

An Overview and Analysis of Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles

Charlie Simpson
Urban & Environmental Policy
Occidental College
April 2015

Table of Contents

Glossary	3
Abstract/Executive Summary	5
Introduction: A Movement	6
What is Tactical Urbanism?	7
DIY and Everyday Urbanism	14
Answering These Questions in the LA Context	20
Methodology	22
Findings/Analysis: From Unsanctioned to Sanctioned	23
Everyday Urbanism in Los Angeles	25
Functional & Communal	33
Union de Vecinos: ‘DIY Social Spaces’	35
Community Living Rooms.....	43
Eco-Village Intersection Repair.....	46
‘Guerrilla Gardening’: LA Green Grounds and Ron Finley.....	51
Functional & Individual	53
LA Department of DIY.....	54
Socal Guerrilla Gardening.....	56
Playful & Aspirational	56
City-initiated Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles	60
People St.....	61
LA County Parklets.....	71
Pop-up Planning Workshops.....	75
Phase 0 Implementation.....	77
Pop-up Events.....	78
Recommendations	81

Everyday/Latino Urbanism.....	81
Functional & Communal.....	83
People St.....	85
LA County Parklets.....	88
Conclusion.....	89
Acknowledgements.....	90
Bibliography.....	92

GLOSSARY:

- **Tactical Urbanism:** “an approach to neighborhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies.” (Lydon, 2) The interventions include illegal, unsanctioned, bottom-up initiatives as well as formal, city-led programs and policies.
- **Urban Intervention:** an act of interfering or changing the built environment of cities
- **Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Urbanism:** small-scale, creative, usually informal or illegal changes to the built environment
- **Everyday Urbanism:** various uses and changes to the built environment that reflect and address the quotidian, daily needs and values of individuals and groups. (Often informal or unsanctioned)
- **Latino Urbanism:** the ways in which Latino-Americans shape and alter their streets and neighborhoods to reflect their daily needs, values, and culture.
- **Functional & Communal:** a type of unsanctioned, informal change to the built environment that addresses a need in basic street infrastructure. They are completely initiated and organized for and by the community itself.
- **Functional & Individual:** a type of unsanctioned, informal change to the built environment that addresses a need in basic street infrastructure. They are initiated and organized by individuals and may not reflect the overall values of the community.
- **Playful & Aspirational:** a type of unsanctioned, informal change to the built environment that makes a statement or questions a normal use, but does not address an

immediate need. They propose future changes or simply bring attention to a certain aspect or use of the built environment.

- **Built Environment:** the human-made spaces in which people interact in everyday life (streets, sidewalks, buildings, etc.)
- **Gentrification:** the process of neighborhood change in which higher-income outside residents move into an area, displacing existing lower-income residents. Property values rise, rents increase, and the commercial area changes, all to cater to the incoming residents with more money.
- **Equity:** fairness and justice in the way people are treated; freedom from bias or favoritism (according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
- **Unsanctioned/Unauthorized:** an act that is not officially recognized or made legal by city government.

Abstract/Executive Summary:

Tactical Urbanism is a growing movement across the world in which individuals, communities, and municipalities are reshaping their cities one street and block at a time. Los Angeles seems to be one of the leading cities of this Tactical Urbanism movement. In order to provide a context and overview of the movement in Los Angeles I look at issues that are prevalent in regards to Tactical Urbanism. Evident in the literature is that Tactical Urbanism deals with issues of social equity and gentrification. How do unsanctioned examples of Tactical Urbanism prevent from becoming catalysts for gentrification? How does formalized Tactical Urbanism (specifically Parklet/Plaza programs) remain equitable and empowering in terms of locations, and community input for designs? The most successful examples of Tactical Urbanism have only come from younger white middle class individuals. How can cities broaden the scope of Tactical Urbanism by harnessing the energy of grass-roots activities happening around the city, especially in underrepresented communities? I try to answer these questions as they apply to Los Angeles through interviews, informal discussions, content analysis, research, and site visits. I found that many examples of what could be called Tactical Urbanism exist in Los Angeles in lower-income communities. Mostly ignored by the municipality, many examples exist of communities altering their built environment in incremental ways, and more importantly, making changes that combat gentrification by occurring for and by the existing community. I also analyzed the more formal, city-led examples of Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles, focusing mostly on the parklet and plaza program called People St. The program provides more immediate changes to communities, but is somewhat limiting in their level of community input for designs and locations. Upon analyzing the unsanctioned, informal examples and the city-led

examples of Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles, I propose that the city work towards being more enabling, flexible, and empowering—giving communities the tools to shape their own environment. Los Angeles has a lot of potential to understand the examples of Tactical Urbanism happening around the city and use this small-scale, low-cost, and inclusive approach to work towards a city that better reflects the people living in it. I hope that this thesis sheds light on this potential, and helps to bring a greater voice to communities all over Los Angeles, especially in the communities most in need.

Tactical Urbanism:

“A nation that celebrates freedom and weaves liberty into its national myth rarely gives regular people the chance to shape their own communities.” –Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (314)

“Plans are often outdated before they are even published, while on a day-to-day basis the control of development perpetuates categories of use that are inflexible and unsuited to times of continuous change.” (Bishop, 19)

“The most interesting, most successful placemaking projects today leave behind previous tenets of the field: gone is the master-planner, the big, top-down, bureaucracy, and the enormously expensive, multi-year debt-financed capital plan.” (Silberberg, 11)

“The layers of bureaucracy that must be navigated for projects small and large have become so thick and the process of receiving permission to build so convoluted, given the variety of competing interests and jurisdictions, that it is exceedingly difficult—and expensive—to get anything done efficiently, if at all.” (Lydon, 83)

Introduction: A Movement

Urban planning of the last century has been controlling, rigid, and slow to implement change. Often long-term plans are drawn up with limited public participation and which often take years to start implementing, if they are approved at all. Since the economic meltdown of 2008, cities and developers have to deal with significantly less resources and the ideal of the long-term transformational plan has become increasingly insignificant and even more difficult to implement. With the economic decline of the past several years, communities across the board

are receiving fewer of the city's resources and infrastructural upgrades. At the same time that cities and people are being affected by the recent recession, people are becoming more efficient with what they do have. People and community groups are using the Internet to crowd-source money for local projects. Social media and blogs are increasingly becoming a platform to spread ideas and organize for change. Governments are starting to use the Internet to become more open, inclusive, and responsive to people's needs. Important to note as well is that it's "for the first time in twenty years that city growth surpassed that of the exurbs. Our largest cities...grew at a faster rate than their suburbs for the first time in almost one hundred years." (Gallagher, 14) More people are moving to the city. Fewer resources, frustration with government and planning, radical Internet connectivity, and a growing number of people in cities have all seemed to create this environment of working together, taking action, and starting small. With various reasons and intentions, individuals, community groups, non-profits, business districts, private developers, and governments have all been changing their built environment in incremental ways. Whether it's an individual addressing an immediate need to their neighborhood or a municipality simply testing out their plans, a movement is becoming increasingly visible.

