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DIY urbanism: implications for cities

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A burgeoning do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism movement is gaining notice in American and global cities as amateur designers create and implement small-scale interventions in urban public spaces. While tactics vary widely and may have some benefits for certain users, they nonetheless have the potential to complicate careful and considered long-term planning and urban design strategies. This article describes the historical and recent precedents upon which the current DIY urbanism movement is built and evaluates DIY interventions in light of their implications for cities, particularly how cities might engage with DIY projects in ways that maximize their potential for positive change while meeting objectives such as public safety, equity, and adherence to long-range visions.

Keywords: do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism; tactical urbanism; urban design; DIY design

Introduction

What are the rights and responsibilities of the public as they relate to public space? This question has become increasingly salient in recent years, with cities balancing security, management, and funding of public space (Low 2006; Schmidt, Németh, and Bostford 2011) with freedoms of assembly and free expression, perhaps most pronounced in the context of the Occupy movement (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Shiffman et al. 2012). In cities across the United States and globally, public officials are also increasingly encountering a (seemingly) new brand of citizen-led place-making activity. Called Tactical Urbanism, Guerilla Urbanism, Temporary Urbanism, Pop-Up Urbanism, and Insurgent Urbanism, among many other proposed labels,¹ many of these actions are part of a do-it-yourself (DIY) movement in which urban residents take it upon themselves to do what cities will not, or cannot, to address urban issues using what Iveson (2013, 941) calls “micro-spatial urban practices.”

Individuals and ad hoc groups are creating “spontaneous interventions” (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State 2012.) intended to improve the public’s urban experience, from gardens on street medians to self-built benches installed at bus stops. Using tactics branded pithily as “chair bombing,” “guerilla wayfinding,” and “projection mapping” citizen designers conceptualize, construct and install their own “unauthorized urban design contributions” (Douglas 2011a) in public spaces to address issues of local importance, circumventing official processes and permits. Though sometimes more playful commentary or temporary fixes than serious long-term solutions, DIY actions are nonetheless often innovative, sophisticated, and low-cost solutions to difficult or

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unaddressed urban problems. At the same time, DIY approaches represent a critical challenge for urban governance, management and planning, acting as a kind of “vigilante urbanism” that may vex cities in the same way that vigilante justice vexes law enforcement officials; despite laudable ends, DIY means are unorthodox, skirting formal processes and exercise of police powers that planners and public officials rely on to ensure values such as consensus, public safety, equity, efficiency, coordination of urban systems and others. Assuming DIY activities continue to proliferate, cities may want to consider ways of mitigating potential negative impacts, and while simply ignoring or criminalizing such activities are potentially rational responses, these strategies may be too shortsighted. The growing enthusiasm for DIY parallels ongoing municipal budget crises and political gridlock over infrastructure and civic improvement spending. Maintaining safety, balancing equity concerns and using public resources wisely are important goals. Nonetheless, cities might also consider how to usefully engage the enthusiasm and creativity of DIY urbanism to generate ideas and input in parallel with the other kinds of public participation that are already central to planning orthodoxy. There is no easy answer for how to most usefully address or engage DIY interventions, and solutions will differ with local contexts. While DIY efforts appeal to some citizens and perhaps even align with planning’s self-image that is citizen-centric, proactive and visionary, the benefits of DIY efforts come with a host of potential drawbacks as well.

Rather than debate the inherent value of DIY activities, this article creates a context for reasoned dialog about the DIY movement – both potential harms and perceived benefits – to inform better planning, design, and management of urban places. The paper first describes modern DIY urbanism before situating it in a broader historical and theoretical context, illustrating that DIY urbanism is part of a much longer trajectory of citizen involvement in shaping urban space. The challenges and opportunities of DIY urbanism as they relate to municipal planning and management are then explicated, seeking to understand better how DIY actions might provide useful inputs into formal municipal planning and urban design processes. Given the relatively recent emergence of the DIY movement in its current form, what is presented here is necessarily a broad overview and description of an emergent phenomenon that needs additional attention in the scholarly literature, particularly in the fields of planning, policy, and urban studies. Moreover, while most coverage and analysis of DIY activities in both the popular press and scholarly literature has been laudatory and even overtly partisan, the intent of this paper is to begin a productive critical discussion about the movement’s potential benefits as well as possible harms, drawbacks and limitations of such activities, particularly in the United States context.

DIY urbanism: What is it?

