Pop Up Planning

by

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pop.up.planning

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Site Address:  www.popupplanning.com or popupplanning.wordpress.com

Project Profile Map:  http://g.co/maps/kf89s

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pop.up.planning is an attempt to bring together the phenomenon of Do It Yourself urbanism with the practice of city planning and the management of urban space. We have put together this site so that the DIY-er can better understand the tools and rules that shape our cities, suggest opportunities to work within that framework, and identify a way forward in which cities better respond to and facilitate the pop-up spirit. For the city planners in the room, we've also begun to document DIY efforts across the country and investigate how city officials are working with these individuals to improve the public realm.

The site is organized into three main themes: Planning Primer, DIY Urbanism, and Ways Forward. Click each of these directly, and you are taken to an overview of the theme. Click an entry from the theme's dropdown menu, and you are taken to a specific section within it. We're telling you this because we want to stress that it makes more sense if you read the thematic overviews first before proceeding to the more detailed sections within.

**Planning Primer** is an overview of the practice of city planning and municipal management of the built environment. The theme includes sections on zoning and land use controls, design regulations, building codes, and the surprisingly complex concept of ownership.

**DIY Urbanism (On the Map)** features an interactive Google map of many of the DIY projects featured on this site. It is by no means exhaustive (it focuses only on this continent, for one), but we hope it will grow to include more and more of what's happening out there. You will also find within this theme discussions of what Maire learned from interviewing DIY-ers and city officials across North America, with individual profiles at DIY in Action and synthesized into Current Conditions, Lessons Learned, Benefits, and Challenges. But seriously – check out the map.

**Ways Forward** discusses various policy approaches that a city might take in order to allow and even empower the DIY ethos in the public realm. These are broadly categorized as Pilot, Policy Adaptation, and Property Rights. Lastly, we suggest a few ways that a city (or activists) might use Geographic Information Systems data available about their community to begin identifying sites that may be appropriate for DIY intervention.

Lastly, a caveat: Nothing on the site is intended to be wholly complete or comprehensive. New efforts are “popping up” all the time, and planning policies differ nearly everywhere you go. This is an introduction. Tell us what we've missed.

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*Header photo: Los Angeles’ first Streets for People project: the Sunset Triangle Plaza. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Alissa Walker.)*
A DIY approach to the urban environment is intended to break through people's preconceived notions of the use of public space and also the ways in which that space is managed. It isn't inherently a protest movement and doesn't fundamentally require civil disobedience or flagrant violations of the law. Nevertheless, depending on the actor's motivations and the interventions being conceived, one might choose to act first / ask later or negotiate with public officials for flexibility in applying rules. Either way, it's important for the Doer to understand the regulatory environment in which they act. If you believe that Doing It Yourself is a way of protesting against the use of space or promoting alternative uses, then you must be able to identify the places and policies that shaped them. DIY as community improvement attempts to make (usually temporary) change in the built environment as a way of highlighting the unmet needs of the public or the unjust under-utilization of urban space. In this case the improver needs a “theory of change” by which temporary intervention leads to permanent, sustainable improvement.

The regulatory regime governing our built environment provides ample opportunities for meaningful input and participation by adjacent property owners, political leaders, and the public at large. When done correctly, such participatory processes can create genuine dialogue, help communities achieve a shared vision for the built environment, and create momentum for positive public action in the urban public realm. Often, however, the public review process can turn to a focus on procedural rather than substantive outcomes, miring projects in acrimony and litigation. The process fails to truly represent the public – allowing localized antagonism to stand in the way of public benefits supported by the broader community.

While we suggest that urban interventionism may offer a way out of this prevailing dynamic of disruption, interventionists shouldn't simply ignore the concerns of others or the existing character of the built environment they propose to amend. Regulatory constraints to development on a site often, though not always, represent a consensus by surrounding property owners and tenants about what is appropriate for a given district or area. DIY-ers would do well to understand the regulatory constraints on urban space for a number of reasons besides being good neighbors. Perhaps most importantly, if a self-initiated urban intervention is intended to be a force for positive change in the local built environment, then it must respond not only to its physical context but to the social, institutional, and legal contexts that govern the site as well.

The following primer is intended to point out the various ways that land and land uses are controlled by public officials, how they might relate specifically to do-it-yourself, and then point the way to how these processes could be re-examined to support unplanned intervention. The intent is not in any way to encourage breaking the law but neither is it intended to tell the Doer how they ought to behave. These decisions belong to you.

Sections:
- Zoning and Land Use Regulation
- Overlay Districts and Design Regulation
- Building Codes and Permitting
- Ownership and property rights
It’s critical that the DIY urbanist understand the zoning classification of land being targeted for action. Certain classifications are quite permissive in terms of what can be done with it, while others are maximally restrictive. Lands zoned industrial often allow nearly any use; parcels intended for single-family homes probably allow almost no other use except this one. The DIY-er can use a knowledge of zoning for several purposes:

1. To ensure the intervention complies with zoning standards for the site.
2. To ensure that the place of fabrication complies with zoning standards. If you are producing your intervention in one location for installation elsewhere, you’ll need to be sure zoning allows the activity in your facility (backyard, garage, etc.).
3. To apply for a permit that allows for a special or conditional use or rezoning, if necessary. This may be a cost- and time-prohibitive process.
4. To advocate for changes to zoning laws in order to either (1) allow for periodic, temporary interventions in certain zoning classifications or (2) create a new zoning designation for targeted parcels specifically intended for such action. Both approaches have been used to facilitate the use of under-utilized urban land for community gardens and other actions. (See our frameworks for policy change.)

Zoning refers to the set of restrictions that a city or county places on the use of land. Most zoning restricts the specific activities that may occur on a site as well as the allowed density. For example, a site may be zoned residential for housing, industrial for manufacturing facilities, retail for shops and restaurants, or “mixed use” for some combination. Ordinarily this land use classification is followed by a density standard: the number and types of housing units per acre, the maximum height of an office building, or the scale of an industrial facility. Each zoning classification is typically associated with a set of other development standards, such as the amount of parking that must be provided, publicly-accessible green space, or distance between buildings and the street (setback).

