for architectural agency - that have potential and relevance for a broader global context.

PARKLETS + PARK(ING) DAY

What - Initiated in 2010, San Francisco's *Parklet Program* intends to produce aesthetic enhancements to the streetscape through a new economic model for enhancing public open space. Initiated by local residents and business owners, parklets repurpose a part of the street space in order to create a small public park. The city's *Pavement to Parks* website describes the program as providing "a path for merchants, community organizations, business owners, and residents to take individual actions in the development and beautification of the City's public realm."⁸ Parklets provide amenities like seating, planting, and bike parking.

The parklet has its origin in a local activist intervention that has been instrumentalized by the San Francisco Planning Department and an increasing number of other city governments since: On November 16, 2005, *Rebar* Art and Design Studio rolled out sod, and brought a potted tree and a bench to an single metered parking space in a downtown street lacking public green space. This so called *Park(ing) Project* was created "to explore the range of possible activities for this short-term lease and to provoke a critical examination of the values that generate the form of urban public space."⁹ Widely publicized online, the strategy became promoted as an open source project via a "how-to" manual.¹⁰ In the form of *Park(ing) Day*, it has since become an annual global event for the creation of temporary public parks. "*PARK(ing) Day* has effectively re-valued the metered parking space as an

important part of the commons – a site for generosity, cultural expression, socializing and play.”¹¹ Most recently, it has triggered new uses for metered parking spaces, including a health clinic, temporary farms, and bike repair.



1

Where - While the experiments of *Park(ing) Day* are evolving each year, San Francisco’s *Parklet Program* has been framed by strict regulations of its location (1 or 2 metered parking spaces, setbacks from driveways, curb transitions etc.), materials and uses via the city’s *Parklet Manual*. As of February 2013, thirty-eight parklets have been installed throughout San Francisco, and the program is being emulated in cities around the world.¹²

When - The application and permitting for parklets can take 1 year or more, and the resulting permits can be renewed annually. All associated physical interventions have to be removable at short notice. Considered public space, they operate open 24 hours, 7 days a week, making necessary considerations for safety, and around-the-clock use.

How - The *Parklet Manual* guides applicants through a tightly structured process with multiple opportunities for public input. Parklets are privately funded (with typical costs of \$20,000).

Who - The *Parklet Program* is structured so that anyone can apply (anyone can become an ‘activist’ in their street), yet given the nature of the required drawing submittals in the application process, architects/designers are almost always part of the process in their traditional role. While parklets are funded and maintained by neighboring businesses, residents, or community organizations, the *Parklet Manual* asks initiators to build broad neighborhood support. Signed letters of support are required for permit. There are instances in which architects/designers have been actively involved in devising strategies for funding a Parklet (crowdsourcing to offset material cost¹³) or in efforts for garnering public support. Yet, while born out of an activist intervention initiated by architects, the instrumentalization of *Park(ing) Projects* into *Parklets* has only marginally expanded the territory and roles for architects.

