

MY LONDON STORY

Brenda Puech



I turned a parking space into a garden

LAST SUMMER, I SET UP a mini garden in a parking space next to London Fields. I'd been thinking about it for a long time. I didn't have a car, and I wanted to show how a parking space could be used for something else. In Hackney, where I live, there are more than twice as many households that don't own a car as ones that do. Yet nearly all our kerbside space is devoted to car parking. I couldn't shake off the feeling of what a waste of precious space it was!

I tried to buy an annual parking permit from Hackney Council to use the space, but they refused to let me have one because I didn't have or want a car. So I decided to take the initiative, and converted a parking space directly outside my home into a garden.

The space was usually vacant, so I knew that using it would cause minimal inconvenience to my car-owning neighbours. On May 26, at the start of the summer, I officially launched the People Parking Bay: a patch of artificial grass the size of a car, with flowerpots, a bench and table, a bright red umbrella and a large sign that read

'You're welcome to park yourself on the bench.'

In my ideal world, I'd love to see more kids playing in the streets and people using them as a place to sit or exercise. Over the course of the summer I got my wish. People used the Parking Bay as a resting point on the way back from shopping or cycling; mums used it to feed their babies; locals watered the plants. One couple had their first date there. Some people left books and it became a mini-library. People even used the bay as a community noticeboard. I'm proud of how it became a focal point, where you'd see complete strangers smiling and talking to each other.

The reaction of residents was astonishingly positive. At first I'd find feedback on bits of paper sellotaped to the bay, so I decided to leave a visitor book on the table. Five books filled up within four weeks. Most people said they thought the bay was a brilliant idea, and wished that there were more of them around.

Despite all that positivity, I've had to keep fighting for the People Parking Bay to exist. In June I was faced with an eviction notice. I set up a

petition, which got hundreds of signatures within the first few days, but throughout the summer I had to move the bay to three or four different locations in Hackney and Tower Hamlets. Eventually, despite pleading with the Mayor of Hackney and local councillors to allow the bay to stay, it ended up being dismantled.

Because of all the support I'd received, the council asked to meet me. While they said what I'd done was illegal, they admired the idea, and I pressed for them to launch a system of 'parklet' permits which residents could pay for to install their own People Parking Bay.

There's no mini-garden now: I've had to bring it into my front yard, and sadly it's not open to the public. When a parklet like mine has been so transformational for a local community, it's such a shame the council insists on disposing of it. But if I hadn't set up the People Parking Bay, people wouldn't have realised it was even a possibility. Sometimes you have to take matters into your own hands. ■ *Interview by Salma Haidrani*

→ www.peopleparkingbay.com

DISCOVER!

For more unique looks at London life, head to timeout.com/news