In places with zoning codes, every single piece of land (other than roads and spaces called public rights of way) is zoned. Even public parks or elementary schools are zoned for their permitted uses. Most zoning laws distinguish between principal and accessory uses. In other words, zoning is more concerned with how a piece of land is primarily used but also limits some of the other, secondary activities that may occur there. As a result, a structure may be allowed when it is smaller and less important than a pre-existing building on a lot, but it may not be allowed if it's being built on a previously-vacant lot.

A parcel's zoning classification makes certain uses allowable “by right” while other uses will require special permission such as re-zoning or a special use permit. Such permissions usually require the approval of a public commission such as a Zoning Commission or Board of Adjustment. In some cases the city council or county commission may need to approve the changes; in the smallest of cases only the staff's permission may be necessary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USE CATEGORY</th>
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Design Standards

Overlay Districts, Form-Based Codes, and Design Guidelines

While traditional zoning primarily regulates the uses and built density of land, other types of zoning and development regulations are more commonly used to control the physical character of the built environment. These standards are likely to apply equally to buildings as well as non-building structures, landscaping, and other features that might be particularly relevant the DIY-er.

Overlay Districts

Overlay districts are essentially an additional category of zoning that is laid over the existing zoning for a piece of land. Overlays usually manage certain kinds of lands that may not be relevant to all the land in an underlying zoning district. They are used to protect environmentally sensitive areas like wetlands and hillsides, for instance, or to preserve neighborhood character by protecting historic buildings and development patterns. If a parcel is zoned Residential Multifamily and lies in a historic overlay district, that land is then regulated as to the uses permitted by the RMF classification as well as the design standards and review processes mandated by its inclusion in the historic district. In addition to buildings, overlay districts may control the types of landscaping allowed, the amount of ground cover that can manipulated or disturbed, or the design and provision of nonbuilding amenities such as benches and lighting. Finally, overlay districts are often created at the request of neighborhood residents themselves in response to a perceived external threat usually generated by pressure to develop. As a result they are likely to have strong opinions and direct influence over the built interventions in their communities. For all these reasons DIY-ers must pay particular attention to their efforts when the target site resides within an overlay district. A helpful primer on historic district regulations is available through the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

An example of added rules within an overlay district. (Window standard in a Pedestrian Overlay District in Kansas City, MO)
Form-based codes

Some planners and urban designers believe that the focus of traditional Euclidean zoning on land uses is mistaken. They believe that it is the physical form and features of the building that are most important. Agnostic as to use, form-based codes instead seek to ensure that new buildings are of a consistent character through their building dimensions, the amount of ground area they cover, spacing from other buildings, orientation to the street, and the provision of entry doors and windows. As with use-based zoning codes, form-based codes apply more to buildings than they do to non-building features of a site. It may be that such codes, in some cases, actually empower interventionists by fussing less over uses – primary or accessory – and more about building form. The type of buildings permitted in a particular place usually depends on the existing or desired urban form, or pattern, of a place through a concept called transects. For further information on form-based codes, visit the Form Based Code Institute or the Center for Applied Transect Studies.

A typical classification of urban transects. (Transect.org)

Design Standards

Design standards are closely related to form-based codes in that they seek to establish a certain physical character of development as appropriate to specific places. While form-based codes may be applied city-wide or at least at the neighborhood scale, design standards are generally limited to more tightly-defined places such as historic districts or downtowns (central business districts). These standards go beyond form-based codes in that they detail specific treatments of a building’s walls, rooflines, cornices, windows, doorways, driveways and parking areas, and more. Of particular relevance to the DIY-er, design standards will usually provide more stringent guidelines for outdoor features such as landscaping, public seating, artwork, lighting, and other features of the urban public realm.

Dimension regulations in a form-based code for Benicia, California.
An urban design guideline for open space in Raleigh, N.C.

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Building Codes and Permitting

Building codes and permits

Probably every American city enforces a building code, most of which follow a uniform code published by an independent council. Building codes ensure that the structure is stable, materials are relatively fire resistant, that plumbing and electricity are sufficient, and that people can move in, out, and around in the building. These codes are strictly enforced and allow for very little exception. If one of these codes is deemed applicable to a proposed intervention, one should expect to closely adhere to its standards. Violations of building codes can result in fines and, eventually, condemnation and seizure by public authorities.

Building codes are enforced by a city's building inspectors and code enforcement officers. These officials decide whether a structure meets the standards required by that town. These codes not only cover permanent buildings but they also regulate structures that are temporary, in the public right-of-way, or use innovative materials. These are where DIY activity is most likely to encounter the building code. The building code allows for temporary structures (which stand for less than 6 months) as long as they still meet all standards for structural stability, fire safety, entries and exits, lighting, ventilation, and sanitation. If you want to erect a temporary structure, you will probably need to get approval from the building inspector. You will be required to submit a site plan showing the structure and its relationship to property boundaries, as well as provide the designed occupant load (the number of intended users) and adequate exits. This can be a high bar to achieve without the help of a professional structural engineer! (However, you may be able to avoid some of these rules if the structure is less than 120 square feet – a little more than 10 feet wide by 10 feet long – or designed for fewer than 10 people.)

The building code also regulates any structure that reaches into public space known as rights-of-way. Generally, any structure below 8 feet in height cannot intrude into space such as a sidewalk unless it is a step or an architectural feature like a column, sill, or lintel. Even then these encroachments are limited to less than 12 inches. Certain locations may be even stricter: in Raleigh, N.C., posts and columns are not allowed at all within the right-of-way or sidewalk. Though you probably intend your intervention to engage the public realm, care must be taken along the boundaries between public and private space, lest your project be removed by city officials. Finally, if your project uses uncommon construction materials or techniques, you may have to prove its safety by obtaining a load test from a professional engineer.

Building permits are the first step in complying with a building code. Most types of building or site work require a building permit before it can begin. The main exceptions are accessories to houses such as detached tool sheds, playground equipment, and inflatable pools. Permit applications require a description of the work, drawings or plans, and the signatures of relevant licensed professionals such as a construction contractor, architect, or structural engineer. The building permit is time-limited: a project must be started and completed within the approved timeframe or an extension or new permit will be required. All new buildings and structures, as well as changes to a building or structure that change its fundamental classification, also require a certificate of occupancy before the work is considered complete and people may inhabit the space. These involve an inspection by a city official when work is nearly complete.