For a movement that goes by perhaps dozens of names, the lack of a unifying theory or definition of DIY urbanism is no surprise, at least partially because it is such a capacious and free flowing concept. The term and its variants have been used to describe everything from graffiti, skateboarding, *parkour*² and flash mobs (Iveson 2013) to the creation of multi-acre, multi-million dollar parks (Viglucchi 2012). However, this paper focuses on specific kinds of DIY activities enacted in public space that to some degree attempt to emulate or augment formal municipal designs and infrastructure. Though practices like graffiti, ad hoc memorials, Occupy-style public space activism (Shiffman et al. 2012), street vending and other aspects of what Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski (2008) call *Everyday Urbanism*, and the various practices for claiming liminal spaces that Hou (2010)

labels *Insurgent Urbanism* are certainly closely related and possess DIY traits, the focus here is narrower. Instead of attempting to define DIY urbanism generally, this paper focuses on specific varieties of DIY activities with the following three characteristics:

First, DIY solutions included here are instigated, designed, created, paid for and implemented by single users or small voluntary groups and not municipalities or corporations. These actions are not responses to requests for proposals (RFP) or funded by public art commissions, but emerge simply from citizens seeing and responding to some unmet need in urban space. This differs from park “friends” groups, neighborhood-based planning efforts, and other kinds of citizen advocacy that generally seek some level of municipal support, whether financial or through licensure, policy change, or other means. In the case of DIY approaches, the very nature of the intervention is to eschew municipal involvement, funding or sanction.

Second, efforts generally attempt to emulate or augment official municipal infrastructure in public space. As opposed to traditional painted graffiti, political poster “sniping” and other tactics, DIY efforts included here are generally more functional as opposed to merely aesthetic or political. Some, as discussed below, may persist for months without city officials even noticing their presence. Others may fill such an obvious need that they are left in place and given tacit official sanction, or even become so integrated into the urban fabric that they are replaced by official versions.

Finally, the beneficiary of these DIY interventions is, at least rhetorically, the general public. Projects are positioned as having no direct fiscal benefit to a specific user or set of users and there is usually no gatekeeping mechanism such as a usage fee. The goal of these efforts is theoretically just a more user-friendly urban environment. DIY projects may, as a trigger for gentrification or other dynamics, have trickle-down economic implications, but direct economic benefits are not generally the impetus for the kinds of DIY interventions analyzed here. Thus, DIY efforts also differ from many of the activities promoted under rubrics like *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 2008), such as street vending, food trucks, pop-up shops and guerilla advertising, which are practical, low-cost reactions to urban conditions that serve individual stakeholders (e.g. property owner or entrepreneur) but not necessarily the average urbanite.

DIY efforts take many forms. Some are mostly humorous commentary intended to literally or metaphorically soften the rough edges of urban landscapes. PARK(ing) Day was created in 2005 by the San Francisco art and design collective Rebar, when members turned a metered municipal parking space into a small urban park for 2 hours (the parking meter’s time limit). The idea quickly went viral and for 2011’s PARK(ing) Day (September 16, see Figure 1) activists created 975 temporary pop-up parks in 162 cities in 35 countries on six continents (Parking Day 2011). However lighthearted, activities like PARK(ing) Day are posited by proponents as a kind of urban activism that provides increased agency for citizens beyond a phone call to city hall or speaking at a public meeting, and instead “to call attention to the need for more urban open space, to generate critical debate around how public space is created and allocated, and to improve the quality of urban human habitat ... at least until the meter runs out!” (Parking Day 2011). These kinds of “purposeful play” (Przyblyski 2010, 196) are a distinct type of social commentary, intended to provide what Schrijver (2011, 247) calls “a light nudge” to municipal officials and intended “to be read at various levels: as a simple joke or an ironic smile, but also as a critical intervention meant to question general preconceptions on urban space and our interactions within it.”

The core of the DIY approach, however, takes such efforts a step further, involving creation and installation of small-scale design solutions meant not only to highlight, but



Figure 1. Park(ing) Day 2011 in New York City.
Photos: Gordon C. C. Douglas



Figure 2. DIY street furniture in south Los Angeles.
Photos: Gordon C. C. Douglas

actually solve – at least in one location for a short amount of time – an urban problem. A lack of seating at a high-volume bus stop might lead DIYers to “chair bomb” a street corner with self-fabricated benches (Figure 2). Landscape designer Steve Rasmussen Cancien has installed this kind of unauthorized street furniture in partnership with low-income communities in West Oakland and Los Angeles, California, for years (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association 2010), while DoTank: Brooklyn builds chairs from shipping pallets dropped off clandestinely in high volume pedestrian and transit areas around New York City (Lerner 2012). DIY wayfinding projects include signage and other devices intended to supplement what has been provided by municipalities (Figure 3). In Los Angeles, activists in 2008 installed unauthorized signage along the poorly marked 4th Street Bikeway, while other DIYers went a step further, painting – or in the DIY parlance “paint bombing” – an unauthorized bike lane directly on city streets (Prichard 2010), and

in Seattle a group calling itself the Reasonably Polite Seattleites installed \$350 worth of plastic pylons to increase the safety of the Cherry Street bike lane (Fucoloro 2013). Residents of the New York City neighborhood of Long Island City, along with their city council member, erected “The People’s Stop Sign” at a busy intersection (Altman 2012) while a project called “Walk Raleigh” in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, installed unauthorized but official-seeming signs on utility poles that included walking directions to local landmarks (Kellner and Siceloff 2012). Guerilla gardening and other “urban greening” groups such as Los Angeles Guerilla Gardening (LAGG) have planted twenty unauthorized gardens in city parks, street medians and highway rights-of-way (Shinn 2011). Other DIY’ers pack seeds, compost and powdered clay into golf-ball sized “bombs” that can be hurled over fences or into vacant spaces to bloom after subsequent rainfalls, a practice known as “seed bombing.”³

