tactical

adj: /tak-ti-kəl/

1. of or relating to small-scale actions serving a larger purpose
2. adroit in planning or maneuvering to accomplish a purpose
TACTICIANS

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City planners and public leaders are frequently preoccupied with making large-scale, transformative change in the built environment. While stadiums, museums, large waterfront parks, and convention centers are all big-ticket items with measurable curb appeal—for some—such projects require a substantial investment of time, as well as political, social, and fiscal capital. Moreover, their long-term economic or social benefit cannot be guaranteed. In the pursuit of progress, citizens are typically invited to engage in a process that is fundamentally broken: rather than being asked to contribute to incremental change at the neighborhood or block level, residents are asked to react to proposals that are often conceived for interests disconnected from their own, and at a scale for which they have little control. In the pursuit of resilient neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan regions, surmounting the challenges inherent to this “public” process continues to prove difficult. Fortunately, alternative tactics are available and ready for deployment.

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**THE CHALLENGE**

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**TACTICAL URBANISM**

Improving the livability of our towns and cities commonly starts at the street, block, or building scale. While larger scale efforts do have their place, incremental, small-scale improvements are increasingly seen as a way to stage more substantial investments. This approach allows a host of local actors to test new concepts before making substantial political and financial commitments. Sometimes sanctioned, sometimes not, these actions are commonly referred to as “guerilla urbanism,” “pop-up urbanism,” “city repair,” or “D.I.Y. urbanism.” For the moment, we like “Tactical Urbanism,” which is an approach that features the following five characteristics:

- A deliberate, phased approach to instigating change;
- The offering of local solutions for local planning challenges;
- Short-term commitment and realistic expectations;
- Low-risks, with a possibly a high reward; and
- The development of social capital between citizens and the building of organizational capacity between
public-private institutions, non-profits, and their constituents.

While the term is not our own, we do believe it best describes the various initiatives surveyed herein.

EXPERIMENTATION INFORMS DESIGN
In short, tactical urbanism interventions create a laboratory for experimentation. Case studies from across North America reveal the benefit of taking an incremental approach to the process of city building. To be sure, long term change often starts with the process of trying something small. Upon implementation, results may be observed and measured in real time. And when done inexpensively, and with flexibility, adjustments may be made before moving forward. Indeed, there is real merit in a municipality spending $30,000 on temporary material changes before investing $3,000,000 in those that are permanent. If the improvement doesn’t work as planned, the whole budget will not be shot, and future designs can continue to be calibrated to meet the needs of a particular, and dynamic context.

If done well, such small scale changes may be conceived as the first step in realizing lasting change. Thus, tactical urbanism is most effective when used in conjunction with long term planning efforts.

Food carts, for example, are used in Portland, Oregon to incubate small businesses, and to mask surface parking lots. The most successful entrepreneurs either continue to upgrade their “cart” structures, or move up and out to more permanent restaurant space, which makes space for new vendors. The presence of the carts also makes it easier to imagine the eventual intensification of each surface parking lot into mixed-use, walkable urban development, perhaps with some of the same micro-restauranteurs at the ground level.

If included as part of a public charrette process, some examples of tactical urbanism may more quickly build trust amongst disparate interest groups and community leaders. Indeed, if the public is able to physically participate in the improvement of the city, no matter how small the effort, there is an increased likelihood of gaining public support for larger scale change later. Additionally, involving the public in the physical testing of ideas can yield unique insights into the expectations of future users and the types of design features for which they yearn; truly participatory planning must go beyond drawing on flip charts and maps.

CASE STUDIES
Tactical urbanism is also a way to build public awareness among those not directly involved with the physical intervention. Again, in Portland, Oregon, a “guerilla crosswalk” was painted across a busy street with inexpensive white paint and rollers. Although the city typically removes unauthorized signs and pavement markings in short order, the temporary improvement directly communicated the need, and a real desire for better pedestrian infrastructure.

Similarly, the Toronto-based Urban Repair Squad maintains a website that gathers images of D.I.Y. urban repairs in public spaces. They recently featured images of symbols painted on ordinary roads indicating the need for future extensions of the city’s bicycle network.

In some cases, cities follow the lead of their citizens by implementing short-term, low-budget livability improvements initiated by citizen-activists. In other cases, it’s the city who takes the lead.

New York City, for example, is currently designing and implementing more permanent changes to it’s many street design “pilot projects.” Such project have cost very little and have largely been deemed a success. Numerous other cities are now undertaking a similar approach.