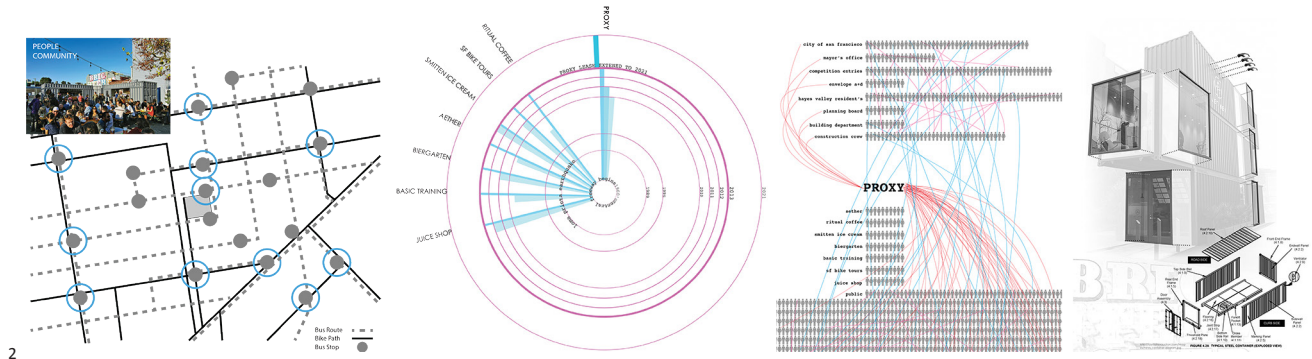
The proliferation of parklets has also spawned critique - from the general issues of privately owned public space, to their role as thinly disguised revenue generators for businesses, to the decrease in available parking spaces, noise issues and other nuisances. As the longer-term impact and potentials of parklets is carefully being studied,¹⁴ other potential territories open up benefit from (and may expand) architectural knowledge and methods: these include embedding digital methods for use data collection in the design of parklets, development and

Figure 1: Comparative analysis (*where, what, when*) of the original *Park(ing) Day* Parklet (Rebar), 24th and Sanchez Parklet (RG Architecture), Powell St. Parklet (Walter Hood); student work by Sanna Lee and Maryam Nassajian.

implementation of mobile feedback via smartphone apps, data visualization of parklet impact, the strategic consideration of parklet life-cycles, and their deliberate implementation and coordination in order to catalyze more permanent changes in the structure of sidewalks and street edges.

PROXY SF

What - *Proxy* is a temporary venue made up of a collection of food trucks, portable pods and renovated shipping containers spread across two adjacent lots in the Hayes Valley neighborhood of San Francisco. *Proxy* has been described as “part city-wide festival, part neighborhood block party”, “a programmatic matrix of possible temporary uses.”¹⁵ It opened in 2011, as a temporary, full-scale experiment in bringing arts, culture and retail to urban lots awaiting redevelopment.



2

Where - *Proxy* is situated on land freed up by the demolition of a section of the Central Freeway that had become unstable during Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989. The local neighborhood organization had fought for years for its removal which finally began in 2003. The series of odd-shaped lots left in its wake were slated for the development of affordable housing, initiated by a widely publicized competition in 2005. *Envelope A+D* was one of the winners. During the subsequent economic downturn, development on the lots came to a halt. The Mayor’s Office of Workforce and Economic Development approached *Envelope A+D* with a request for a proposal for the temporary activation of the two lots situated in the heart of the Hayes Valley district.

When - The project is comprised of a rotating set of vendors, working out of a changing constellation of converted shipping containers or trucks, and a series of temporary events and installations. Vendors leases have varying durations. Originally conceived for a three-year life cycle, *Proxy’s* temporary lease has now been extended an additional 8 years until 2021.

How - The Mayor’s Office of Workforce and Economic Development embraced *Envelope’s* proposal for the site, yet was unable to provide any funding or make available loans. The City charges rent for the two lots that *Proxy* occupies, which is carried by the vendors who also pay for the customization of the shipping containers. Funding for the overall framework and events comes from corporations, local donors and philanthropists. City administrators supported the project through adapting and streamline the permit process for the installation of new containers.

Who - While this project was initiated by the Mayor’s Office through a request for proposals directed at *Envelope A+D* as one of the housing competition winners, the development and success of *Proxy* is the consequence of the broad range of tasks taken on by the architect. *Envelope A+D* acted as the developer, entrepreneur and ultimately, curator of various cycles of programs and activities taking

Figure 2: Analysis (where, when, who and what) of *Proxy SF* (Envelope A+D); student work by Garrett Rock and Dustin Tisdale.

place on the site. Breaking new ground with their proposal, it was in the hands of Envelope to gather the support of the Building Department (negotiating new territory within City Building Code regulations), neighborhood residents, and potential stakeholders. In addition, *Envelope* took on financial responsibility, and had to devise fund raising strategies for temporary events and the basic framework for the site. In the process, the architects form stakeholder networks, curate vendors, and have a high degree of control the outcome and mix of activities on the site at any point in time.