History and context

Despite a recent surge in publicity about DIY activities they are actually part of a much longer history and neither the tactics of DIY urbanism, nor the forces driving these interventions are really new. To the extent that DIY urbanism is an artistic or social statement, some precedents can be traced to the mid-twentieth century when artists like Guy Debord and his Paris-based collective, The Situationist International, employed experimental modes of art including proto DIY approaches to comment on the era’s social conservatism and controversial social shifts toward modern architectural design and rational planning



Figure 3. DIY bike lane signage in central Los Angeles (left) and Toronto (right).
Photos: Gordon C. C. Douglas

practice (Douglas 2011b; Schrijver 2011). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, experimental architecture collectives such as Ant Farm and Archigram were promoting “pop-up” and temporary design as both practical solutions to urban issues as well as mechanisms for social commentary, and along with artists like Gordon Matta-Clark and his Anarchitecture movement, blurring the lines between art, architecture and urban design and advancing their own DIY ethos (Zeiger 2011).

Another French import is often linked to the DIY approach, the concept of a “right to the city” as initially conceived by philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his book of the same name (*Le Droit à la ville*, 1968) and subsequently revived and rearticulated by geographer and social theorist David Harvey as “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2009, 315). The Right To the City has become a social movement in its own right and a mantra for modern advocates working on a range of urban issues, including DIY proponents (Stickells 2011). Yet while academic observers are quick to draw connections between Lefebvre and Harvey and today’s DIY urbanists, Douglas (2011a) counsels restraint, noting that many DIY practitioners in his research “were resistant to the idea of themselves as radicals” (6) and expressed no interest in “upending even local authorities, let alone ‘the system’” (7), suggesting that modern DIY urbanism may have different rationales than the social commentary that marked previous proto-DIY activities.

Talen (2012) argues that the DIY movement in the United States is actually the latest in a long tradition of American self-help and urban beautification efforts starting at least as far back as the municipal art and civic improvement movements of the mid-to-late 1800s through the City Beautiful era and into the mid-20th century as urbanists like Jane Jacobs and William “Holly” Whyte promoted fine-grained, contextual design solutions. Urban “pioneering” and “homesteading” activities of the 1970s also underpin today’s DIY activity, such as squatting (illegal living) in vacant urban properties, and guerilla gardening, originally promoted by advocates like Karl Linn in Philadelphia and Green Guerillas founder Liz Christy in New York City. As early as the 1970s skateboarders, BMX bicyclists, BASE jumpers, and other participants in what would eventually be called “extreme sports” increasingly adapted urban landscapes for their own needs by repurposing existing infrastructure (Ferrell 2001). The Burnside Banks skate spot in Portland, Oregon, took on almost mythical status among skateboarders across the globe after it was created, in true DIY fashion, by a group of skateboarders who, with no permission from any public agency, clandestinely poured their own concrete ramps within the existing footings beneath the Burnside Bridge in late 1990 (Vivoni 2009). Thus, though it would not coalesce as a true “movement” until sometime in the early 2000s, the roots of DIY urbanism were firmly entrenched elements of art, urban activism, and urban life by that point, as simultaneous shifts in the thinking about citizens’ roles in urban planning, design and policymaking were also taking place.

Beginning in the 1960s the still emergent field of city planning began to depart decisively from highly technological and managerial approaches that had largely been the state of the art in the United States and the UK to that point. Inspired by seminal texts such as Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960) about the urban user experience, Rachel Carson’s environmental exposé *Silent Spring* (1962), Herbert Gans’ critique of Boston’s urban renewal programs *The Urban Villagers* (1962) and other seminal tracts, some planners began to question the field’s reliance on top-down approaches. Planning professor and practitioner Paul Davidoff published the widely influential article, “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” (1965) in *The Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, setting the stage for what became known as advocacy planning (Krumholz 1982; Hartman 2002)

helping foreground progressive notions of social and environmental equity in the practice of planning. Closely linked with advocacy planning, the era's emergent community design movement also evinced a substantial proto-DIY spirit, with academic and professional planners working *pro bono* with under-resourced communities to develop citizen-based development plans or to design and build projects like parks and other community spaces. Community design pioneer and landscape architect Karl Linn built "neighborhood commons" on vacant lots in Philadelphia and elsewhere (Linn 2007), while other early community designers created People's Park on a University of California-Berkeley parking lot and Tent City on a Boston parking lot (Goodman 1971), among the kinds of projects undertaken by activist planners and designers in dozens of cities.