What is Tactical Urbanism?

Dozens of names have come to describe the overall trend towards this inexpensive, smaller, local approach to urban development. To name just a few, it has been called Guerrilla, Informal, Spontaneous, Temporary, Pop-up, Insurgent, Iterative, Everyday, DIY, and Tactical. I have chosen to approach this paper through the lens of 'Tactical Urbanism' because it includes a larger spectrum from informal, illegal, urban interventions, all the way to formal programs and events. Urban Planner and co-founder of the planning, research, and consulting firm called the Street Plans Collaborative, Mike Lydon just released a book titled *Tactical Urbanism: Short-*

term Action for Long-term Change. The book defines and gives context to the movement and provides a framework for cities and citizens to approach a Tactical Urbanism project. Mike Lydon defines the term and describes the spectrum and general ways in which it is used in the following excerpt from his book:

“Tactical Urbanism is an approach to neighborhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies. Tactical Urbanism is used by a range of actors, including governments, business and nonprofits, citizen groups, and individuals...Tactical Urbanism is a learned response to the slow and siloed conventional city building process. For citizens, it allows the immediate reclamation, redesign, or reprogramming of public space. For developers or entrepreneurs, it provides a means of collecting design intelligence from the market they intend to serve. For advocacy organizations, it is a way to show what is possible to garner public and political support. And for government, it’s a way to put best practices into, well practice—and quickly!” (Lydon, 2-3)

The whole idea is that everybody is acting to make change to the built environment; everybody can be a city builder.

Some of the more well known examples of Tactical Urbanism include Intersection Repair and Parklet and Plaza programs. Intersection Repair is an example of when a neighborhood in Portland decided, without permission from the city, to paint an intersection, build “a 24-hour self-serve tea station, a community bulletin board, an information kiosk, and a children’s playhouse” to slow down traffic and make it into a community gathering space. (Lydon, 96) The city eventually formalized the process and provided the tools for every neighborhood to be able to transform their own intersection. The community transformed their neighborhood using simple, cheap materials and the process was scaled up and became an official, easy way for communities to make immediate changes to their neighborhood. The various parklet and plaza programs around the country, including the People St. program in L.A. which I will analyze later in this paper, are programs in which the city allows non-profits, businesses, and business districts to apply to transform a parking space or an excessive roadway space into a mini plaza or park.

They are built using low-cost materials and are generally renewed every year. This is an example of a city providing the tools for communities to have more open space quickly and cheaply. One appeal to Tactical Urbanism is that if it doesn't work then it can easily be removed because of the low-cost and temporary nature of the projects.

Expressed in Lydon's book are a few key characteristics that make Tactical Urbanism a success. From the unsanctioned, grass-roots level, a key aspect of Tactical Urbanism is to seek collaboration with the city and within the neighborhood to try to scale up the intervention to make lasting change. "It's important to remember that what makes your project tactical is the *intent*; the short-term intervention should be placed within the framework for delivering long-term change." (Lydon, 187) In order to gain the attention and support from the municipality you need to measure the results and document, blog, or draw media attention. Another desirable aspect of a tactical intervention is that the project is easily replicable to other areas of the city or neighborhood. Once the municipality recognizes a project, they should be flexible, empowering and enabling. "Municipal leaders are in a position to use their limited resources to scale the best bottom-up initiatives citywide. For city and citizen, Tactical Urbanism is now *the* primary tool for doing so." (Lydon, 42) What constitutes the 'best' bottom-up initiatives is up for debate, but the point is that the city has to be responsive and flexible. Cities and residents have to work together. Mike Lydon's book goes on to advise that "city leaders focus less on the illegality of temporary interventions...and more on the underlying conditions that cause constituents to act without city permission in the first place." (Lydon, 184) If people are actively changing their built environment then the city needs to understand why. Once a city *does* formulate a Tactical Urbanism program such as the Pavement to Plaza program in NYC, how does it remain equitable and empowering to the communities it involves? NYC's plaza program, because it relies on

private funding and maintenance, was leaving out neighborhoods that couldn't afford to apply. The program received a grant and there is a non-profit group called the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership that both specifically aim to address this issue of equity and help aid the most underserved neighborhoods. Most other parklet and plaza programs around the country are trying to deal with the same issue.

From Mike Lydon's book it is clear that there are tensions between bottom-up interventions and how the government reacts to them. In the thesis titled *Tactical Urbanism, Public Policy Reform, and 'Innovation Spotting' by Government: From Park(ing) Day to San Francisco's Parklet Program*, Mariko Davidson further addresses some of the tensions inherent in Tactical Urbanism. Davidson agrees with Mike Lydon that bottom-up projects will succeed if they align with the goals of the city, are documented, and seek support from the municipality. More importantly, the thesis argues that Tactical Urbanism risks becoming elitist and not representing the needs of the community. Davidson gives examples of some of the most successful Tactical Urbanism projects: 'Better Block', 'Walk Raleigh', Guerrilla Bike Lane Separators, and 'Park(ing) Day.' Mike Lydon's case studies looked at three of the same projects, which he calls 'Build a Better Block,' 'Guerrilla Wayfinding,' and 'Park(ing) Day.' This following excerpt from Mariko Davidson's thesis gives insight into the current success stories from around the country:

"Tacticians from these projects were all young (25-35 years), college-educated white men that implemented these projects alone, with little to no public input process taken prior to the activity...If Tactical Urbanism becomes a new norm to implement strategy, we should be conscious to the extent it articulates, and can amplify, the vision of a race, class, and gender already dominantly represented in American society. Tactical Urbanism might become another advantage in an already unequal system." (Davidson, 52-53)

If the most successful projects in the U.S. are being done by a specific social group, then an obvious gap that needs to be addressed is what the underrepresented groups are doing to

informally shape their built environment. How can cities approach their tactics and possibly formalize their projects in an empowering and iterative way? To keep many Tactical Urbanism projects from becoming elitist or only representing a few, Davidson emphasizes that they need to gain public feedback and support before becoming more formal solutions. The Tactical Urbanism success stories that Mike Lydon and Mariko Davidson explain are truly amazing examples of how individuals and small groups can make a city-wide and even national impact by starting small, using low-cost materials, and allowing them to scale up. Municipalities just need to see this potential and search for opportunities to empower and enable the most underserved neighborhoods and make sure that future projects represent the needs of the existing community.