A few of the above examples, and more, are included in this survey of tactical urbanism interventions. While not comprehensive, the efforts described herein do provide numerous ideas and resources for transforming our towns and cities into better places to be together.
BUILD A BETTER BLOCK

FAST FACTS
IN BOTH DALLAS AND FORT WORTH A FEW OF THE TEMPORARY BETTER BLOCK IMPROVEMENTS WILL BE MADE PERMANENT BY THE CITY. FORT WORTH’S INITIAL BETTER BLOCK WAS “BUILT” USING ONLY $500 WORTH OF MATERIALS.

LEADERS: Local advocates, local businesses

SCALE: Street || Block || Building

PURPOSE: To promote livable streets, and potential neighborhood vitality.

OVERVIEW: The Build a Better Block project was launched by local community activists in the Dallas neighborhood of Oak Cliff. Spearheaded by Go Oak Cliff, the organization relied upon cheap or donated materials, and the work of many volunteers to transform a single underutilized urban block.

Local artists, musicians and potential business owners joined together to temporarily program vacant storefronts and reclaim public space. Food vendors and sidewalk cafe tables were added and became places to congregate. “New York style” cycle tracks were painted along the curb, pushing cars outward to reduce the number of travel lanes. Finally, native landscaping and street furniture helped improve the block’s sense of place.

A key element of the Build a Better Block project was engaging existing vacant retail space. Working with property owners, temporary “pop-up” shops demonstrated the presence of an unmet retail market demand in the neighborhood.

To date, the Build a Better Block effort has had a substantial spin-off effect: the momentum gained from the project led to the permanent use of formerly underutilized retail space, and garnered a commitment from both the City of Dallas and the City of Forth Worth to permanently implement street improvements. It has also spurred a new consultancy firm endeavoring to advise other organizations and cities on how to conduct their own such experiments as a way to incite change.

Finally, the Better Block Project continues to capture the attention of urbanists and advocates across the country. Indeed, similar efforts have now taken place in Forth Worth, TX, Oyster Bay, NY, Oklahoma City, OK, and Memphis, TN where 15,000 participants helped reinvigorate a stretch of Broad Avenue.

A final lesson associated with the Build a Better Block initiative is the use of social media. By using such web-based communication tools as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the organizers continue to draw not just local participants, but national attention as the initiative expands to other cities. A How To Guide is now available at the Build a Better Block website (cited in the Sources page).
PARK(ING) DAY

FAST FACTS

MORE THAN 700 PARK(ING) SPOTS HAVE “POPPED UP” IN 140 CITIES, ON SIX CONTINENTS. IN 2010, TEHRAN, IRAN; HANGZHOU, CHINA; PARIS, FRANCE, AND MANY OTHER CITIES JOINED IN FOR THE FIRST TIME.

LEADERS: Advocates, Non-Profits, Community Groups

SCALE: Street || Block

PURPOSE: To reclaim space devoted to automobiles, and to increase the vitality of street life.

OVERVIEW: PARK(ing) Day is an annual event where on-street parking spaces are converted to park-like public spaces. The initiative is intended to draw attention to the sheer amount of space devoted to the storage of private automobiles.

The initiative first occurred in 2005 when an interdisciplinary design group called Rebar converted a single San Francisco parking space into a mini-park by laying down sod, adding a bench and tree, and feeding the meter with quarters. Instantly garnering national attention, PARK(ing) Day spread rapidly amongst livable city advocates.

At its core, PARK(ing) Day encourages collaboration amongst local citizens to create thoughtful, but temporary additions to the public realm. Once reclaimed, parking spaces are programmed in any number of ways; many focus on local, national, or international advocacy issues, while others adopt specific themes or activities. The possibilities, and designs, are endless.

While participating individuals and organizations operate independently, they do follow a set of established guidelines. Newcomers can pick up the PARK(ing) Day Manifesto, which covers the basic principles and includes a how-to implementation guide.

Rain or shine, PARK(ing) Day brings creativity to city streets. Credit: The I’on Group

A simple PARK(ing) Day installation. Credit: Park(ing) Day FLICKR Pool

A group of non-profit and neighborhood organizations hosted a 2011 PARK(ing) Day after party below the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Credit: FLICKR User Brodowski
PLAY STREETS

FAST FACT

MANY CITY NEIGHBORHOODS LACK ADEQUATE PARK AND OPEN SPACE. PLAY STREETS FILL THIS NEED BY PROVIDING A SAFE SPACE FOR RECREATION AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION.