By the late 1960s the appropriate role for citizens in urban planning and design decision-making was being debated even within the formal government planning structure. This conversation was especially vigorous in the UK as epitomized by the 1969 publication of *People and Planning* (also known as The Skeffington Report). Appointed in 1968, the Committee on Public Participation in Planning opened their report noting, "We have undertaken this task with great pleasure because we believe that the growing interest in participation is a valuable new development" (Committee on Public Participation in Planning 1969, 1). Created as a guidebook to facilitate a more participatory variety of local planning, the report includes case studies as well as 47 detailed recommendations for how to create "a new partnership" (47) between planners and citizens. In the intervening decades, the planning and urban design professions have come to see community participation as critically important. Jacobs and Appleyard (1987) in an attempt to create an "urban design manifesto," argued 25 years ago:

As important as many buildings and spaces are *many participants* in the building process. It is through this involvement in the creation and management of their city that citizens are most likely to identify with it and, conversely, to enhance their own sense of identity and control. (120, emphasis in original)

This emphasis on process and participation is now widely accepted as a minimal requirement of effective and ethical practice in municipal planning and placemaking. While DIY efforts take this mindset to a substantially more radical end, this shift towards a citizen-based model has been influential in shaping DIY practitioners' view of what is possible when citizens wish to engage in the shaping of urban space.

Yet, despite the history of self-help promulgated by the community design movement and a widespread acknowledgement of the fallacies of top-down technocratic approaches and the importance of contextual solutions (e.g. Sirianni 2007) and public participation and consensus-building (Innes 1996; Margerum 2002), the formal structure of modern municipal planning and design still leaves very little room for true DIY efforts. Modern planning is largely focused on developing a symbiotic relationship between private market forces (e.g. developers or entrepreneurs) and the public sector, with planners performing mostly creative, diplomatic and exhortative roles as shepherds of the public interest (Myers and Banerjee 2005). But even this less prescriptive and more facilitative model of planning stakes out a clear role for local government focused largely on managing and shaping private resources. In the abstract, whether these private resources in question come in the form of multi-billion dollar development projects or a DIY park bench built and paid for by an anonymous activist group should largely be a moot point; the role of planning in both cases is to maximize the public benefit of private actions and minimize their attendant harms. The challenge arises because the scale of DIY efforts – both

potential harms as well as possible benefits – is relatively small and the spirit within which solutions is offered ranges from altruistic to whimsical (and, perhaps) occasionally rebellious. Thus, it might be easy to overlook DIY efforts as mere pranks in need of better policing, and there are, as of yet, no clear models for how to more usefully interface with DIY interventions in ways that provide necessary scrutiny and oversight but also harnessing DIY efforts as a potentially useful input to formal municipal planning and design processes.

It is also widely accepted in the planning literature that shaping the urban environment has never been the exclusive domain of professional planners and designers and that everyday citizens are not and should not be merely participants in workshops and public meetings, but that they actually already help shape urban places. As Jon Lang notes in *Urban Design: The American Experience*:

All kinds of people are involved in designing cities: lawyers, developers, individual households, and professional designers of various types. Much is designed by people who do not regard themselves as designers, but whose actions nonetheless change the built world. While professional designers are involved in making many decisions about the future of the city, many design acts are made by the citizens of cities on their own behalf. (Lang 1994, 35)

The eminent urbanist Sir Peter Hall observes in his monumental *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (1996) that, likewise, “there are just a few key ideas in twentieth-century planning, which re-echo and recycle and reconnect” (7) and of this small handful, one is the idea which:

argues that the built forms of cities should, as generally they do not now, come from the hands of their own citizens; that we should reject the tradition whereby large organizations, private or public, build for people, and instead embrace the notion that people should build for themselves. (9)

As Lang and Hall point out, the leap from citizen to DIY citizen-planner or citizen-designer is in some ways merely a logical extrapolation of longstanding precedent. While this dynamic has long been true in the slums of the global south, and on privately-owned parcels where developers and homeowners exercise some degree of autonomy, it is the DIY urbanists’ unsanctioned public space interventions on the streets and sidewalks of countries like the United States that is seen as both novel and “in direct opposition to top-down, capital intensive, and bureaucratically sanctioned urban change of the kind most often associated with urban planning” (Talen 2012).

DIY urbanism: Modern roots

The conceptual underpinnings of DIY urbanism are wide-ranging, but the modern variant is certainly unique, even if not wholly new. In recent years, a number of observers, particularly in Europe, have begun to publicize an emerging wave of creative small-scale place-making efforts. Especially in Berlin – still adapting to decades of division and uneven development – designers focused on what were usually called “temporary” uses to rethink and remake the city, which had a distinct DIY flavor. Overmeyer’s (2007) *Urban Pioneers: Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin* cataloged dozens of such projects while Haydn and Tremel’s (2006) edited collection *Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the Use of City Spaces* contained case studies and critical analysis of this phenomenon. Schwarz and Rugare’s edited volume *Pop Up City: Urban Infill Vol. 2* (2009), presented a US perspective on temporary interventions, illustrating the growing

popularity of DIY approaches within the design community and among urban social activists in the last half decade or so, paralleling a renewed focus on socially conscious, self-help and pro-bono approaches to design (Bell 2004; Architecture for Humanity 2006; Bell and Wakeford 2008; Cary and Public Architecture 2010). Jay Walljasper of the planning and design consultancy Project for Public Spaces (PPS) published *The Great Neighborhoods Book* (2007), subtitled *A Do-It Yourself Guide to Placemaking*, highlighting numerous citizen-led approaches ranging from supporting local businesses to guerilla gardening.