The remaining pieces of literature that specifically address Tactical Urbanism focus on planners and the city and how they can implement bottom-up initiatives and use Tactical Urbanism to benefit and empower the communities it involves. In *The Planner's Guide to Tactical Urbanism* by Laura Pfeifer, she addresses the difficulty that planners face in trying to maintain the spirit of Tactical Urbanism while formalizing a project, which means getting things done quickly and with low-cost materials. She says “planners must balance the need for a robust level of citizen engagement with the desire of community stakeholders to implement projects quickly.” (Pfeifer, 8) Once a citizen-initiated project becomes formalized, it must still reflect the spirit of the community and be able to be implemented fast. She advises that cities avoid being immediately critical of any unsanctioned or illegal activity because they may be exposing a community’s need. Planners must try to “harness the energy and creativity of citizens.” (Pfeifer, 19) There is also a section, based upon various examples throughout the North America, about how cities can test out innovative ideas and uses by hosting temporary, pop-up events. She also mentions an important point that cities should learn from other examples of Tactical Urbanism

existing elsewhere, but should avoid simply copying other models; projects should always be adapted to the local context. Her criteria that cities should consider when using Tactical Urbanism projects will be important when I later examine existing projects in Los Angeles.

The study titled *Reclaiming the Right of Way: A Toolkit for Creating and Implementing Parklets* written by a team from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs exposes various issues and challenges that parklet programs have dealt with. These challenges include funding from the community group or business, public engagement in the planning phase, and creativity allowed in the design. These are all challenges that reiterate the considerations that planners need to take when formalizing a Tactical Urbanism project that the other studies have mentioned. The Vancouver parklet program, for example, showed that “public engagement could be improved during the planning phase, a challenge given that parklet projects are designed to move quickly from concept to implementation.” (UCLA, 58) Because the parklet programs rely on private funding, underserved neighborhoods often need extra support. Because the city wants to implement the improvements quickly, they may have to jeopardize community engagement. This begs the question: How do cities formalize a Tactical Urbanism initiative that harnesses the creativity of the community, reflects their needs, and still implements projects in a timely manner?

Another study on parklet and plaza programs titled *Experimenting With the Margin: Parklets and Plazas as Catalysts in Community and Government* by Robin Abad further suggests that formalization of Tactical Urbanism projects need to focus on ways to ensure equity and appropriate community involvement. One of the benefits of Tactical Urbanism is increased community engagement, and the major parklet and plaza programs around the country are based upon community-initiated applications. A community group or business district initiates an

interest in a parklet or plaza, but sometimes they may not have the appropriate amount of community support, flexible design choices that reflect the community's needs, and often certain neighborhoods can't afford to apply. "As Parklets rely upon private partners for design, construction, and ongoing maintenance, they most often appear in districts of economic significance and stability, or districts transitioning into increased levels of commercial activity." (Abad, 170) This thesis describes something called *Heuristic Urbanism*, which is the process of formalization from an unsanctioned, grassroots effort to a sanctioned, government initiative. "Heuristic Urbanism considers the progression of urban interventions from guerilla tactics to sanctioned strategies." (Abad, 43) Although formalizing Tactical Urbanism seems to have the potential to increase public engagement and speed the project delivery time, it is not without its growing pains. The good thing about Tactical Urbanism, though, is that unsuccessful or unwanted projects can easily be removed and even improved. Just because a project has scaled up to become formal, does not mean that it cannot continue to scale up and improve to become even more permanent and reflective of the community's desires.

Even though small-scale, iterative urban change is not new, the term 'Tactical Urbanism' was just coined within the last handful of years. Because the term is new, relatively few studies have been written on specifically 'Tactical Urbanism' and the implications that the movement has on today's cities. From the literature I've just discussed, issues of equity and gentrification are a constant theme. Even the artist responsible for founding Park(ing) Day—an annual event held around the world where people transform parking spaces into parks for a day—and who has heavily contributed to the formation of the Pavement to Parks (parklet) program in San Francisco, has recognized that "there is a fervent debate happening at the moment about Tactical Urbanism and its relationship to social equity." (Bela, 2015) Individual, unsanctioned examples

of Tactical Urbanism run the risk of not representing the community. Official, government-sanctioned programs deal with the same issue. More specifically, the most successful examples of when Tactical Urbanism has scaled up from unsanctioned to sanctioned, have only represented initiatives from young, white males whose intent was to grab the attention of the municipality. The actions of communities and individuals who are in underrepresented neighborhoods and whose actions are not necessarily to gain the attention from the city officials need to be considered. The literature on terms such as Guerilla, DIY, Insurgent, Temporary, Pop-up, and Informal, which often have overlapping qualities with, and can even be called Tactical Urbanism, need to be reviewed. Similar tensions arise with these studies in terms of equity, gentrification, and how the city can properly deal with the interventions, but it is necessary to review in relation to Tactical Urbanism in order to broaden the understanding of what low-cost, small scale city-building interventions are occurring. How do they fit in with Tactical Urbanism?

DIY and Everyday Urbanism

DIY or Do-It-Yourself Urbanism is a term that is frequently compared with Tactical Urbanism, but that varies slightly. Mike Lydon in his book, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change*, states that “Not all DIY urbanism efforts are tactical, and not all Tactical Urbanism initiatives are DIY.” (Lydon, 8) Small, unsanctioned changes to the built environment can fall under the umbrella of Tactical Urbanism if the intent is to catalyze long-term change and address a need in infrastructure. If it is a self-expression of art, that can still be DIY, but isn’t necessarily tactical. What also distinguishes Tactical Urbanism from DIY is that “Tactical Urbanism projects exist along a spectrum of legality” and includes government-initiated examples, not just unsanctioned activity. (Lydon, 8) Because many of the DIY urban

interventions are synonymous with many of the unsanctioned grass-roots examples of Tactical Urbanism, the literature has shown similar challenges and tensions. So what is DIY Urbanism?