All this talk of buildings and structures begs the question, what counts as a building or structure? The standard building code defines a building quite simply as "any structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or occupancy." In Raleigh's code of ordinances, a building is defined as "any structure, place, or any other construction built for the shelter or enclosure of persons, animals, chattels or property of any kind or any part of such structure, shelter or property." A structure is "anything constructed or placed upon a property which is supported by the ground or which is supported by any other structure." In other words, a building provides shelter to people and things, while a structure is
more broadly anything that rests on the ground or another structure.
The ways that urban space are regulated of course depends on who owns them. Unfortunately, property ownership isn't as simple as it may seem. Property rights law and theory relies on the concept of property as a “bundle” of rights. While you may own the land that your home sits upon, you do not possess the right to do whatever you want with it. In an urban area, your land will be zoned for certain uses. Even if you're allowed to use it in your preferred way, there may be rules about how your use affects others. If you own land zoned for industrial use and you build a factory, this doesn't mean that you can emit any sort of substance into the air: that air goes on to affect the lives and property of other people with their own property rights. But say you are entitled to the use of your land and that your use doesn't affect anyone else's person or property. Does that mean you have all rights to that land? Not necessarily. The electric company may have an easement on your property so that it can maintain its electric lines. This means you cannot build within this easement nor can you block access to it. A previous owner of the land may have put a conservation easement on it to protect stands of mature trees or the quality of a stream running through it. The point is that there are many ways in which the rights of private property-holders are limited, both by other people and by the power of the state.

In discussing DIY urbanism and the rules and regulations that define our ability to act in urban space, it's important to keep in mind not only who “owns” the property but how the rights associated with that property are distributed. The following four types or owners of property are perhaps the most relevant to our interest here:

Publicly-owned space. Property that is owned by the government is held in our name as citizens and taxpayers and is to be used to our benefit. Any rule that limits our access to this land must have a reasonable public policy rationale. For instance, although we can always visit our county courthouse during its hours of operation, we cannot necessarily enter into any room that we want or enter it after hours without permission. This is because the government has an interest in carrying out its duties to enforce laws without unreasonable disruption. Similarly, we can enter public parks anytime during daylight hours but usually we cannot enter them overnight and we cannot do whatever we want in them. In most cases these rules are reasonable and justified, but under circumstances the DIY-er may want to challenge these limitations. You might do that through traditional forms of political activism such as lobbying and protesting, or you might highlight the ill-considered nature of a rule through civil disobedience. In any case, it's important to recognize that the government has a widely-recognized power to regulate the use of public space but that it doesn't always use this power appropriately. DIY urbanism is one method of seeking positive change in the way our public accesses its space.

Easements. Easements are restrictions placed on property by a party other than the holder of the land. It provides for a certain use to the exclusion of other uses. For example, a private party may negotiate for an easement from the property owner in order to provide utility connections or conserve important natural features of the site, in exchange for monetary compensation. In some cases, the power of the state may compel a land owner to grant an easement to another party through eminent domain. Usually the government must provide a fair level of compensation in exchange for this easement. These easements are often sustained in perpetuity – they do not vanish simply because the underlying property was sold to another owner. It's important that the DIY-er check for the existence and location of easements on subject properties even when they would otherwise have the right to build on the land.

Public right-of-way. A public right-of-way is a form of easement in which land is set aside for a public purpose, usually for transportation corridors. These are most often strips of land that run along the side of a road. They are intended to allow for future widening of roads, for the addition of sidewalks, or for the maintenance of drainage ditches. Placing any structure or material within this right-of-way usually requires an
encroachment permit, though in some cases political signs are permitted during campaign seasons.

**Private property.** As previously discussed, the owner of a piece of land doesn't necessarily possess all the rights associated with that land. The owner of private land may also hand off some of her rights to other parties voluntarily. She does this as a landlord leasing land (or a structure) to a tenant. In these cases, the lease contract defines how rights are distributed, though in most places there are laws that define certain rights and responsibilities for both landlord and tenant.

Of course, the property may not be owned by an individual. It may be owned by multiple individuals through a corporation or partnership, or it may be held by another organization such as a trust. These property owners will decide among themselves how grants of rights to property will be assigned to others. In other words, it may require unanimous agreement to sell or lease property, it may require a majority vote, or one person may be given authority over all decisions. This can complicate the use or sale of private property when the owner is physically remote or decision-making authority is distributed to a large number of people. A common example of this is when land is inherited by multiple heirs to an estate, some of whom may be difficult to locate or do not know they have a share in the property. It may be very difficult and costly in these cases to put this land to productive or community-supporting use.

Besides the problems of shared ownership, two other conditions may cause the under-use of urban land: foreclosure and stalled development. In foreclosure, property is seized by another party because the owner did not fulfill their obligations. Obviously the most commonly-known example is when a home is foreclosed because the owner hasn't made mortgage loan payments on time. Commercial properties can also be foreclosed because the owner, often a developer, failed to meet loan obligations. It can also happen when owners do not pay property taxes or violate other types of laws. Depending on the foreclosing institution, these properties can be very difficult to resolve. A bank or lender may not want to sell a property at a loss, it may be overwhelmed by the sheer number of foreclosed properties it controls, or there may be legal challenges to the foreclosure itself, which must be resolved before the property can be subsequently sold. Foreclosure is one reason that proposed developments – often on prominent urban sites – can stall, but there are many others. Most of these relate to the ability of the developer to obtain financing for the cost of his project. In other cases, the developer may face unexpected opposition to the proposed use, find unexpected environmental conditions on the site, or simply go out of business as a result of other development failures. In all cases, the property may remain abandoned or cleared for a very long time while the developer seeks solutions to his problems: by finding a buyer for the site, coming up with a different use and development plan, resolving political opposition, or obtaining needed financing.

These sites, where complications to the ownership of private property prevents the productive use of a piece of land, are very commonly targeted by the DIY-er for better community use, even if temporary. However it may not be as simple as getting permission from the owner. For one, there may be many owners of the property. Secondly, the owner/s may be under restrictions by their bank, lender, or insurance company, that prevent them from temporarily turning over the site to a different use. Lastly, owners of stalled or failed sites are often endlessly optimistic. They expect to begin moving forward or to sell the property at any time, and they don't want to encumber this by granting temporary rights to other users.