In an editorial in a 2011 issue of *Architectural Theory Review*, Lee Stickells suggested “an apparent resurgence in the exploration of the social in contemporary architectural culture” (214) in recent years, much like that in the artistic and planning communities. In particular, Stickells noted a wide range of recent exhibitions examining these social/design connections, many of which, not coincidentally, also highlight or analyze DIY approaches, including *just space(s)* (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) 2007), *Actions: What You Can Do With the City* (Canadian Centre for Architecture 2008), *DIY Urbanism* (San Francisco Planning + Urban Research Association (SPUR) 2010), *Unplanned: Research and Experiments at the Urban Scale* (Superfront Gallery, Los Angeles, California 2010) and *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 2010) as well as numerous European exhibitions of similar provenance.

Among the most recent articulations of DIY and associated approaches is the handbook *Tactical Urbanism Volume 2: Short Term Action/Long Term Change* (Lydon et al. 2012), which has been widely circulated on the internet. *Tactical Urbanism Volume 1* (a shorter version of *Volume 2*) had to be moved to a new web host after it was downloaded 10,000 times in just a few months, the limit of its original hosting site (Lydon et al. 2012). The book highlights many DIY tactics but also includes city-sanctioned “prototype” efforts such as pop-up cafes, “Build a Better Block” programs (Lerner 2012), and small-scale experimental design interventions by cities such as allowing “gutter cafes” (Arieff 2011) or temporary *al fresco* seating for businesses atop curbside parking spaces that do not necessarily fit the narrow definition of DIY urbanism circumscribed for this paper, but are nonetheless closely related.

Workshops, symposia and other events designed to explore and promote DIY and associated practices have been held, such as the Tactical Urbanism Salons in New York City, Philadelphia, Memphis, Louisville, and Santiago, Chile. The Bat-Yam Biennale of Landscape Urbanism in 2010 near Tel-Aviv, Israel, included an event called 72 Hour Urban Action described by the *New York Times* as “a guerrilla architecture and design festival” (Grant 2010); subsequent versions have been held in Terni, Italy; Stuttgart, Germany, and Derry-Londonderry, UK. In early 2012 the Architectural Foundation of Cincinnati and the University of Cincinnati Niehoff Urban Studio sponsored the “Do It Yourself Urbanism in Cincinnati” competition, seeking “the most creative visions for temporary installations for the public good to enhance our use, perception, and enjoyment of public space” (Architectural Foundation of Cincinnati 2012). The US pavilion at the 13th International Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012 highlighted DIY and related efforts under the theme “Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good” with curators seeking submissions that “cut across boundaries, addressing architecture, landscape, infrastructure, and the digital universe,” and “share an optimistic willingness to venture outside conventional practice and to deploy fresh tactics to make cities more sustainable, accessible, and inclusive” (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State 2012). Many of the works in the Biennale were DIY projects and

New York Times architecture critic Michael Kimmelman (2012) called the US exhibit one of the few bright spots of the Biennale, writing:

That many of the projects here skirt authority and don't involve architects suggests not that architects aren't important or that cities don't depend on top-down plans. It suggests that cities and architects still have a ways to go to catch up with an increasingly restless public's appetite for better design and better living. And that the public isn't waiting. (C1)

Even higher education has jumped on the DIY bandwagon. Queens College of The City University of New York is now offering a Guerilla Architecture track within its Master's of Fine Arts (MFA) program, while Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) offered a course during the Spring 2012 term entitled "Hacking the Urban Experience" in which architecture students designed and installed unsanctioned DIY interventions in public spaces to understand better, as the syllabus notes, "that there is an opportunity for architects to regain lost relevance by inserting themselves through unsolicited proposals into the public consciousness as steward's [*sic*] of urban well being" (Locke 2012).

DIY urbanism: So what?

Clearly, DIY urbanism and its many cousins (tactical, guerilla, pop-up, insurgent *ad infinitum*) are part of a burgeoning and much larger narrative about public space and citizens' right and responsibilities in relation to it (Hou 2012). Certain members of the public are increasingly unwilling to wait for bureaucracies to deal with pressing urban problems in traditional, methodical ways, instead addressing these issues on their own. But beyond a lot of talk about gutter cafes, guerilla gardens and seed bombs, what does it all mean, especially for the municipal officials who must deal with these "spontaneous" and unsanctioned interventions when they show up unbidden and unexpectedly on city streets? DIY urbanism exists at the nexus of multiple activities – protest art, architecture, social activism, landscape design, industrial design – and the scant literature on the topic primarily glorifies the DIY approach as both a form of social protest against anachronistic planning processes as well as a form of philanthropic provision of social goods by creative activists. What is almost wholly absent is a discussion of how municipalities might balance the positive aspects of DIY urbanism with its potentially deleterious effects. Despite growing attention from the mainstream press and within certain sectors of the design community, DIY efforts have received only a smattering of direct attention from planners in the practice (e.g. Page 2008) or academic literature. Yet, municipal planners, designers and other officials face a delicate balancing act. While they may indeed see the same needs, opportunities and even solutions that DIY proponents see, municipal officials have other concerns that are absent or secondary to DIY actors, including ensuring public safety, equitably distributing resources and dis-amenities, adopting transparent and participatory processes for change, making fiscally prudent budgetary decisions and balancing short-term needs and desires with long-term visions.