LEADERS: Neighborhood/Block Associations, Advocates, Municipality

SCALE: Street || Block

PURPOSE: To make safe spaces for people of all ages to be social and active.

OVERVIEW: Play Streets, popular in New York City and London, are streets closed to motor vehicles and repurposed for recreational activities. In essence, Play Streets create a public playground within otherwise car-dominated areas. They often occur seasonally, during the warmer months and are typically located in neighborhoods where open space is scarce. When implemented in low-income neighborhoods, these initiatives often serve children of families who cannot afford to send their kids to summer, or day camps.

In New York City, a ‘play street’ is made possible when 51% of the residents living on a one-way residential block sign a petition and offer it to their local police and transportation officials, who then send it to the local community board for review. Once the community board approves the idea, the initiative can take shape and the city provides youth workers to supervise the program. Approximately 75% of these initiatives are organized by the New York City Police Athletic League.
OPEN STREETS

FAST FACTS

40 OF THE 50+ KNOWN OPEN STREETS INITIATIVES IN NORTH AMERICA BEGAN WITHIN THE LAST THREE YEARS.

LEADERS: Municipality, Politicians, Advocates, Non-Profit

SCALE: City || District || Corridor

PURPOSE: To temporarily provide safe space for walking, bicycling, and social activities; promote local economic development; and raise awareness about the detrimental effects of the automobile on urban living.

OVERVIEW: Open Streets initiatives are increasingly common in cities seeking innovative ways to meet environmental, social, economic, and public health goals. Open streets are often referred to as “ciclovias,” which in Spanish translates literally as “bike path.” The origin is largely thought to be Bogota, Colombia, a city known worldwide for being a leader of the ciclovia/open streets movement. However, before there was Ciclovia in Bogota, there was “Seattle Bicycle Sundays,” which first launched in 1965, predating Bogota’s Ciclovia by more than a decade.

While the benefits of Open Streets initiatives are widely recognized, perhaps the most tangible benefit is the social interaction and activity that develops—thousands of people of all ages, incomes, occupations, religions, and races have the opportunity to meet in the public realm while sharing in physical or social activities. In doing so, participants develop a wider understanding of their city, each other, and the potential for making streets friendlier for people.

The resulting vibrancy therefore enables people to experience their city’s public realm in a different way, which helps build broader political support for undertaking more permanent pedestrian, bicycle, and/or other livability improvements. In this way, open streets are a tool for building social and political capital, while having very real economic impacts for businesses, vendors, and organizations along the chosen route.

North American Open Streets Initiatives: 2010

North America’s Open Streets Initiatives. Credit: The Street Plans Collaborative

Bike Miami Days
Credit: Mike Lydon

San Francisco’s Sunday Streets
Credit: Sunday Streets FLICKR Pool
Pavement to Plazas

Fast Facts

Following the implementation of the new Times Square Pedestrian Plaza, injuries to motorists and their passengers declined by 63%. Similarly, pedestrian injuries decreased 35%, even while pedestrian traffic increased.

Leaders: Municipality, Business Improvement Districts

Scale: Street || Block

Purpose: To reclaim underutilized and inefficiently used asphalt as public space without a large outlay of capital.

Overview: Pavement to plaza programs, popularized recently in New York City, but echoed in city’s like San Francisco, seemingly define tactical urbanism as led by a municipality. Typically, these interventions start by using temporary, inexpensive materials to re-assign excessive motor vehicle space for the use of pedestrians or bicyclists. Because these efforts do not require large outlays of capital, they are able to provide a new vibrant public space virtually overnight. While the city funds the design and the construction, partners from the local business or advocacy community are usually asked to operate, maintain and manage the new plazas.

Following the immediate closure of Times Square, the center piece of New York’s wildly successful “Greenlight for Midtown” street improvement project, Tim Tompkins of the Times Square Alliance realized that people might want to sit somewhere. So, he bought 376 rubber folding chairs for $10.74 apiece and “instantly — millions of people have a new way of enjoying the city.”

By taking this experimental, “lighter, quicker, cheaper,” approach, the City and public-at-large are able to test the performance of each new plaza without using up scarce public resources. If successful, the intervention can then transition into a more permanent design and construction phase, as is happening currently in several of New York City’s new plazas and sustainable street “pilot” projects.