**Privately owned “public” space.** As the Occupy protest movement has illustrated since 2011, cities are increasingly filled with land that looks and acts like public space but is actually controlled by private entities. Many of these spaces, in the form of plazas and mini-parks, were created by developers in exchange for permission to build as they wanted: a certain use, a certain density, etc. While they are broadly required to allow public access to the space, these requirements are difficult to enforce. The owner may limit uses beyond what would be allowed on public land, especially when it comes to political protest. They may forcibly remove certain users without the benefit of due process. And, perhaps most importantly, they are not accountable to the public that uses this space. They have no incentive or responsibility to provide proper accommodations on the site, respond to public suggestions or criticisms, or allow new uses as the needs of the community change. For all of these reasons, it's important for the DIY-er to monitor how semi-private spaces are being created, what authority public officials retain over them, and what mechanisms exist to ensure the space exists for the public good.

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What is DIY urbanism? For the purposes of our work, we're defining this movement as citizen-generated alterations of the built environment that are intended to improve the public realm or put under-utilized space in service to the community. Put simply, through DIY urbanism, residents of the city reimagine and re-create the world around them — with or without asking permission. This definition is purposefully inclusive so as to encompass the sheer range of urban interventions being carried out (inter)nationally.

Some North American examples are “pinned” on the map below, with goals ranging from increasing open space to decreasing reliance on the automobile. Zoom in to see more actions for each city, click for more information, and feel free to share any examples you find interesting!
A caveat: While the map above appears to represent DIY urbanist actions as isolated, singular events, this is misleading. Most initiatives are planned with replication in mind, and some have already become movements, rather than one-off projects: San Francisco’s Park(ing) Day is perhaps the most well-known example, having spread internationally. (It even has its own manual, providing guidelines for new interventionists.)

To better understand the challenges and opportunities DIY urbanists take on, we conducted a series of interviews with the folks behind some well-known initiatives. Their experiences and commentary inform our analysis of this movement.

**Current Conditions >>**

_header photo: A Dallas-based Better Block Project, under construction. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Jennifer Conley.)_
Since the very first cities, people have always organized among themselves to improve their homes, neighborhoods, and broader communities; DIY urbanism is as old as cities themselves. However, the recent uptick in activity is attributable to several newly converging factors. Financial limitations mean many large projects – some designed to revitalize neighborhoods – have been put on hold, leaving idle land (and hands) for new projects. In the context of economic recession, frustrations about existing social and political issues have reached a fever pitch. There is a renewed willingness to get involved and, literally, do things yourself where your local government may not have the resources to. It hardly even needs to be mentioned that the ever-increasing ways of connecting with like-minded people on the Internet – from Facebook to Kickstarter to blog networks – also efficiently spread ideas and inspiration across communities and between timezones.

Critically, DIY urbanists recognize that they do not need to appeal to an outside force to improve their space. They are willing to experiment with the conditions of the city independently, in lieu of working with an existing process or program that may be overly time-consuming or costly for their purposes. Toronto's Urban Repair Squad takes this to an extreme, at times impersonating road workers in their quest to add bike lanes, bike boxes, and sharrows to their city's streets. Frequently, acts of DIY urbanism occur in an extralegal space – what multiple representatives referred to in our talks as a "code vacuum." These projects are often challenging to define. Many exist somewhere between parks and streets, such as San Francisco's Pavement to Parks, which converts city parking spaces into mini-parks with the addition of designer-created deck structures.

Given their unique qualities, projects are frequently funded on an ad hoc basis, often through a combination of creators' personal investments and material donations. Tight funding, coupled with the temporary nature of many of these projects, also leads to the use of materials that are more easily found, repurposed, and disposed of. The fact is, unlike city bureaucracies, funding isn't the first problem that comes to the mind of the DIY-er. To control costs, creative energy is invested in the process of design and selection of materials rather than the search for grants and the identification of funding streams.
The provisional nature of such projects can be beneficial or a source of conflict. Many projects do not fit the conventional definition of "temporary" – they are installed for weeks to months, or are set up on a once-weekly or once-monthly basis – but are also decidedly impermanent, perhaps treated as an interim use of space until a more profitable or otherwise preferable project comes along. This provisional zone creates some level of stability for the project and its visitors, but also locates projects outside of existing permitting processes. San Francisco’s Proxy initiative offers one example of how to turn this potential challenge into an opportunity. When a multi-unit housing project was put on hold in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the Mayor’s office offered architects Envelope A+D a temporary lease on the lots the development would have occupied — in return for an innovative use of the site. Envelope delivered an ever-evolving commercial project housed in shipping containers, and compromised with the city’s building department on what a “temporary” permit would mean for the space: more than the 90 days granted a typical temporary project, but with non-conditioned spaces.

As many interventionists reported, creating these projects – often temporary, and usually in a space imperfectly shaped by existing regulatory systems – affects the way they approach their work, generating new models for action. These new processes are, as mentioned above, deeply context-specific. They are also iterative, or “alive”: the intervention changes both in the planning stage and often post-implementation, with constant tweaking to adjust factors that don't seem to be working. Proxy is designed to house a changing slate of vendors; San Francisco’s parklets are intended to be adaptable, given their low cost and quick implementation processes.

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Header photo: One of San Francisco’s well-used curbside “parklet” projects. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Jeremy Shaw.)
Although DIY-ers stressed that every project is unique, some common themes emerged in the discussion of what kinds of urban settings — physical, social, and political — make for especially vibrant and effective projects. It is important to recognize that these themes interact and overlap with one another: for example, context-specificity is an especially central factor, as it includes physical features (like access to a site, or design of the surrounding area), political elements (mayoral support), and social context (neighbors’ opinions).

- **Physical access:** Essentially, if people cannot get to the project site – if people will not be able to interact with a given intervention – it will be less effective. While DIY urbanist projects can enliven an otherwise underused space, if often helps if they are in proximity to pedestrians or another popular site. Related to this, it helps to be working with a visible space, one that is open to community members both physically and visually. LEAF’s five Urban Forest Demonstration Gardens fulfill both of these conditions: they are located adjacent to Toronto metro stations, with garden locations chosen in part based on maximal visibility (among other factors, such as the presence of a good volunteer base in the area to maintain the projects).