The proliferation of DIY urbanism presents both a new set of challenges to the planning and urban design *zeitgeist* as well as opportunities to learn from and usefully engage DIY approaches. This is a delicate balancing act, as the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority discovered recently. Metro became the target of widespread public ire after its decision to rip out 176 flower boxes planted by The Phantom Planter in neglected space around the DuPont Circle metro station and threatened the guerilla gardener with imprisonment if caught caring for the plants. Though a Metro spokesperson

told the *Washington Post*'s Robert McCartney that the planted area was already scheduled for a long-planned overhaul, McCartney was unimpressed, opining that he had "underestimated Metro bureaucrats' capacity for folly" (McCartney 2013) in so aggressively policing the Phantom Planter's DIY gardening efforts whether or not it actually did contradict Metro's existing plans for the space.

Challenges and complexities

Rampant and unchecked DIY urbanism is by no means a simple fix. By its very nature, the concept challenges traditional notions of planning and governance. DIY interventions are not just a reaction to perceived unmet needs in local communities, nor solely recognition by altruistic citizens of the fiscal constraints many cities find themselves in today. The reality is that DIY approaches, at least to some degree, are also a form of soft rebellion against a planning status quo that is perceived to lack creativity, flexibility, imagination and efficacy. If you are capable of "doing it yourself" why do you need trained and credentialed planners or urban designers in the first place? If you think planning is ineffectual, or, worse, the cause of undesirable urban conditions and not a potential source of solutions, then the DIY approach to addressing issues on your block or in your neighborhood becomes increasingly appealing.

Coverage in the popular press regularly adopts the rationale that DIY efforts are antidotes to the "problem" of planning. Zoning creates dead urban spaces, which "make it harder build vibrant communities. In many places, regulations absurdly forbid awnings, sidewalk seating, food trucks, and other amenities that help create lively, walkable streets" (Judson 2012). The planning and urban design professions "have long been the province of professionals and bureaucrats. As a result, many urban spaces today lack human scale and sensitivity" (Douglas 2011b). Official planning processes are "a long slow slog. Politics, budgets, and liability concerns can all serve to impede progress on what often seem, to the average cyclist at least, to be easy no-brainer solutions" (Prichard 2010). DIYers, meanwhile, are positioned as altruistic neighborhood saviors "doing these things to combat the slowness of government" (unnamed source quoted in Arieff 2011). While some proponents of DIY suggest that the same strategic approaches (e.g. low cost, experimental, temporary) can also be useful for municipal planners, most pro-DIY arguments are decidedly antagonistic to planning. DIY is thus posited as a rational, and perhaps even necessary, tactic for citizens to rescue their communities from planning processes that are increasingly seen as part of an overly bureaucratic and intractably anachronistic system.

Furthermore, despite the movement's roots in participatory planning, protest art and the Right to the City, DIY is by its nature a self-motivated activity engaged in by individuals or small groups using private funds and conducting their guerilla urban design raids in secret, thus skirting public approvals, public funding and public process. DIY activities that position themselves as local and grassroots thus paradoxically circumvent the very same community-based, participatory and fair-share processes that planners have worked diligently to enact in many cities. As with other public-private partnerships from parks conservancies to "privately owned public spaces" (POPS), allowing or relying on the private sector (though in this case an individual as opposed to a corporation) to fund what have traditionally been civic responsibilities could actually lead to an erosion of the public commons as opposed to the expansion that DIY enthusiasts seem to promote. The potential for private over-reach or abdication of municipal responsibility, or both, may actually mute the purported communitarian aspects of DIY approaches and serve as another example of the slippery slope on which "voluntarism and community work are easily

mobilized for a neoliberal agenda” (Mayer 2007, 109) in which public resources are increasingly subsumed into a purely market-led regulatory structure (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). Two examples illustrate this dynamic.

According to the *Miami Herald*, in 2012 a Miami entrepreneur, “undertook what must be the ultimate DIY project: He built a park atop the debris” of the former Miami Arena (Viglucchi 2012) in the city’s struggling and park-starved Park West neighborhood. According to the *Herald*, neighborhood resident and developer Brad Knoefler was unhappy with the pace of action on the site by the Southwest Overtown/Park West Community Redevelopment Agency, so, “Knoefler rented a bulldozer and began crushing and smoothing out the rubble piles, guerrilla-style. He also hired guys off the street to help him patch sidewalks and repaint curbs which he said the city was unwilling or unable to repair” (Viglucchi 2012). Knoefler eventually secured a lease from the city to operate the park as a privately operated public space, with the park’s design firm noting on their website, “rather than a burden” the park is “designed for financial and infrastructural independence from the city, so that it is a catalyst for change” (Local Office Landscape Architecture 2013). Or, consider the example of Stockton, California (population 290,000). When the city prepared for bankruptcy in June 2012 due to pension obligations and loss of tax revenue, local residents voluntarily took on the role of public works employees as the city slashed services. A local activist told National Public Radio that Stockton’s citizens realized these were things they used to take for granted but, “Instead of just crying and saying, oh, the police won’t answer, the garbage isn’t being collected, they’re saying, I’ll pick up the garbage. I’ll paint the curbs,” (Gonzales 2012).