In its 3-year life span to date, *Proxy* has been the site of temporary events reaching from weekly truck-based food markets through San Francisco's Off-The-Grid, to symposia and exhibitions on the topic of innovative strategies for activating public space. The success of "*Proxy - the Site*" has led to efforts of turning "*Proxy - The Strategy*" into a nonprofit organization that enables it to be deployed as mechanism for urban change elsewhere. The project itself has laid open new territory for architects to act as active creators of emerging urban condition: urban planners, developers, fabricators, fundraisers, philanthropists, cultural curators, good neighbors, and responsible citizens.¹⁶

LIVING ALLEYS

What - Located within San Francisco's *Market Octavia Neighborhood Plan* in close proximity to the demolished portion of the Central Freeway, *Living Alleys* is a pilot program for the activation of a set of small streets in the Hayes Valley neighborhood. Initiated by the San Francisco Planning Department, "the *Market Octavia Plan* envisioned a process where local residents could propose "living streets" -- shared, multi-purpose public spaces -- improvements to their alleys, and participate in the design and implementation."¹⁷ The City's primary goal is to create active, pedestrian-friendly places that provide amenities for neighbors and passers-by to sit and engage with each other, and foster a variety of community activities.

Where - The planning department considers individual blocks of the local alleyway network as sites for this program. Proposals can also consider small portions of the alleys related to specific commercial or residential activities. Proposed improvements must address storm drainage, traffic calming, fundraising and long-term maintenance.

How - *Living Alleys* proposals may be sponsored by a private partner (a local merchant, resident, institution, etc.) but all amenities of a *Living Alley* must be free and open for public use.¹⁸ Initiators must consider community partnerships, and garner neighborhood support. The proposal are encouraged to be phased, so that funding strategies can be developed over time. The *Living Alleys* pilot program is funded through a Caltrans grant, and small grants are made available to the top three proposals submitted by the deadline.

Who - Inspired by active and inhabited small streets across the planet as well as events like *Open Streets* or *Play Streets*, the San Francisco Planning Department initiated the *Living Alleys Program* in order to enable local residents to take initiative in improving and activating public urban space. Not unlike the *Parklet Program*, the *Living Alleys Program* provides a framework, process and guidelines for the proposals. The emphasis on neighborhood support encourages partnerships within the community along specific alleys. Members of the planning department introduced the program to the local community through a sequence of neighborhood meetings that attracted between 20 and 80 people.

With local residents as initiators, *SF Jazz*, a non-profit organization working to develop the audience for jazz in the San Francisco Bay Area, reached out to California College of the Arts for a partnership in the development of a proposal for Linden Alley, located within the *Living Alleys* program site. The *SF Jazz Center* hosts regular concerts, an annual jazz festival, has its own jazz ensemble as well as an educational program for youth and young adults. The collaboration on the *Living Alleys* project took place in the framework of an interdisciplinary graduate elective seminar. The seminar was run as an “ENGAGE” seminar through CCA’s Center for Arts and Public Life. “ENGAGE” courses focus on learning through a real life projects in partnership with community members. The San Francisco Planning Department also collaborated throughout the process, coordinating student involvement and presentations at community meetings, and participating in various discussions of the ongoing work.