- **Community interest:** Would-be DIY urbanists typically have a goal in mind, an interest un-met by the current design or use of a space. Ideally, this goal will be shared by neighbors of the project, or even officially backed by an existing neighborhood group: for example, Portland’s City Repair projects are often spearheaded by groups of neighbors. If that goal is not shared, or if the project itself bothers neighbors, this can result in challenges to, or even the cancellation of, the project. This is not to ignore the importance of projects that shake up common conceptions of space: some DIY urbanist programs are intended to protest existing conditions, to generate friction and (hopefully) productive dialogue around those conditions.
Portland's City Repair brings neighborhoods together for intersection-painting, creating gathering spaces in their community. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Sara Dent.)

- **Relationship-building:** Although one of the benefits of DIY urbanist projects is the activation of social capital at the local level, the relationships we refer to here are between city officials and staff, and interventionists. For those whose DIY projects are expressions of larger, underlying goals, partnering with the city is the best hope of achieving more systemic change. Time and again, project coordinators reported that a “champion” was critical to their project's success: a department-head, a city commissioner, a councilman, the president of a planning commission. Alternatively, where projects are city-initiated, a steering committee that includes all departments with jurisdiction over the product can create the needed network of relationships.

- **Executive support:** Most of the interventionists interviewed operated under a “strong mayor” (or “mayor-council”) political system, but even those which didn't reported the importance of mayoral support in successfully carrying out projects. Mayors have helped to publicize projects, both among city staff and throughout the city. They have also smoothed projects' progress through other departments, particularly powerful or more conservative ones, and sped up permitting processes. Finally, mayors' post-election agenda-setting has helped to create climates in which these projects can thrive. Despite the primacy of mayors, it is important that all departments understand the shape and purpose of urban interventions. Viva Vancouver offers a particularly clear example: the political climate for the project was created with the election of a new mayor, but it takes a steering committee of representatives from a range of city departments to target interventions.

- **Context-specificity:** As designed interventions, DIY urbanist projects are dependent on their physical context – but also on the willingness of surrounding populations to live with them, and on the political culture within which they are initiated. Those planning these projects must be aware of all of the conditions within which their project will live, and those conditions should shape their project’s appearance, scale, timeframe, et cetera. While CMG’s Parkmobiles cannot be considered traditional DIY urbanist projects — created as part of a larger street life plan for San Francisco's Yerba Buena district — the objects themselves are designed to suit a range of settings within the diverse neighborhood, from less-trafficked industrial spaces to highly-visited tourist areas.

![](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

The utilitarian Parkmobile is both mobile and visually compatible with multiple environments. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Curbed SF.)

- **Existing energy:** Finally, multiple interventionists reported the importance of building on existing events and energy. In the aftermath of the 2010 Winter Olympics, which led to rerouted transit and increased walking, Vancouver rediscovered pedestrian life, creating energy for the development of Viva Vancouver. Later, Viva Vancouver staff took advantage of a protracted bus rerouting (and their transit authority's support) to install a large public structure. Taking advantage of energy can occur at the site scale, too. Although many projects are intended to enliven underused spaces, others (particularly parklet/plaza-based programs) build on existing pedestrian or bike activity, or nearby events and uses, as in the case of Streets for People's pilot project, the Sunset Triangle Plaza. The Plaza is located adjacent to a small park that hosts a regular farmers market, and is open to nearby cafes that see many pedestrian/bike visitors from surrounding residential areas.

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*Header photo: Perhaps Viva Vancouver's most visually distinctive project, Picnurbia provides space for sitting, reclining, or perhaps (as the name suggests) picnicking. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Wendy Cutler.)*
On the most basic level, DIY urbanism is well-suited to addressing day-to-day livability concerns, related to both physical and social issues. Many of the projects we've identified are responses to a perceived need for increased open space, for decreasing reliance on the automobile, for repurposing underused (or negatively used) vacant lots. Such projects have the potential for both immediate and long-term environmental and economic benefits. DIY urbanism, then, may provide new — and frequently, cheap! — ways of responding to old problems, quickly and effectively. These responses are experimental and reversible. In this way, would-be urban interventionists can change conditions quickly, providing temporary, adjustable solutions. If a project doesn't work, it can be easily removed or improved. This possibility has been especially important for Viva Vancouver: physical interventions can be adopted quickly, sidestepping some (if not all) public process requirements. The case for DIY urbanist projects can be enhanced by undertaking intentional projects that are targeted to specific change — and that have outcomes that are verifiable through later evaluation. In most cases, such evaluation has not yet occurred.

The DIY urbanist process as practiced by organizations like Depave and City Repair also provides new opportunities for social interaction and community-building. By working together on a physical project that improves their environment, and overcoming the challenges of the aforementioned “code vacuum” that many DIY urbanists face, neighbors forge new connections and a collective sense of purpose. They may also develop a sense of ownership for the spaces they share, leading to future involvement in the public sphere and an unwillingness to let those spaces be violated. With Depave, schools, churches, and residential communities volunteer together to remove unneeded concrete or asphalt parking lots, converting them into green spaces; City Repair’s range of projects include placemaking efforts like repainting intersections to serve as community gathering places. In both cases, the execution of a project may take only a day or two — but, by working together, new relationships are formed and existing ones strengthened, creating connections that can be leveraged for future projects.

DIY urbanism also offers a new way for citizens (organized individuals, groups, businesses, et cetera) to convey information to planners and public officials, signaling community interests and desired programs with actions rather than words. For communities that are already well-organized advocates for themselves, neighborhood-based physical interventions are a new way of demonstrating a commitment to, for example, pedestrian-bike infrastructure or community greening.
However, DIY urbanism creates a space for the less vocal, too. Where individuals or communities feel politically disempowered or lack financial resources, urban interventions can offer an outlet that is concrete, often exciting, and, as mentioned above, can strengthen community linkages. Baltimore's ARTBlocks was started with just such a mission: providing underserved, disenfranchised communities with the opportunity to come together and beautify their neighborhood.