In a study titled *Do-It-Yourself Urban Design: The Social Practice of Informal "Improvement" Through Unauthorized Alteration*, Gordon C.C. Douglas defines the term and analyzes dozens of DIY examples from various cities in North America to try to find out what types of people were doing these interventions, what their intentions were, and what potential impact they had on the community. Douglas defines DIY urban design as "small-scale and creative, unauthorized yet intentionally functional and civic-minded 'contributions' or 'improvements' to urban spaces in forms inspired by official infrastructure... Individuals or informal groups challenge expected, regulated uses of particular spaces through unauthorized direct action." (Douglas, 2013) Douglas' definition focuses on individual interventions that seem to make useful changes to the built environment, but their intent often isn't to seek recognition or authorization from the city. This shows a distinction from Tactical Urbanism, however, in which documentation and recognition are keys to catalyze lasting change. Most importantly, he concludes that the majority of the people he has found to perform these interventions are young, white, educated, middle-class men located in gentrifying areas. Douglas also echoes the criticism of Mariko Davidson's study that unauthorized, individual urban interventions risk becoming elitist and not representing the community's needs as a whole. Within the last few years, many examples of Tactical Urbanism and DIY urban design have received mostly positive press, but equity and issues of community representation need to be addressed. Douglas sums up this issue well in the following quote:

[taking into account] "the favorable attention that interventions often receive in trendy publications, and it is entirely possible that these ostensibly counter-cultural acts of organic, positive, informal contribution may, just like official urban design improvements, ultimately help

increase property values, and thus precipitate and even encourage the gentrification process.”(Douglas, 2013)

He does end the study on a positive note, suggesting that cities should learn from these actions before quickly removing or condemning them.

An investigation of how cities should deal with and even integrate DIY tactics into formal processes is the focus of the paper titled *DIY urbanism: implications for cities* by Donovan Finn. His definition of DIY urbanism is similar to Douglas’ in that individuals or small groups perform the actions in an illegal manner with their intent to be functional improvements, similar to official infrastructure. Finn’s research mentions, like most of the literature I’ve mentioned so far, the potential issues that the interventions themselves have on social equity, but he also talks about how city governments should respond to DIY interventions in an equitable way. Finn seems to think that “DIYers [need] to accept the reality that certain DIY tactics will be co-opted by cities, thereby stripping away some of DIY’s rebellious ‘guerilla’ luster.” (Finn, 394) Once an unsanctioned urban intervention becomes part of the official process, how does the city still maintain the empowerment, ‘luster’, and need that the original act expressed? Finn sums the dilemma between top-down and bottom-up initiatives well when he says that “the formal structure of modern municipal planning and design still leaves very little room for true DIY efforts.” The role of planning should be to “maximize the public benefit of private actions and minimize their attendant harms.” (Finn, 387) Which DIY and tactical efforts should be acknowledged? One type of intervention in a particular neighborhood could be seen as innovative, while other similar examples of DIY urbanism in another neighborhood could be ignored, rejected, or seen as vandalism. As the studies on Tactical Urbanism have shown thus far, city governments have disproportionately given positive attention to interventions done by the more affluent middle-class.

This criticism seems to have been further expressed about the ongoing exhibition called *Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good* by one of the essays that the exhibit commissioned. The event was first shown in 2012 at the U.S. Pavilion at the 13th International Venice Architecture Biennale. It “documents the nascent movement of designers acting on their own initiative to solve problematic urban situations, creating new opportunities and amenities for the public. Provisional, improvisational, guerrilla, unsolicited, tactical, temporary, informal, DIY, unplanned, participatory, opensource—these are just a few of the words that have been used to describe this growing body of work.” The exhibition’s description calls these interventionists ‘designers,’ which already seems to be a limiting term. Even though some really great, transformative examples in this exhibition are for and by underserved communities, it doesn’t seem to be the majority. Professor Tom Angotti, in his essay that is actually posted on the exhibition’s website, accurately sums up the major issue with DIY and Tactical Urbanism and their relation to equity:

“This Spontaneous Interventions exhibition honors gentrifiers by giving them a prominent place at the prestigious Biennale. Missing from the stage are the local residents and businesses who, over decades and with little fanfare, improve their communities through many brilliant and creative actions. Their many gradual, small steps have to be analyzed and understood for their role in shaping the urban environment and creating livable cities.”

Who are these unrecognized residents who are making these gradual, small, brilliant, and creative steps to improving their community?

The following two pieces of literature explore the communities and people, mostly in low-income neighborhoods, who, like the DIY and Tactical Urbanism examples described before, are also making small, unsanctioned, creative steps towards improving their built environment. These communities’ actions most often aren’t being recognized and very few of them catalyze officially sanctioned programs like the success stories of Tactical Urbanism. In the

book titled *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, Jeffrey Hou, among a host of other contributors, explore people who are using public space in unintended ways. “Insurgent public space is in opposition to the kind of public space that is regulated, controlled, and maintained solely by the state.” (Hou, 13) Communities, through what Hou calls ‘momentary ruptures’ and ‘everyday struggles’ in the built environment, express their cultural, social, and economic needs onto public space in ways that are often illegal. He refers to this remaking of public space as guerrilla urbanism. “The instances of self-help and defiance are best characterized as a practice of guerrilla urbanism that recognizes both the ability of citizens and opportunities in the existing urban conditions for radical and everyday changes against the dominant forces in the society.” (Hou, 15) Examples include readapting vacant lots for gardens or cooperative housing and transforming single-use residential sidewalks into mixed-use places to gather and sell food. A chapter by Michael Rios describes how Latinos in the U.S. are adapting spaces to reflect what French philosopher Michel de Certeau, and more recently, Margaret Crawford in her book, call “Everyday Urbanism.” This is a term used to describe how urban spaces are used for people’s daily routines and economic, social, and cultural needs. This concept is applied to a chapter by James Rojas about how “Latinos often retrofit elements of the built form to satisfy their economic and social needs” in Los Angeles. (Hou; Rojas, 36) I will go much further into depth about what Rojas calls ‘Latino Urbanism,’ when I discuss these unauthorized urban interventions in the context of Los Angeles.