The students were involved in client meetings with *SF Jazz* as the community initiator, in discussions with the planning department, and in multiple public presentations of their work that gave neighborhood residents opportunity for feedback (Fig. 3). Students also conducted in-depth research on site and, in some instances, city-wide. They collaborated in teams of 3 on 4 separate proposals for



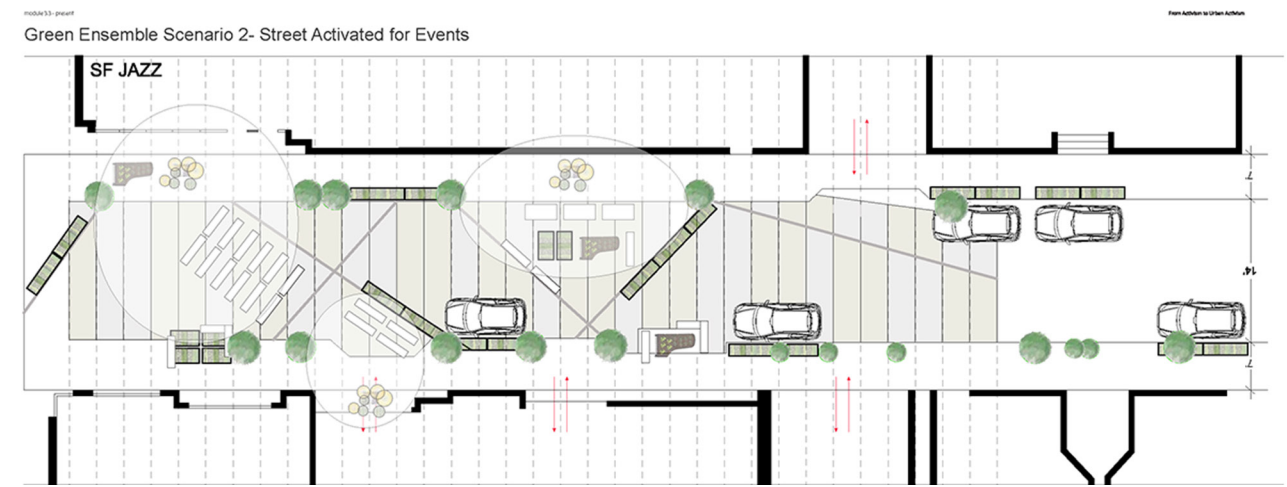
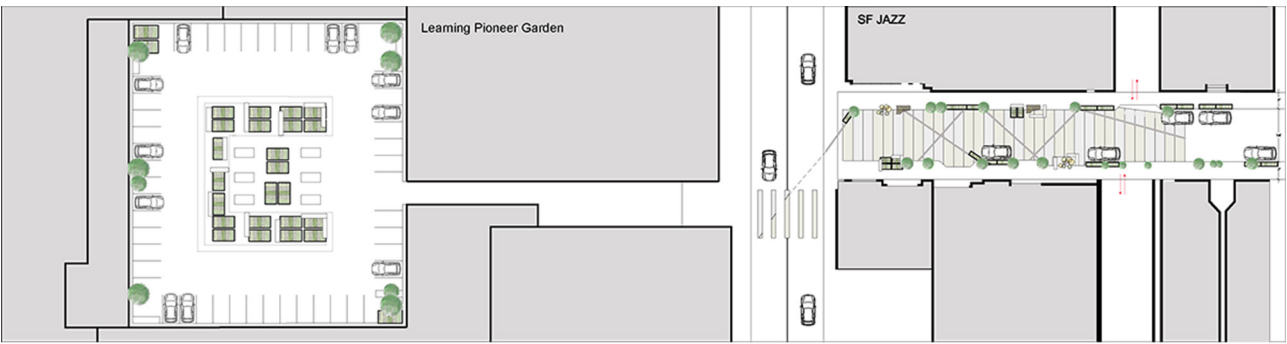
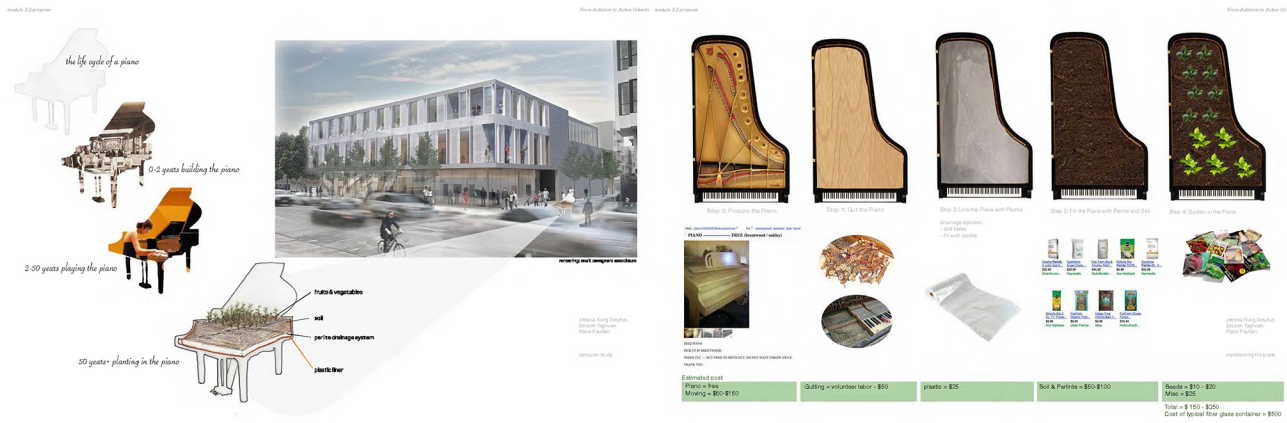
3

