



Civic adventures with Rebar design collective

John King
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Red-hot architects from around the world will gather next week in Venice to mingle and gossip and show off what's new. Frank Gehry will be there and Zaha Hadid, Thom Mayne, and Pierre de Meuron and Jacques Herzog.

Oh, and three guys from San Francisco taking time off from their day jobs to show the results of a partnership they describe as an "open forum for outlandish ideas."

"It's a little unreal to think about hanging out in these scenes," says Blaine Merker, 32. "There's such gravitas associated with the Biennale. When people hear *we're* going they say, '*What?*' "

Merker is one-third of Rebar, a 4-year-old design collective that sets out to upend notions of the role of public space within cities. That Rebar's flying off today to display work at the Venice Biennale's 11th International Architecture Exhibition not only shows that the trio is onto something, it demonstrates how ideas take hold in an age when what's seen on the Internet is as real as anything rising from the ground.

"I'm not sure Rebar could have existed in a pre-Internet world," muses Matthew Passmore, 38, who has a law degree but no architectural training. "There's this dichotomy in our work being so temporal - but through Web sites and videos and blogs, it becomes worldwide."

That temporality is at the core of the action most associated with Rebar: Park(ing) Day.

Planting a seed

The first was in 2005, a guerrilla seminar in urban design: The trio and friends commandeered a vacant parking space on the 500 block of Mission Street at noon, unrolled 10 strips of sod, popped a bench at one end and a potted tree at the other, and then lounged until their time ran out at 2 p.m.

End of story - until a blogger posted photos and calls started coming in. Rebar responded by posting its own video along with a how-to manual and a licensing agreement banning commercial use of the repurposed space (no temporal tapas bars, for instance).

One year later there was a logistical partner, Trust for Public Land, coordinating locations on a selected day for a dozen emulators in San Francisco and similar events in 13 cities. This year's Park(ing) Day is Sept. 19, and at least 65 cities will host variations on the theme.

Because of TPL's role, the 2008 event emphasizes the virtues of open space: "It's a way to communicate our message that parks are important for cities," says TPL's Matthew Shaffer.

Rebar's take is more complex.

"It's not just about parks, it's about rethinking streets and how we use urban lands - a much broader idea," proclaims John Bela, 36, the third member of the troika. "Space is so circumscribed, defined by commercial activity. ... We look for fragments of space that might be appropriated for social interactions not governed by commerce."

Another act of appropriation was last year's erection of a band shell in the panhandle of Golden Gate Park, a structure consisting of such consumer detritus as 65 automobile hoods and 3,000 plastic bottles. A collaboration with the Finch Mob and CMG Landscape Architecture, it was in use for 10 weeks before being exiled to a warehouse on Treasure Island.

Gone but not forgotten: The band shell won an award this summer for Urban Design from the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It also caught the eye of William Menking - not only one of the AIA judges, but also the organizer of this year's United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

"I immediately loved it - it had so much spirit, and felt like San Francisco in a quirky way," says Menking, editor of the Architect's Newspaper, based in New York, which also has a West Coast edition.

Creativity on display

The pavilion will include 17 examples of what is described as "an expanded conception of architectural practice and responsibility." There are responses to gentrification and designs for farmworker washrooms, as well as the much-publicized Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley.

"Some of the things that will be on display are high-minded. The band shell has (intellectual) substance, but it's fun and has a lot of color," Menking says. He also likes Rebar's design approach: "They work in an off-the-cuff manner. They do it because they like it."

Rather than ship the band shell to Europe - no budget - Rebar will show a display board on the evolution of the band shell. There's also a new video on Park(ing) Day, a project that caught Menking's eye as he explored the Rebar Web site.

After a week in Venice crashing at a friend of a friend's, Rebar heads north to ExperimentalDesign Amsterdam 2008. There it will present a piece of street furniture done in collaboration with Droog Design of the Netherlands.

Dubbed the "bushwaffle," Rebar's creation functions as a flexible cushion and is dispensed in vending machines.

"The first concept was this super-furry space ... a huge inflatable mattress the size of half a city block," Bela says. Many iterations later, imagine a flower-shaped beach ball with a patch of fur in the middle.

"This is a bit of a new direction for us," Bela admits. "It's real practical."

A different sort of practical challenge involves Rebar's future.

Conceptual splashes aside, the trio's work doesn't pay the bills. Merker works four days a week at the design firm Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, Bela one day less at CMG Landscape Architecture. Passmore is a legal consultant.

"We'd all like to do this full time, but also maintain the ethics and integrity of the work," Passmore says. In other words, find a lucrative way to critique the urban environment without, say, creating a portable park to display a hybrid automobile, as one car maker proposed last year.

As for this year's Park(ing) Day, Rebar will be in Europe, where Merker's goal is "to meet people doing cool stuff, whoever they are."

"We're receding into the background," Merker shrugs of Park(ing) Day. "It's nice in a way."

For more information on Rebar, go to www.rebargroup.org.

For details concerning this year's Park(ing) Day: www.parkingday.org.

For information on the Venice Biennale: links.sfgate.com/ZETI.

Place appears on Tuesdays. E-mail John King at jking@sfchronicle.com.

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