The book titled *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor*, analyzes various examples of informal activity in cities, similar to those in *Insurgent Space*. The book concludes: “the prevalence of informality in cities suggests that conventional city planning and urban design regulations should be reevaluated, as they are failing to meet the complex

needs of society.” (Mukhija, 8) Editor Vinit Mukhija argues that government should understand what informal, illegal, urban interventions people are performing and adapt their policies and planning to better engage and reflect the community’s needs. A chapter by Nabil Kamel describes the ‘placemaking tactics’ of marginalized communities that includes sidewalk vending, guerilla gardening, informal playgrounds, informal signage, etc. These actions are described as forms of “everyday resistance” that are done silently. While many residents in lower-income communities rely on walking, biking, and transit, many neighborhoods and cities in America are built to serve the car. “Marginalized residents are locked in a material and institutional environment designed for other times and users. These constraints are renegotiated every day by a variety of placemaking tactics—despite the high risk, costs, and uncertainty associated with unsanctioned practices.” (Mukhija; Kamel 133).

In *Insurgent Public Space* and *The Informal American City*, the small-scale urban interventions differ from the examples in the studies on Tactical and DIY urbanism. Marginalized communities, trying to survive economically and express their cultural values usually perform the informal interventions in the books I just named. Their actions usually reflect communal values and needs, and they have no intention of measuring impacts or seeking the recognition of the municipality. For example, a person who has set up a street-vending cart near a bus stop isn’t trying to catalyze long-term change or blog about the experience; it’s an activity engrained in the everyday life of the community.

The small amount of research on Tactical Urbanism exposed certain challenges that need to be further addressed. A common theme throughout the literature was the issue of social equity and gentrification. Unsanctioned examples of Tactical Urbanism, often initiated by individuals or small groups, risk not reflecting the community’s needs; a deliberative process with more public

input seems necessary. Of the unsanctioned initiatives of Tactical Urbanism, the most successful examples across the country that have become part of a formalized city process, have only been performed by young, white, middle-class citizens. What similar unsanctioned city-improvement efforts are occurring in lower-income communities of color? What are ways in which the city government can empower and enable these communities? Once a city government formalizes a Tactical Urbanism project, specifically parklet and plaza programs, they have been criticized for leaving behind the most underserved neighborhoods and having limited flexibility in terms of community input. How can the municipality implement Tactical Urbanism programs that are socially equitable and sufficiently reflect the creativity and needs of the community? I will try to answer these questions within the specific context of Los Angeles County. Before I do that, however, I must first give some context to the Los Angeles landscape.

ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS IN THE LA CONTEXT

“And the automobile ruled all over; the cars glided across this strange landscape—no longer exactly urban, certainly not suburban in any traditional sense—at speeds up to fifty miles per hour along new broad, six- and eight-lane dedicated concrete and asphalt strips that cut straight through the old neighborhoods, barrios, and ghettos of the city.” (Axelrod, 18-19)

The quote above is from the book titled *Inventing Autopia* by Professor Jeremiah B.C. Axelrod, describing the car-dominated landscape of Los Angeles that began to take shape in the 1920s and has prevailed ever since. As a city, Los Angeles is the second largest in the U.S., the largest in terms of counties. The landscape is dominated by low-rise detached homes, strip-malls, and overlapping freeways. The city was overwhelmingly built for the car and not the pedestrian. In the influential book titled *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham describes the city in terms of four different landscapes: the beach, the freeways, the flatlands, and the foothills. People in Los Angeles spend so much time in their car that Banham writes an entire section describing the freeways. “The freeway system in its totality is now a single

comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.” (Banham, 213) Built to allow people to move easily from place to place, freeways and roads have become *the* place; this car-dominated landscape leaves little room for active pedestrian life. In contrast, New York City’s vertically dense, concentrated street grid with a mix of uses and short blocks, keeps the streets alive with people at all hours of the day. In sprawling Los Angeles it is unpleasant to walk anywhere because of the single-use zoning, cracked, narrow sidewalks, and endless parking lots; usually people’s daily needs are far from where they live.

Aside from being a car-dominated city, it’s important to note that Los Angeles is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States. According to the 2013 Census Bureau, LA County is 48.3% Hispanic or Latino, 27.2% White, 14.6% Asian, and 9.2% Black. Latinos make up almost half of the population. In an article by the educational, independent T.V. station in L.A called KCET, a study is referenced that shows that Los Angeles is “the capital of Asian America, with the largest number of Asian immigrants of any county in the nation, and the home of the largest Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Korean, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, and Thai populations outside their respective home countries.” (Trinidad, 2013) A seemingly endless number of cultures are represented in Los Angeles, and together they are constantly shaping and changing the built environment with their everyday behavior.

Entrenched in Los Angeles are many different people who live in ways that often contradict the car-dominated, low-density city. They are re-making the city to greater reflect their needs and values, often acting in unauthorized or illegal ways. Individuals, artists, designers, community groups, non-profits, and more, are contesting the pre-conceived, top-down approaches to using public space. Many people in lower-income communities, who often don’t own cars and whose culture values street-life, must use the resources they have to re-make their

neighborhoods. If the power of Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles, of small-scale action leading to long-term change, is to reach its potential, these unauthorized actions need to be recognized and understood. The official examples of Tactical Urbanism also need to find ways to adapt to the needs and context of Los Angeles. City officials need to examine LA and how its people are re-shaping their environment.

METHODOLOGY:

How do unsanctioned examples of Tactical Urbanism prevent from becoming catalysts for gentrification? How does formalized Tactical Urbanism (specifically Parklet/Plaza programs) remain equitable and empowering in terms of locations, and community input for designs? The most successful examples of Tactical Urbanism have only come from younger middle class individuals. How can cities broaden the scope of Tactical Urbanism by harnessing the energy of grass-roots activities happening around the city, especially in underrepresented communities?

These are the tensions and gaps that I've found in the literature regarding Tactical and DIY urbanism. The goal of this paper is to attempt to answer these questions within the context of Los Angeles. In order to do this, I researched and compiled a list of all of the unsanctioned examples of Tactical, DIY, and Everyday Urbanism that I could find and that seemed relevant to this project. I first analyze the unsanctioned, informal interventions and then look at the various official examples of Tactical Urbanism, focusing on the People St. program in LA.