In both cases, projects initiated at the DIY level may be taken up as part of city programs, as they capture public attention or as group leaders build relationships with city staff. At its best, DIY urbanism can reinvigorate urban citizens, reawakening their civic spirit through the creation of often small, but real, changes to their world, and reminding them of the possibilities of public space and public participation. In this way, DIY urbanism dovetails with existing movements towards increased localization. These projects take place at the local level – a level that it is politically (and economically) feasible for interventionists to shape, and the level that has the most direct effect on their well-being.

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Header photo: DoTank:Brooklyn's "chairbombing" (using repurposed pallets) adds needed seating to public spaces quickly and cheaply. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Fabienne Knefel.)

Although many DIY-ers cited strong city-interventionist relationships as critical to project success, certain policy challenges became recurring topics of conversation among both independent groups and city representatives. The following general summary briefly addresses primary concerns, which are more specifically highlighted on individual project pages.

- **Permitting:** Again, given that these projects frequently happen in a regulatory vacuum, they live outside of existing permitting processes. Where a city requires permits, DIY urbanist projects are often shoehorned into those processes—which may be confusing and overly cost- and time-intensive, particularly for projects meant to be quick, cheap, and temporary, or for smaller groups that lack resources. (This is not to say that fee structures are unnecessary: they do ensure that project coordinators are fully committed.) One specific permitting challenge is the definition of “temporary.” Many DIY urbanist projects fall somewhere on a spectrum, in between “special event” and “temporary” (whatever the municipality’s definition of the term: in San Francisco, three months), or between “temporary” and “permanent.”
- **Property ownership:** DIY urbanist projects often find a home either in public space, or in places with questionable futures, such as lots intended for projects that have been put on hold due to the recession. Projects have benefited from the provision of temporary leases, or leases at competitive (lower) rates, that ensure manageable site control at least for the duration of the project.
- **Health/safety:** Where untested or unconventional materials are used—for these untested, unconventional projects!—new health and safety issues tend to arise. Additionally, atypical structures may raise safety or ADA concerns, as may projects in the right-of-way. Wherever safety concerns emerge, the specter of liability is not far behind, which cities organizing such projects to consider.
- **Existing traffic/transit/parking:** Many DIY urbanist projects live in the public right-of-way, where they may interfere with existing traffic patterns. In particular, the disruption of transit routes quickly raises complaints. Projects may also use metered parking spaces, leading to a loss of revenue and parking options.
- **Maintenance/upkeep:** Most of those we interviewed had plans for keeping projects maintained, but for less-organized groups, or individuals running a project on their own, this is an important factor to consider, in part because poorly-maintained projects can generate ill will or lead to the loss of resources.

For those DIY urbanists not trying to work within the rules, there is a fine line between public art and graffiti, and between vandalism and design interventions—a line that urbanists may find themselves on the “wrong” side of, in the eyes of city staff and officials. How can DIYers and city staff find ways to move forward, together?

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ARTBlocks

Deborah Patterson (Director)

Baltimore, MD

Interventionist: Nonprofit

Started in 2007, ARTBlocks is a Baltimore-based arts nonprofit: Patterson brings creative placemaking techniques to neighborhoods, helping them reinvent and reconnect with their public spaces through collaborative art projects.

The idea: As Patterson observed in her previous work, “The human drive is to create. Underserved neighborhoods don’t have an opportunity to do that...Often the people who live in a city are left out of city planning decisions, and decisions are made for them, and again, I feel it's extremely powerful to include people in those kinds of decisions.” Those decisions include actions that shape the built environment and appearance of cities.

The challenges: Originally, Patterson faced political complications that led her to shift the program’s geographic focus. Now, her largest challenge is explaining the placemaking process to neighborhood residents, helping them understand the potential of their public spaces. It's important to Patterson that she not “be perceived as someone coming in and saying, ‘I have the answers.’ It’s more that I have a tool that I was trained in and want to bring.” While she notes that building truly collaborative working relationships can slow down the interventionist process, that teamwork is essential to ARTBlocks’ approach.

The outcome: ARTBlocks has initiated several projects in Druid Hill Park and its environs, introducing creative placemaking to these neighborhoods – and receiving a positive response. Patterson was also involved with a recent guerrilla crosswalk-painting action.

The bigger picture: “I’m hoping it will lead to empowerment in the community. Placemaking hasn’t been done so much at the underserved level. At the planning [city government] level, they have money and support. But in the underserved communities, lots of folks can’t even sustain their lives, much less a project...I think ultimately, with a critical mass of projects, if you’re really focused in one area and you start making that area more and more and more positive, hopefully it’ll spread farther out.”
April 5, 2012

**Bus Roots**

Marco Castro (Creator)

New York, NY

**Interventionist: Independent actor**

*Bus Roots* began as Castro's 2010 thesis project for NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program; the project is intended to provide a new way for people to create green spaces in their communities. It currently exists as a 225-lb, 15 sf green roof on the BioBus, which provides science education programs for public school students.

The idea: “I looked at different projects people had been creating – moving farms, urban gardening. I was thinking, how can we make arteries be covered in green? There's a space in the buses, can we take over that? It was interesting to see how you can have plants moving.”

The challenges: The initial complications of this project were primarily technical and ecological: How can a green roof be made as lightweight as possible, to minimize fuel use? Will plants survive the conditions of a moving roof? When Castro approached city transit staff, they also raised liability concerns: Would plants or other materials start flying off the vehicle? (So far, the answer is no: all elements are securely bolted down.)

The outcome: “One of the requisites for my thesis was that I had to test it out and see what people think about it, so I started with the BioBus: a 50 square foot roof garden using sedum.” Castro continues to experiment, with the help of researchers, and hopes to get green roofs on city transit vehicles when a new, lighter-weight, easy-to-install model is developed.

The bigger picture: “I'm focusing on Bus Roots, but kind of treating it as a platform. I'm interested in talking about food issues in the city. How can we use food for interaction? How can we create communities that pop up in different spaces where we need them?... The Internet is breaking down divisions. There's a lot of DIY, a lot of people making things. I think this project kind of goes along those lines. It's not a top-down project. It's kind of from the grassroots. No pun intended!”
April 5, 2012

Depave

Maia Nativ (Development coordinator)

Portland, OR

Interventionist: Nonprofit

Started in 2007 as a City Repair project, Depave became an independent organization in 2011. The group removes concrete and asphalt from urban areas around Portland, replacing former parking lots and pavements with green space.