Linden Alley and *SF Jazz*. Like the analysis of *Proxy* and the *Parklet Program* conducted in the beginning of the semester, the conceptual development of these proposals was framed by the same five questions - challenging students to move beyond the consideration of physical and locational design in order to understand their work as phased, choreographed, curated, and networked into the larger urban and community context. Students also proposed strategies for funding and considerations for the life cycle of the materials used (Fig. 4).

Picking up on the potentials of *SF Jazz* as a music venue, the proximity of several schools and a rising interest in community gardening in the area, one team’s proposal transformed and deployed defunct pianos (sourced as free on Craigslist) as a way of structuring street space for outdoor events and performances (Fig. 5). With minimal cost and effort, the pianos are converted into planters that are adopted by local residents, schools and businesses - some of them providing learning gardens, others supplying the restaurant located in the *SF Jazz Center* with herbs and lemons.

The *Living Alleys Program*, thus, provided a test case in which the students (as architects-to-be) are hired in a traditional role (to ‘design’ the street space outside *SF Jazz*), but took on broader issues that required a different tool-kit: questioning boundaries and premises, researching potentials, uncovering networks and mutually beneficial relationships, anticipating structures for development over time, and inventing fundraising strategies. This expanded architectural ‘technology’, as

Figure 3: Client and community interactions during the seminar (initial client meeting at *SF Jazz*, Hayes Valley community meeting, final presentation of the work at *SF Jazz* with members of the San Francisco Planning Department); photos by author.



the sum of knowledge and methods used, also involved thinking beyond the local intervention on a specific urban block with several projects working beyond the boundary of the Linden Alley site towards larger urban connectivity and consideration of transportation networks. In the example of one project, *SF Jazz's* location was conceived as a node within a network of sound installations that included an event stage at *Proxy*.¹⁹ Outside of the constraints of this collaboration in the framework of an academic seminar, architects working within the *Living Alleys Program* would benefit from methods used in community organization and mediation. Further potentials for the involvement of architects in the process include the development (and evolution) of guidelines for *Living Alley* applicants, and contributing to the development of a longer-term dynamic development process that is intertwined with moments of periodic feedback and assessment.

Figure 4: Student proposal for Linden Alley - mobile planted pianos, including life-cycle study, cost analysis and maintenance plan; student work by Jessica Kung Dreyfus, Raine Paulson-Andrews and Setareh Taghvaei.