In regards to the illegal, informal interventions, I arranged the examples that I found into categories based off of their different intentions and initiators. I then formulated them into tables describing the action itself, and who, when, and where they were done. The dozens of interventions I found to be happening in LA have varying levels of community input and whose intentions go from addressing a need to playfully expressing an individual passion. To further

understand some of these interventions and provide a voice to the underrepresented examples, I interviewed different initiators and people who deeply understand the changes their community is making to the environment. In some cases I also went and visited the sites and interventions to better understand their appeal and scale.

I then seek to better understand the official examples of Tactical Urbanism in Los Angeles. I categorize them based upon the nature of the program or intervention and formulate them into a table that briefly describes and orders them. I chose to focus on the People St. program, which allows community groups, non-profits, and business districts to apply for parklets or plazas. I also examine the pilot parklet program that just started for Unincorporated LA County. Part of my analysis included mapping out all of the existing or approved parklets and plazas in Los Angeles to provide further context. I briefly talked with the assistant pedestrian coordinator for the City of Los Angeles, Valerie Watson, who is most heavily involved with the People St. program. I also interviewed the planning director for Pacoima Beautiful, a non-profit community organization who recently applied and received a plaza from the program. I then had a discussion with a team at the LA Department of Public Works who just initiated the pilot parklet program for Unincorporated Los Angeles County. Aside from the parklet and plaza programs, I also describe the other various examples of city-initiated Tactical Urbanism around Los Angeles. Through interviews, site visits, research and content analysis, I try to give insight into the existing Tactical Urbanism movement in Los Angeles and find ways of making these interventions more equitable, empowering, and enabling.

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS: From Unsanctioned to Sanctioned

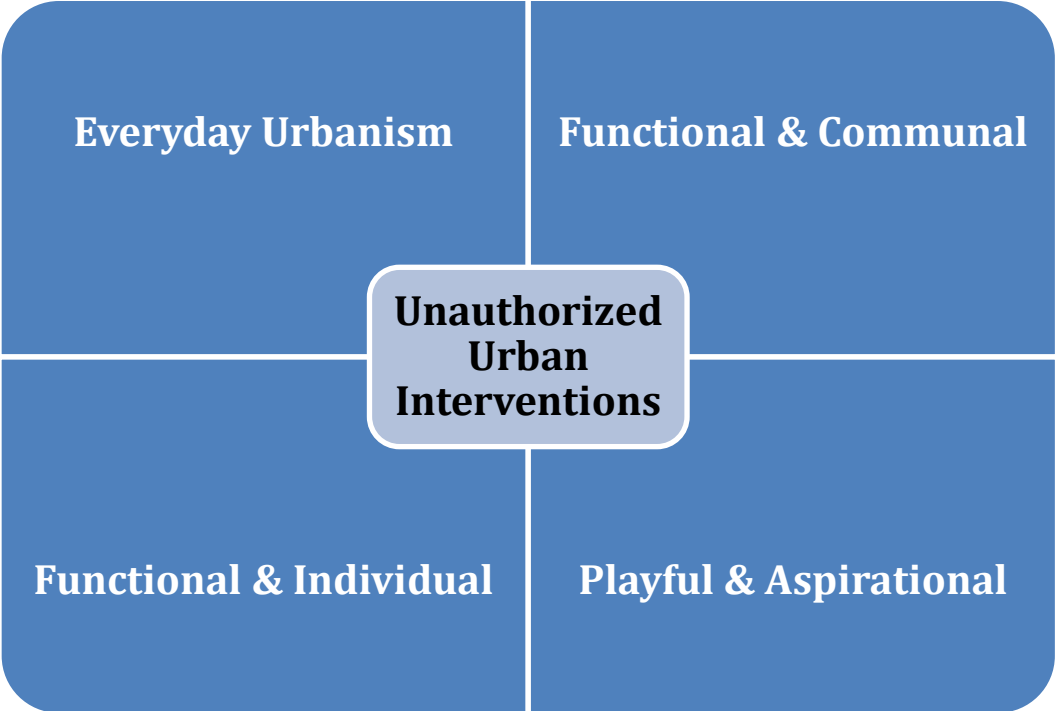
When analyzing the unauthorized examples of urban interventions in LA, some of them may be ‘tactical’ with the intent to gain recognition from officials and catalyze longer-term

change. Others may also be called DIY Urbanism, spontaneous, bottom-up interventions that may or may not have the intent to gain recognition or have any long-term implications. Lastly, these unauthorized, illegal interventions could also be called ‘Everyday Urbanism’, reflecting small changes to the built environment that occur on an everyday basis due to people’s needs and values. Many of these interventions could be called multiple names. A challenge with Tactical Urbanism is finding the potential of urban interventions in underserved neighborhoods. My analysis examines all of the different potential names—Tactical, DIY, Everyday—because they recognize short-term, low-cost actions occurring in neighborhoods of all different incomes and ethnicities; not everyone has the same intentions. In relation to Tactical Urbanism, city officials need to look at the potential of enabling and empowering the ways in which people want to live, regardless of its intention or if its legal. Another challenge expressed in the literature is preventing unauthorized interventions from catalyzing gentrification. Mariko Davidson’s thesis puts emphasis on how these unsanctioned interventions are usually done by individuals whose actions leave no room for community input, and therefore run the risk of causing conflict and gentrification if not removed. This is another reason why I look at unsanctioned urban interventions from a spectrum of actors in order to find examples that *DO* represent and come from the community.

Out of all of the unauthorized examples of urban interventions in LA I organize them into four different categories based upon their intention and the initiators: ‘Everyday Urbanism,’ ‘Functional & Communal,’ ‘Functional & Individual,’ and ‘Playful & Aspirational.’ Refer to **Figure 1** for a chart displaying the four categories. Everyday Urbanism, based upon Margaret Crawford’s book by the same name, describes the way in which city dwellers alter their built environment on a daily basis to reflect their economic, social, and cultural needs and values.

What I refer to as ‘Functional & Communal,’ are unauthorized urban interventions that are functional improvements to a need in infrastructure and done for and by a community or neighborhood. ‘Functional & Individual’ interventions are unauthorized functional improvements to a need in infrastructure, but done by one or two individuals often without larger community involvement. ‘Playful & Aspirational’ refer to unauthorized interventions that are often done by individuals or small groups that may bring attention to a problem in the built environment or question a particular space’s intended use, but that do not immediately try to fix a problem.

