The most significant change to San Francisco's landscape in 2011 involves a conjuring act that turns parking spaces into pedestrian nooks. They go by the name of parklets, a word that didn't exist two years ago, and when 2011 arrived there were only four. Now there are 22, with six more approved and 44 in various stages of review.

Their reach extends from Potrero Hill to the Outer Sunset, as far north as Washington Square and as far south as one planned for the Excelsior district. The latter parklet will be built by students at the Out of Site Youth Arts Center; by contrast, Audi sponsored a "promenade" on Powell Street that was designed by noted Oakland landscape architect Walter Hood with a budget rumored to approach $1 million. They're also attracting attention beyond the Bay Area. Parklets have popped up in Philadelphia and Vancouver, British Columbia. Several are planned for Los Angeles. Architectural Record devoted a page this fall to "the ultimate revenge on the modern city: one less parking space, one more park."

Correction: Two parking spaces are sacrificed, not one. In their place goes a platform that sits level with the sidewalk and is adorned with seating, plants and some form of a protective edge. They've become so popular that there's even a spin-off in four "parkmobiles" near Yerba Buena Gardens that consist of low, customized dumpsters filled by eye-catching plants with an inset bench on one side.

Enough generalities. On to the specifics: a guided tour of every parklet now open. Some are more welcoming than others. Some already show their age. The best strive to create destinations, not just seating. It's a design experiment being conducted before our eyes, and it's not going away.

100 and 200 blocks of Powell Street - Powell Street Promenade
Opened July 2011
How it looks: The "promenade" consists of eight sleek platforms with aluminum bands that rise in spots to provide tables and benches within railings that are ribbed extrapolations of the theme. No two stops are alike; several have planters that ripple along the edge, the blade-like upper rims just wide enough for a slender derriere.
How it feels: These are the most upscale eddies - Audi's budget no doubt exceeds the other parklets combined - and the chic tone might seem jarring alongside cable cars. Here's the flip side: The promenade nudges tourists and visitors to expect the unexpected, even in the most familiar spots. And it does get used.

1570 Stockton St., 423 and 526 Columbus Ave. - Tony's Pizza Napoletana, Caffe Greco and Caffe Roma
Opened October 2010-July 2011
How they look: These three parklets all were designed by Rebar Group, using yard-wide modules clad in planks of engineered bamboo; some units are flat, others include seating pods or planter boxes. Each of the trio has a different arrangement, but all cluster the flat units to create dining areas.
How they feel: The parklet outside Tony's is the coziest, an urbane neighbor to Washington Square with colorful tile tables that add a bit of flash to a snug block. The ones outside cafes Greco and Roma are no match for the vast dimensions of Columbus Avenue; they're like small barges along the shore of the Mississippi.

1755 Polk St.
The Crepe House
Opened May 2011
How it looks: Another early example of seating and not much else; even the drought-tolerant shrubs look perfunctory.
How it feels: Things were more inviting when the planters held small fir trees, but drivers complained about blocked sightlines.

1230 Polk St. - Quetzal Cafe
Opened May 2011
How it looks: Three planters perpendicular to the street split the deck into two equal sections. They're also visually emphatic with thick walls of concrete, some striped and some sloped.
How it feels: Seating rather than chill space, to be sure. But by that standard, better than most.

384 Hayes St. - Arlequin and Mad Will's Food Co.
Opened September 2011
How it looks: You know the drill. Concrete pavers, rectangular planters, movable tables and chairs. Two short benches along the sidewalk are a twist, but they don't look inviting.
How it feels: On design-savvy Hayes Street, the utilitarian motif strikes a dour tone. Why linger here when Patricia's Green is a block away?

Farley's - 1315 18th St.
Opened August 2011
How it looks: A flat outpost on a steep block. The parklet's carefully engineered base is topped by an amiable mashup of plywood, recycled-log backrests, artificial turf and well-worn tables and chairs.
How it feels: Funky and laid-back, with a DIY sensibility in keeping with the proudly not-posh neighborhood it serves. Extra points for the perch-like vantage point.

3868 and 3982 24th St. - Martha & Bros. Coffee and Just for Fun
Opened December 2010
How they look: These parklets are of identical design by RG-Architecture. The decks are concrete pavers. The distinctive planters - tall rectangular cubes of weathered steel - are linked by thin cables. One has an inset bench; both are dotted with red metal tables and chairs.
How they feel: What a difference the setting makes. The parklet outside Just for Fun beckons from behind deciduous cherry trees above bountiful shrubs. The one at Martha & Bros. Coffee has only a telephone pole for company, and it seems naked.

3600 16th St. - Squat and Gobble
Opened March 2011
How it looks: Fancy iron railing, oversize pots with buoyant plants, colorful umbrellas amid bistro seating - even lights strung above the sidewalk. C'est si bon!
How it feels: Like an extension of the sponsoring restaurant, rather than space that is open to all. If you don't notice the "Public Parklet" sign at the base of one edge, you won't think to grab a seat. This was one of the early parklets, and it has served as a cautionary tale.

639 Divisadero St. - Mojo Bicycle Cafe
Opened March 2010
How it looks: This is where it all began, and what an inauspicious start design-wise: wood decking lined with tall dark planters, cables strung between. The round tables and their chairs are the same as the ones outside the cafe, a touch that's now taboo.
How it feels: Thank goodness for the exuberant succulents and shrubbery: They screen out some of the automobile commotion on an emerging neighborhood strip where too much traffic rumbles by.

1300 Fulton St. - Cafe Abir
Opened July 2011
How it looks: Like a well-built wooden crate. Inside is a long bench against the solid wall. Eight round metal tables in a line, metal chairs along the sidewalk.
How it feels: More like a restaurant alcove than an urban oasis.