The idea: Depave started when a founding member conducted his own home pavement removal, replacing his driveway with fruit trees. Further projects indicated that there was an as-yet untapped community interest in this kind of work.

The challenges: A primary challenge is the permitting process, which is currently fairly lengthy and expensive – and not tailored to the kind of work Depave does. Nativ explains, “When we tried to submit permits for our first couple sites, the City literally didn’t know what to do with us. What is this? We would be submitting a building permit but we’re not building anything...That process took a while, and I think it took them a while to trust us as this little nonprofit to really go in and do this kind of work.” Now, Depave has a good working relationship with the City, which is supportive of their work, particularly as it pertains to stormwater objectives. Ongoing maintenance of newly created green spaces is another barrier to conducting more projects: it is difficult to find volunteers that can commit to monitoring a site for the long-term.

The outcome: Prospective sites are evaluated based on community support, visibility, and the availability of grants, among other factors. Depave has worked with public and private schools, churches, and other community groups to produce new green spaces – many incorporating community or rain gardens. Nativ notes: “We see that parking lots that have been transformed into gardens are now being used, as opposed to before, they were just sitting there with sometimes negative use.”

The bigger picture: “I think people are starting to look at dead space that can actually be used to grow food, now that everybody talks about this food crisis and the oil crisis. I think there’s a lot of that. There’s a lot more awareness about the connection between stormwater runoff and clean rivers and fish and the ocean. Just an awareness of this bigger picture and how we can start at a small scale. I think a lot of people are seeing that, and seeing that they can make a difference.”
April 5, 2012

Mobile Pools

Rebecca Birmingham (Senior project manager)

New York, NY

Interventionist: Design firm

Design firm Macro Sea's Mobile Pools project was initiated in 2009 as “Dumpster Pools.” As the name suggests, dumpsters are converted into mobile, swimmable spaces, suitable for independent installation or for clustering as part of a larger program.

The idea: The group's objectives in creating the project were “to experiment with underused space, to reuse everyday materials, and to repurpose the urban environment with renewal in mind.”

The challenges: After the project's first, most informal incarnation – once the City became aware of the project – liability concerns and code-compliance became a greater issue, particularly from the Department of Health. Macro Sea faced “restrictions on how far the pools had to be from an electrical source, submitting detailed plans to several of the city agencies, along with a safety plan, hiring lifeguards, maximum occupancy, etc. A lot of this work had to be done each time the pools were set up, since evacuation plans, etc, would be different for each site.”

The outcomes: The pools have since been a part of city events like New York's Summer Streets, and Macro Sea has been “continually updating the design to make the pools more mobile, easier to set up, and more accessible to the public...Anywhere you have a flat surface, you can have a dumpster pool. The different projects we've had have shown that the pools are very versatile – they work in a highly controlled environment where kids can safely swim (as at Summer Streets) or at crazy nighttime parties thrown by art collectives. We're excited to see what opportunities arise for the next use of the pools.”

The bigger picture: “People are excited to experiment with new ideas in order to make ends meet right now, and part of that is reimagining their surroundings and questioning their preconceptions. A lot of Macro Sea's projects fall in line with this rethinking process.”
April 5, 2012

Parkmobiles

Calder Gillin (Designer)

San Francisco, CA

Interventionist: Landscape architecture firm

CMG’s Parkmobile is only the first step of a Street Life Plan developed for the Yerba Buena Community Benefits District (YBCBD): a mobile dumpster-turned-planter, custom-built to include a curbside bench.

The idea: “The Parkmobile is a project that we invented as a fast, straightforward, and relatively easy and inexpensive way to implement an idea that was important to the Street Life Plan. This wasn’t a ‘do-it-yourself’ project at all, and I think it captures that spirit which we understand as being really popular and appealing right now, at least in San Francisco, of this fast, cheap, and dirty approach to urbanism. We think it’s separate because we’re a professional design firm, because we were hired by YBCBD, a nonprofit using a property tax increment given to them by the city to do neighborhood improvement programs.” Given this context, Gillin explains why this was the starting project: “The reason we did this one first was because YBCBD wanted to show an impact right away, to prove to the community that they were going to get things done and were taking it seriously. It was also a PR thing, too. We wanted to make a project, something that was easy to understand, easy to describe to your mom, really imageable, with photographs that spread like wildfire.”

The challenges: Given the project’s larger context – the City of San Francisco, which already has a parklet permitting program (see: Pavement to Parks) – some aspects of Parkmobile implementation that may have been challenging in other cities were fast-tracked. There have been some limitations on the project: Parkmobiles cannot be placed in regulated street parking spaces, and they require curbs or parking spaces that can temporarily be set aside. Their plantings also cannot be taller than seven feet, since the Parkmobiles must be moved on flatbed trucks and should not impede visibility too much within the district.

The outcome: Six parkmobiles are currently stationed in the district, with the hopes that they will be moved every month or two. Gillin explains: “Owners or tenants can get in touch with YBCBD, who’s managing this program, and request one. And when you request a Parkmobile, you have to sign up for keeping it clean. There’s a little bit of commitment. So where they are now, their locations reflect the first or second generation of people that reached out to the CBD. Our hope is that they’ll catch on and people will create demand for them...This is all reinforced through the parklet permitting process. We have a permit for the whole district for two years.”
The bigger picture: “I think as a firm, we want to reach out to and inspire lots of different types of people, clients, and students, and this project in a lot of ways was similar to what artists are doing out in the street, more unorganized and tactical efforts – but it is part of a plan that is a much bigger thing. These approaches to urbanism are actually all on a continuum: a big plan to realign streets or eliminate lanes of traffic, whatever the biggest projects are, on one end of the spectrum, and Parkmobiles on the other. They represent the same goals and values and strategies. This is not a new idea, and to us we don’t think of this as cutting edge or anything that special. It’s just a different expression of something that people have believed in for a really long time: comfort for pedestrians.”