Figure 1: Types of Unauthorized Urban Interventions



FINDINGS/ANALYSIS: Everyday Urbanism in Los Angeles

In analyzing Everyday Urbanism within the context of Los Angeles, I focus on how Latinos in East LA are remaking their built environment on a daily basis to reflect their social,

economic, and cultural needs. In his thesis titled *The Enacted Environment: The Creation of “Place” by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles*, James Rojas discusses how Latinos are retrofitting the built environment in East LA through their everyday behavioral patterns. He describes how Latinos use space differently from the average middle-class American suburbanite. He calls the activation of space that Latinos use the ‘Enacted Environment.’ The following quote from Rojas accurately captures the concept:

“The enacted environment is made up of individual actions that are ephemeral. However, they are all part of a persistent process. The pictures in this thesis illustrated the everyday habits of the residents of East Los Angeles, which changed constantly from day to day and as they moved away. The enacted environment is a stream of events in time that people create.” (Rojas, 90)

Latinos’ interventions reflect their everyday behavior, values, and needs. The interventions aren’t always premeditated one-time instances, but take place in a variety of ways at various times throughout the day. “For economic reasons, Latinos walk, bike, and use public transit. These everyday activities bring people together and integrate human needs with mobility.” (Hou; Rojas, 36) In Los Angeles where the landscape is dominantly built to support the car, Latinos must retrofit and activate their streets and yards into pedestrian-oriented spaces; he calls this activation and remaking of place in East LA ‘Latino Urbanism.’

One Saturday morning, James Rojas took me on a walk around East LA, showing me firsthand the prevalence of Latino Urbanism. Walking down a commercial street, I saw brightly painted stores and restaurants and a fair amount of people populating the sidewalk. On the residential streets, which in most neighborhoods in LA would be quiet and privatized places, I saw people gathered around a fence in their front yard, selling household items on the street. I saw front yards utilized as mini-plazas and a street vendor selling papusas. We took a walk down various alleyways that were painted with murals. We turned a corner on a dead-end street next to

a highway and saw a religious shrine with a painted mural, flowers, and benches. Seemingly every space between houses was activated and used for a social, economic, or cultural purpose.

From the interventions that I saw and that Rojas' analyzed in his thesis, I will briefly describe four different examples of Latino Urbanism: street vending, religious shrines, murals, and front yard plazas. Street vending is ubiquitous around the streets of East LA. They provide extra street activity and make residential streets into mixed-use areas. "Latino street vendors have ingeniously transformed auto-oriented streets to fit their economic needs by strategically mapping out intersections and temporarily transforming vacant lots, sidewalks, and curbs into pedestrian-oriented *mercados*." (Hou; Rojas, 38) In the book *The Informal American City*, there is an entire chapter about the importance of street vending. "Los Angeles is the only one of the ten most populous cities in the United States that does not allow sidewalk vending of food." (Mukhija; Vallianatos, 210) Los Angeles needs to see the value and importance that street vending adds to these streets. In East LA it meets an economic need for many and brings life to the streets.



Photo Credit: James Rojas



Photo Credit: James Rojas

Another form of Latino Urbanism are the various shrines, big and small, that are spontaneously placed throughout the community. They can be found in parking lots, front yards, alleys, on the side of buildings, and the street. On December 12th people gather at a big shrine in the parking lot of the 'El Mercado' swap meet in East LA. "The annual event now draws more than 5,000 believers. They celebrate the virgin for 24 hours. Bands play, children dance and shopkeepers donate countless tamales, gallons of coffee and pots of menudo." (Bermudez, 2011)

The shrines can become spaces to gather and celebrate the Lady of Guadalupe. In an interview with James Rojas, I asked him about the impact of the shrines on the landscape. He told me "the shrines offer moments of solace and silence and soften the edges of the landscape. They offer variety mentally and physically in the environment. They are a sacred and mental space."



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson

Another common expression of Latino values and culture in the landscape are murals. Most shops and restaurants are painted bright colors to draw attention from the pedestrian and advertise what they sell. On the sides of buildings there are also tons of murals that cover the entire wall. The last example that I want to discuss is the use of front yards as plazas. Many people construct waist-high fences that act as gathering points and bring life into the front yard. “Enclosed front yards help transform the street into a plaza. This new plaza is not the typical plaza we see in Latin American and Europe with strong defining street walls but has an unconventional form. Nevertheless the streets in Latino neighborhoods have all the social activity of a plaza.” (Hou; Rojas, 41) These various examples of Latino Urbanism provide life

and vibrancy to East LA and give the place character; city officials need to understand these uses of space.



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson (Mural on the side of a market)

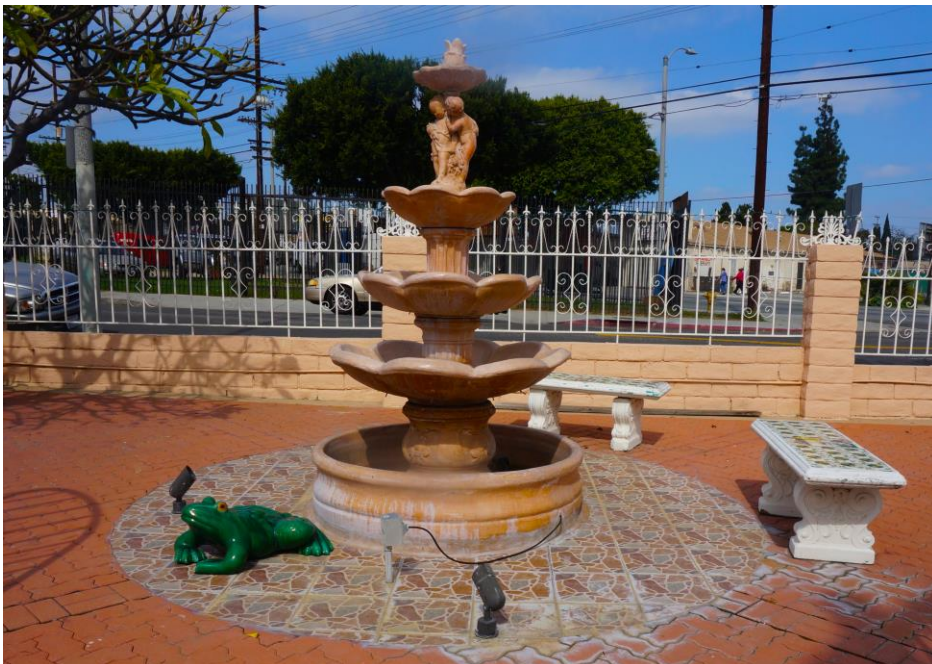


Photo Credit: James Rojas (Front Yard Plaza)