Both the Miami and Stockton examples may illustrate DIY urbanism taken to a rare extreme, but they raise important questions. Both examples could be read as inspirational examples of DIY urbanism writ large. Or conversely, as an abdication of public responsibility for, and control over, decisions that affect the citizenry at large. This strikes to the heart of planning in many ways, for if the programming, design and maintenance of public space and public infrastructure is continually outsourced to the private sector or citizen volunteers with little or even no municipal oversight, why do cities need planners, designers, and, indeed, any other employees in the first place? Why not let individuals, or developers, or multi-national corporations just do whatever they want? Such an unregulated process would make it extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for cities to exercise their police powers and assure equity, safety and other concerns.

Another challenge is that any attempt to integrate or otherwise harness enthusiasm for DIY approaches runs the risk of creating or perpetuating inequity in many urban neighborhoods. For instance, allowing unchecked DIY interventions in currently low-income neighborhoods could provide needed amenities or improvements but may simultaneously hasten gentrification and displacement in much the same way that publicly-funded infrastructure upgrades and other investments have been shown to do (Hackworth 2007; Douglas 2012). Differences in opinion over aesthetics, perceptions about public safety, and even cultural values mean that DIY efforts may also create a potential flashpoint for class and ethnic tensions in many neighborhoods, among other potential disagreements. And from an equity standpoint planners cannot simply look the other way and tacitly approve DIY interventions as inherently rational reactions to municipal funding limitations if they are simultaneously vilifying and criminalizing other arguably rational activities in the very same public spaces. As Deslandes (2012) argues, it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which, “The man who sleeps in the empty building, the women under the bridge and the families out in the park will not have their space-making celebrated for its informality and innovation. The DIY urbanists’ will be.”

These tensions between what, if any, is an acceptable or desirable level of DIY activity in a city, and issues such as the legitimacy of planning oversight, the role of cities in the management of public space, and the social equity implications will each have to be explored and negotiated in individual cities and neighborhoods. What is clear is that the proposed logics behind DIY urbanism, while perhaps compelling on one level, mask an increasingly complex set of dynamics that complicate and may counterbalance potential benefits.

Possible ways to harness DIY enthusiasm

While DIY urbanism presents a number of challenges and conundrums for cities and planners, it also represents some potential opportunities, assuming the debates about the utility and limitations of the DIY approach can be worked thorough with careful and reasoned analysis. On the one hand, many aspects of DIY urban design are central to the core ideals of planning, particularly the participatory aspects. DIY urban design, if nothing else, is evidence that there are citizens out there in the world who care about their communities and are willing to spend time, effort and, often, their own money to make their neighborhoods better, at least by their own definition. While planners are continually looking for ways to increase public participation in planning processes through visioning exercises, design *charrettes*, surveys and other officially-sponsored undertakings, DIY urbanists represent a potential self-selected cohort of able and informed citizens ripe for this kind of engagement.

There are various ways in which cities might engage interested DIY urbanists. One approach is to create programs that empower citizens to become involved in local space design and management, not only through traditional advisory or commentary roles but also in more active ways. Chicago's NeighborSpace is a non-profit organization created by the city, the Chicago Park District and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County that works with community based groups to acquire public or undeveloped private land in city neighborhoods, which the community partners manage as parks and community gardens. The city of San Francisco has created an online portal, SFBetterStreets.org, to help citizens more easily deal with city agency approvals for citizen-initiated projects and request neighborhood amenities that "combines all the city's guidelines, permit requirements, and resources for public space development onto one site, giving the user a handy step-by-step approach toward improving San Francisco's streets" (San Francisco Planning Department 2012). Efforts such as these help empower residents to use DIY inspired approaches to creatively address local issues, while providing some structure and formal oversight of the process.

Cities might also create other opportunities for the use of DIY approaches, for instance implementing DIY tactics as short-term experiments or proofs of concept, which Lydon et al. promote in their *Tactical Urbanism* handbook. Peer Chacko, Dallas Assistant Director of Development Services told *Miller-McCune* magazine⁴ that the Better Block project, which works with commercial property owners and neighborhoods to create temporary, low-cost traffic calming and streetscaping experiments had helped the city recognize and understand how they could more usefully engage residents in the design process and temporarily test potential changes (Lerner 2012). Cities could also take a more active role in soliciting DIY solutions to local issues. Through Requests for Proposals (RFPs), small grant programs, special DIY-friendly overlay zones, targeted DIY experiment sites, DIY temporary use permits or even "hackathon"-style events similar to 72 Hour Urban Action, cities could use existing tools that planners are familiar with to solicit and invite targeted

DIY interventions in specific locations or to address specific needs under city-approved parameters and oversight.