1331 Ninth Ave. - Arizmendi Bakery
Opened September 2011
How it looks: Wooden modules are arranged as if in a three-dimensional puzzle to create seating and counters of varying forms and heights while splitting the space into four sections - one reserved for the coolest black bike racks in town.
How it feels: Comfortable and sophisticated at once. An intimate addition to one of San Francisco's most underrated commercial districts.

4033 Judah St. - Trouble Coffee Co.
Opened August 2011
How it looks: Like a driftwood fortress. An undulating eucalyptus trunk provides most of the seating. The edge is a wondrous wall of mismatched wood. The deck consists of long bricks - some squiggly, others straight - inscribed with the names or nicknames of local donors who helped make it happen.
How it feels: If parklets were nothing more than sidewalk extensions above asphalt, the novelty would wear off. This and a handful of others show what makes the potential so exciting. They embody aspects of neighborhood life, letting outsiders experience strains of local culture. At best, they're a physical manifestation of today's San Francisco - and perhaps a hint of tomorrow's city as well.

No time to roam the city in search of parklets? Then head to Valencia Street. With seven along the way and at least one more in the works, it's the movement's main drag - and a streamlined survey of the variety of forms that reclaimed asphalt can take.

375 Valencia St. - Four Barrel Coffee
Opened July 2011
How it looks: Artisanal metalwork meets artisanal coffee. Two nooks that include handsome wooden bars are framed by a railing that extends overhead, young vines pushing upward on either end. The section between the nooks serves another purpose: vertical bicycle parking!
How it feels: Definitely the most well-crafted parklet. Whether you find it profound or hipster precious depends on your perspective. By any measure, it's a scene.

914 Valencia St. - Freewheel Bike Shop
Opened March 2011
How it looks: As simple as can be: artificial decking, a planter along the edge that blurs a sloped backrest and a solid wide bench, and two slate-topped sections perpendicular to the sidewalk that provide a wide perch for coffee cups.
How it feels: From the end of the first batch of parklets, where the aim was overflow space for pedestrians, this is the most beckoning by far. What we have instead of creative flourishes is the parklet equivalent of an old brown shoe - infinitely adaptable, an ideal spot to kick back.

937 Valencia St. - 'Deepistan National Parklet
Opened July 2011
How it looks: The only parklet in front of a private home is modest in size but ambitious in reach. A curb cut has been replaced by concrete pavers walled in by broad aluminum planters 42 inches high. One angled box is filled with succulents, the other with fragrant plants beneath a yucca tree. You'll even find a triceratops topiary that puts Chia Pets to shame.
How it feels: The space inside is more enticing than the metallic outer walls. But give it points for personality, and pause to contemplate the show.
3248 22nd St. - Revolution Cafe, Escape from New York Pizza and Lolo  
Opened April 2010  
How it looks: The city's second parklet ain't what it used to be. Planters are bare. Ghosts of graffiti mar the faded modules. A different sign of age: There are no defined edges to the deck. 
How it feels: In limbo. Designer Rebar Group is fabricating a version 2.0 that should be installed by February. "That parklet was too successful for its own good," reflects Rebar's Blaine Merker. "It was a pilot, and two years with the current design was a pretty good run."

3318 22nd St. - Fabric8  
Opened August 2011  
How it looks: One corner is devoted to a shingled mound topped by a birdhouse-like shed. The seating? Beanbags. The handsome planter that defines the eastern edge holds an olive tree. 
How it feels: Like a whimsical installation - and indeed, artist Eric Otto composed what he calls "The Peace Keeper" from salvaged materials. Sponsor Fabric8 wasn't out to create seating for patrons, it wants to make people smile. We need more surprises like this.

1132 Valencia St. - Crepe House and Zaytoon  
Opened June 2011  
How it looks: No benches, just tables and a clean deck framed by wooden planter boxes and vertical metal railings. 
How it feels: Uninviting if you aren't there for food and drink, but it's often festive; the $2.95 beers on tap at Crepe House will do that.

78 29th St. - Cafe Seventy8  
Opened August 2011  
How it looks: Sloped outer wall with planters of faux wood (recycled plastic) topped by horizontal cables strung between wooden posts. Not much seating, two sturdy steel tables with comfortable chairs. In other words, to the point. 
How it feels: The relatively high cables make the space seem more protected than most. A mature street tree drapes the parklet, which sits on a quiet block apart from the sponsoring cafe. In other words, it's easy to linger longer than planned.

Creating a parklet

So you want to build a parklet - officially described as "space for people to sit, relax and enjoy the city around them." Follow these steps:

• **Pick a good location:** It can't be at a corner, and it can't be on streets where the speed limit exceeds 25 miles per hour. Don't block red zones or fire hydrants.
• **Backing:** Line up "demonstrated community support," such as letters or petitions. They come in handy if a neighbor objects.
• **Know the rules:** When the city's application period begins - the next one might come this spring - keep a few design parameters in mind: The platform can extend only 6 feet beyond the curb, and it must be framed by "planters, railing or cabling." Permanent seating is preferred to the exclusive use of movable chairs. Greenery is a plus. So are "high quality, durable and beautiful" materials. No tropical hardwoods, though!
• **Costs:** If you do get approved, anticipate fees of $982.50 - plus $650 more if parking meters are taken out of commission - and a $221 annual fee. Plus liability insurance ($1 million). The cost of construction varies from parklet to parklet, but a $20,000 budget will probably be enough.
Learn more: For more information on parklets, go to sfgreatstreets.org/parklets.