Figure 5: Deployment of planted pianos, and proposed integration as school district learning gardens; student work by Jessica Kung Dreyfus, Raine Paulson-Andrews and Setareh Taghvaei.

ENDNOTES

1. Senatsverwaltung fuer Stadtentwicklung Berlin / Studio UC/ Klaus Overmeyer, *Urban Pioneers - Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin* (Berlin: Jovis, 2007), 24.
2. Amy Culper and Sheila Crane, "Design Agency - The New Heuristics", *Journal of Architectural Education* Vol. 68/1 (March 2014): 2-4.
3. Culper and Crane, "Design Agency", 2.
4. Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 28.
5. "San Francisco Beating Silicon Valley With Growth in Jobs", Bloomberg, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-25/san-francisco-beating-silicon-valley-with-growth-in-jobs.html>.
6. "Backlash by the Bay: Tech Riches Alter a City", New York Times, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/25/us/backlash-by-the-bay-tech-riches-alter-a-city.html>.
7. "How Burrowing Owls Lead To Vomiting Anarchists (Or SF's Housing Crisis Explained)", Techcrunch, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://techcrunch.com/2014/04/14/sf-housing/>.
8. San Francisco Planning Department, Pavement to Parks Website, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://pavementtoparks.sfplanning.org/parklets.html>.
9. "About Park(ing) Day", Park(ing) Day Website, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://parkingday.org/about-parking-day/>.
10. http://parkingday.org/src/Parking_Day_Manual_Consecutive.pdf, accessed April 30, 2014.
11. "About Parking Day."
12. San Francisco Planning Department, *Pavement-to-Parks Parklet Manual* V.1.0 (2013), 1.
13. see for example *DNA Lounge Parklet*, San Francisco by Studio Anomalous, <http://studioanomalous.com/dnaparklet/>.
14. see for example *Reclaiming the Right of Way Evaluation Report - An Assessment of the Spring Street Parklet*, UCLA Complete Streets Initiative, Luskin School of Public Affairs, and Parklet Studies, August 2013.
15. Interview with Douglas Burnham of Envelope A+D on Proxy's website, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://proxysf.net/interview/douglas-burnham/>.
16. Douglas Burnham / Envelope A+D, "On Site in the City" Pamphlet, 11/001 (Sept. 2011): 34.
17. San Francisco Planning Department, Request For Proposals: "Living Alleys" (October 23, 2013), v.1.0: 1.
18. "Living Alleys" RFP, 1.
19. *SF Jazz* has submitted all work produced by the seminar as part of their proposal for city funding. The Linden Alley proposal is one of three projects currently in review with the SF Planning Department.
20. Kenny Cupers, "Where is the Social Project", *Journal of Architectural Education* Vol. 68/1 (March 2014): 6.

CONCLUSION

The context of San Francisco may be specific through its scarcity of available land, and the nature of its opportunities for development and articulation of public space. In cities around the globe, however, the need for active and engaging public spaces is equally present with their own choices of location, or the potential of turning underused private land into temporary public amenities in the interim until more permanent development processes take over. The role and skillset of the architect, the breadth of questions to tackle, may vary slightly, but essentially applies with regard to an expanded set of roles architects can and should take on. Confronted with this context in architectural practice, this will have implications for how, and what, we teach in our curricula. Amongst many of the knowledge areas and methods listed in the examples above, flexibility, adaptability and team-based working methods emerge as increasingly important skills.

As Kenny Cupers has pointed out, this entails a shift from intentionality to agency²⁰ in architectural education - from the well defined and planned outcome, to the initiation of a process whose outcome cannot be fully anticipated. In this context, one of the challenges lying ahead is to structure of processes of prolonged engagement, not unlike the one pioneered by *Proxy*, in which built-in feedback loops allow for observation, reflection, iteration, and adjustments. Architects need to take on questions about the effects and consequences of processes set in motion my bottom-up short term strategies and their growing instrumentalization by city governments.