In a time of fiscal retrenchment DIY approaches may be useful in helping to provide examples of how cities can enhance the existing built environment in ways that are either relatively inexpensive, or user-funded, and sometimes both. Planners may find it useful to engage DIY advocates in dialog about the utility and practicality of DIY solutions as they relate to planners' responsibilities for ensuring public safety, protecting property rights, facilitating equitable distribution of resources and coordinating fine-grained and short-term changes within existing policies and long-term visions. This may force DIYers to accept the reality that certain DIY tactics will be co-opted by cities, thereby stripping away some of DIY's rebellious "guerilla" luster. But planners will also have to accept that many DIY interventions are not merely just pranks or a sophisticated variant of graffiti but, indeed, heartfelt solutions offered in a spirit of communality similar to theories that have long been advocated by serious urban thinkers, from Richard Sennet's *The Uses of Disorder* (1970) to William "Holly" Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (1980). Planners hoping to harness the creative and altruistic spirit of DIY will need to manage this dialog carefully to inspire DIY advocates to help envision better cities while simultaneously illustrating that planning is a useful ally, and not an enemy, to progressive citizen-led efforts.

Such dialogs may already be happening. Commenting on the Walk Raleigh DIY wayfinding effort, Raleigh's planning director noted in the local *News Observer* newspaper that:

Yes, they didn't get proper permits, but it shows a level of passion and commitment to a city and encourages walking. We want to work with this younger generation to capture that energy to build a future city they want to see. (Silver, quoted in Kellner and Siceloff 2012)

Similarly, the PlantSF (Permeable Landscape as Neighborhood Treasure) DIY project in San Francisco began with an unauthorized citizen intervention when a resident dug up the sidewalk in front of her house with a jackhammer and replanted it with local landscaping; since partnering with San Francisco's Department of Public Works, PlantSF has installed over 400 gardens in municipal rights-of-way (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association 2010). These kinds of open dialog, creative problem-solving and partnerships between officials and DIY activists is a critical first step if, indeed, local planners are interested in exploring and tapping the DIY movement's potential.

Conclusion

Sociologist Peter Arlt (2007) has observed the emergence of temporary and DIY urbanism in cities like Berlin since the mid-2000s and argues that what he calls small-scale "space pioneers" are critical players in the regeneration of urban space alongside government planners and corporate developers and are "evidence of a trend to greater social commitment, to more participation, to active networks and the desire to try out something new" (22). Enthusiasm for DIY approaches does not appear to be waning, and many proposed solutions are innovative and may be adoptable (or at least adaptable) as official planning strategies. DIY activities also illustrate the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of individual citizens that is critical to keeping cities lively, evolving and interesting places, and it is also worth remembering that many of planning's most influential figures from the past and present have not been trained (or even practicing) planners.

Planning, indeed, prides itself on being a transparent and participatory process in which citizens and non-planners provide foundational visions and legitimize the planning process through their participation. The rise of DIY urbanism is merely a new iteration of that dynamic, and not inherently a usurpation of planning's claim to responsibility for the thoughtful design and management of the built environment. In an era of increasing civic activism as exemplified most recently by the Occupy movement, growing technical sophistication among citizens and a corresponding retrenchment in municipal service provision, planners may find it useful to engage the enthusiasm of DIY urbanists to facilitate locally appropriate, low-cost, low-impact solutions to urban problems.

The commitment and enthusiasm of DIY proponents may be infectious, and though there are many heartfelt arguments for their approach, it is likewise not a panacea for the problems faced by cities and urban neighborhoods and the vigilante aspects of DIY urbanism are not to be taken lightly. But empowering citizens to contribute to the design of their surroundings, within some parameters, can result in numerous benefits, from innovative solutions to a more engaged citizenry, and DIY projects can illustrate to planners and other citizens what is possible. The role of planners will be to harness that enthusiasm and creativity in ways that are safe, equitable, effective and locally appropriate.

Notes

1. Other terms that have been used include Bottom-Up Urbanism, Self-Help Urbanism, Unstable Urbanism, User-Generated Urbanism, Ad-Hoc Urbanism, Experimental Urbanism, Improvisational Urbanism, Unplanned Urbanism, Participatory Urbanism, Prototype Urbanism, Grassroots Urbanism, Open-Source Urbanism, Informal Urbanism, Urban Bricolage, Urban Acupuncture, and Urban First Aid. This is not a comprehensive list.
2. *Parkour*, or "free running," is a form of physical activity in which participants move at high speeds through urban environments traversing objects using techniques from gymnastics, martial arts, and mountain climbing.
3. As with many aspects of DIY, "seed bombing" is both new and not new. Liz Christy and the eventual Green Guerillas invented the "seed grenade" using Christmas tree ornaments, condoms, or balloons filled with seeds and fertilizer in a similar manner to promulgate greenery on empty lots on New York City's Lower East Side in the early 1970s (Schmelzkopf 1995; Hassell 2002).
4. *Miller-McCune* is now known as *Pacific Standard*.

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