James Rojas, who grew up in East LA, has written countless articles and publications on the subject of Latino Urbanism. I tried to gain a further understanding of the intentions and essence of Latino Urbanism. I also ask him about Latino Urbanism in relation to Tactical Urbanism and how city officials could better understand these interventions in East LA. When asked about the intentions of Latino Urbanism and how it differs from most other traditional examples of DIY Urbanism, he emphasized that Latinos are addressing social and cultural needs and values; their actions have “survivalist intentions.” Recognizing that Tactical Urbanism is most successful when the interventionists gain recognition from the city officials, I wondered if the Latinos in East LA have official recognition in mind when they retrofit their environment. He told me that Latinos don’t care if their actions are recognized, because “they are going to do it anyway. They let spaces flow like water; it’s all subconscious.” This reinforces that they are simply expressing themselves, their culture, and addressing their needs; their everyday actions aren’t intended to catalyze long-term change. Rojas further talked about the differences between Tactical Urbanism and Latino Urbanism when he said: “Unsanctioned Tactical Urbanism isn’t always based off of an immediate need, but more external factors. Both Latino Urbanism and Tactical Urbanism are both driven out of neglect, but Tactical Urbanism are the tactics of the white middle class. Latinos have a more back-door approach and they are humble about their interventions. They aren’t blogging about it, so people aren’t recognizing it as legitimate.” This statement echoes the challenge that Mariko Davidson expressed when they pointed out that most all of the successful examples of Tactical Urbanism have come from the white middle class. Latino Urbanism is a multi-generational approach to neighborhood building; people of all ages participate. Often times, for example, older women build and maintain the shrines. Lastly in regards to the municipality enabling Latino Urbanism, Rojas told me, “Latino Urbanism is

telling a story. The city needs to learn what that story is and how they tell it. In order to tell that story city officials need to really read the landscape.” East LA, an underserved, lower-income community is left to rebel against the auto-oriented, highly regulated landscape of the city. Their intentions may not be to draw the attention from the city or to even catalyze long-term permanent change, but they are altering their physical landscape on an everyday basis; the city needs to learn how to let the community tell their story better and give them the tools to shape their environment the way that they need and desire.

FUNCTIONAL & COMMUNAL

How do unauthorized, small-scale urban interventions prevent from becoming elitist and not representing the community’s needs? Douglas, Finn, and Davidson each expressed concerns in their literature about individual urban interventions being catalysts for gentrification. To address this concern, I analyze examples of unauthorized DIY and Tactical Urbanism that are for and by the community, instead of in contrast to their needs. These examples are also ‘functional,’ meaning they address a deficit of infrastructure in the built environment. **Figures 2 and 3** show a list of these ‘functional & communal’ interventions in Los Angeles.

Union de Vecinos Interventions (East LA)	Description
Benches	Sidewalk Benches/Seating
Alleyway Transformations	Programming (community events), Repaving, Mobile Planters, Murals, and Street Signage
Intersection Transformations	Zebra Crosswalks and Murals
Filled Potholes	Repaving
Solar Lighting	Increase Safety for Pedestrian
Planters	Gardening/Beautification
Shade Structure	Comfort for Pedestrians
Murals	Beautification
Fences	Building and Repairing fences for Safety

Figure 2: Functional & Communal; Union de Vecinos

Interventions by Other Community Groups	Time/Location	Group	Description
Community Living Rooms	2002-present; all over LA	Steve Cancian in collaboration with community groups	Outdoor seating, usually at bus stops
Intersection Repair	2005 (re-paint frequently); Koreatown	Los Angeles Eco-Village	Painted Intersection with Zebra Crosswalks
Guerrilla Gardening	2010-present; South LA	L.A. Green Grounds	Edible Gardens on Sidewalks (new 2015 ordinance allows gardening vegetables on city-owned land!)
Pop-up Land Activation	2014-present; Watts (expanding to other under-served neighborhoods in LA)	Free Lo(t)s Angeles (Coalition of organizations)	Temporarily activating vacant lots. Hosting Pop-up events to visualize what's possible.

Figure 3: Functional & Communal

UNION DE VECINOS: ‘DIY Social Spaces’

Union de Vecinos, a community group based in the Boyle Heights neighborhood in East LA, is a prime example of a community gathering together to make changes that reflect the neighborhood’s needs, independent of the city. Not waiting for the city to make improvements is one of the major appeals of Tactical Urbanism—getting things done. Union de Vecinos has a network of different neighborhood committees that work together to build ‘DIY Social Spaces.’ The organization applied for a grant from the Goldhirsh Foundation to expand this DIY Social Spaces campaign. Although they didn’t receive the grant, it is work that they have already been doing for a few years. In the application, they summarize their reasoning and idea behind this DIY activity:

“Los Angeles’ social connectedness deficit is rooted in our poorly maintained car dominated streets, alleys and neighborhoods. Most Angelenos wish for a more walkable, safer, neighborly environment, but see no way they can make a change when even the simplest public space project seems to take years and hundreds of thousands of dollars. We think we have found a solution: DIY social spaces created by volunteers in a few months for a few thousand dollars.”

Union de Vecinos works with assigned neighborhood committees to identify a problem and trains them to transform streets, intersections, and alleyways through physical improvements and organizing activities. Some of the physical improvements have included benches, movable planters, murals, solar lighting, zebra crosswalks, fixing potholes, repaving alleys, building fences, and providing shade structures. They’ve also organized activities such as cleanups, movie nights, mercados, and children’s activities. The organization hopes to be able to provide the tools to replicate the process all over the city.

Union de Vecinos seems to be acting in accordance with most of the principles for successful Tactical Urbanism projects: community input, rebuilding their neighborhood one block at a time, and under replicable conditions. Mike Lydon even explains that often time the