Gillin also urges a critical approach to these kinds of projects: “I think there’s a risk of giving control or influence over not just the way everything looks, but the way things actually work – these projects shouldn’t sacrifice the potential for the public realm to serve as a public realm for everybody. They can end up controlling or making a territory out of the public realm while degrading the idea of it as permanent infrastructure – this isn’t Facebook or Myspace. It’s permanent civic infrastructure. It’s not that we think these projects are bad, but sometimes there’s a lack of criticalness about the role of these projects and how they affect our lives in the city.”
April 5, 2012

Pavement to Parks

Paul Chasan (Urban designer)

San Francisco, CA

Interventionist: City

San Francisco's Pavement to Parks is a national leader in parklet programs. Via Pavement to Parks, the City provides permits to businesses and organizations interested in converting adjacent parking spots into mini-parks, and works on creating experimental, low-cost plazas out of leftover urban spaces. As Chasan puts it: "This program is about helping people reimagine the public right-of-way with quick, urban acupuncture-like interventions to the streets. We help them imagine that streets are about more than moving cars."

The idea: "When the program started, it was through Janette Sadik-Khan. She met with some city officials and challenged San Francisco to mimic what New York was doing. We started this program and then the plazas component was the first piece...We all sat around and brainstormed some plaza locations based on our experience working in the city. The challenge was to deliver public spaces within the right of way that we could implement quickly."

The challenges: Chasan notes that "In the beginning, the challenge from the City with getting something like this off the ground is there's no regulatory infrastructure to deal with it. It's a new thing. They live in this in-between space between parks and streets. They're in this nebulous place where there's no section in the city code about it. All these details needed to be figured out about how to regulate, permit, maintain....These spaces don't really fall under any sort of code, so if there are problems it's impossible to address them." For the parklets, city staff had to develop a feasible permitting process for local business-owners to engage with. In terms of public response, Pavement to Parks has had to grapple with two main complaints: “people who are upset about the removal of parking, which is fundamental to the nature of the program, and people who are upset about the privatization of public space.”

The outcome: Chasan reports that, “the program is being accepted and embraced by the City's bureaucracy. Having a permit in place, parklets are easier to digest.” With this process, the city issues an RFP for parklets, then sorts through the applicants to choose a limited subset of projects. Once chosen, public notice and permitting processes are initiated for each site. The business-owner interested in a parklet is responsible for the maintenance, capital costs, and liability. Parklets have taken off in some commercial corridors now than others, but are beginning to appear in outer-ring neighborhoods.
The bigger picture: Chasan reports that the program is widening in scope, looking at projects that incorporate pop-up retail as well as broader streetscape improvements: median and/or parking lane extensions, traffic calming programs, et cetera. He points to Parkmobiles as one example of how the program could be pushed forward.

Posted by mdekle.
April 5, 2012

**PHS Pops Up**

*Alan Jaffe (Public relations manager)*

**Philadelphia, PA**

**Interventionist: Nonprofit**

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society is well known for projects ranging from the Philadelphia Flower Show to Philadelphia Green, which includes vacant lot maintenance, among other urban greening initiatives. Last year, the nonprofit ventured into the “pop-up” world with a series of three garden installations in highly visible pockets of Philadelphia.

The idea: The intention of PHS Pops Up was to draw attention to the organization's programs. Two of the installations – a group of carousel animals made out of plant materials at Logan Square, and a collection of tropical greenery around the PHS headquarters – promoted the annual flower show. The third, at 20th and Market, was a pop-up community garden in support of the City Harvest program. This garden featured a variety of activities – tai chi and yoga classes, programs from the Franklin Institute, regular tours – to draw visitors.

The challenges: PHS worked with the City and Brandywine Realty Trust to access the pieces of land involved. The organization had to get permission to use water sources in the area and set up signage to promote the spaces. However, as PHS has well-established relationships with many city agencies already – given their existing programs – these processes went smoothly: “Any project that we're going to consider, first is going to be cleared with the City and make sure it's something they feel comfortable with as well.”

The outcome: Jaffe reports that the pop-up installations were a success: “The carousel animals brought a lot of attention to Logan Square. People were looking at it in a new way. The biggest success was the pop-up garden. People love that we transformed what was a vacant lot into a beautiful garden. It brought attention to how you can take a piece of vacant land and make it something.” This spot in particular has been vacant for 20 years; there were recent plans for development that never happened because of economic conditions. Looking forward, PHS would like to continue the program and is in talks about potential projects for coming seasons. They are particularly interested in finding “different ways of intermingling art and horticulture.”

The bigger picture: “The idea of the pop-up is that it's temporary, to raise awareness – not necessarily to make a permanent project, but to make people aware of what they can do in their backyards – what is possible.”
Interventionist: City

Still in development – having just started their first pilot project, the Sunset Triangle Plaza – Streets for People is an initiative to increase Los Angeles’ walkability and livability through interventions in the built environment. In the case of Sunset Triangle Plaza, that meant closing a redundant street connection, painting the pavement polka-dotted green, and adding movable chairs.

The idea: “Los Angeles' Department of Public Health had a program called ‘RENEW’ [Renewing Environments for Nutrition, Exercise and Wellness] about the built environment and the fight against obesity. They were looking at [this project] as a way to cause a paradigm shift within the built environment and also create an active recreational space that could decrease obesity in a parks-poor area. That’s where the impetus came from, and Streets for People was put together as an ad hoc group.” Peccianti also notes that the Los Angeles Planning Commission president, Bill Roschen, was key in initiating the project.

The challenges: As with similar initiatives, some of the main concerns for the implemented project are the perceived loss of parking (although spots were created along a nearby street to compensate for the loss) and the potential for site users to loiter or make noise after-hours, given that the surrounding neighborhood is both commercial and residential. Earlier, in the design stage, issues of visually demarcating the space and protecting pedestrians from surrounding traffic needed to be considered and overcome. As for project administration, multiple departments had jurisdiction over the proposed plaza area; communication was required to coordinate their different responsibilities in relation to the project. Peccianti acknowledges that, “there were a lot of questions initially – and rightly so – about what this project was going to be, what it was going to look like, how it was going to get done. It was really helpful to us because some questions I wouldn't necessarily think about – I'm not an engineer.”

The outcome: So far, the space has received generally positive responses, and a good deal of use: “There is going to be programming, but I think the great thing about the space itself is that it’s really conducive to spontaneous events. There’s an elementary school a block and a half away, and we found that lots of kids are stopping by afterschool and playing basketball. There was a tai chi class that happened, some book readings...The moveable tables and chairs are really important to us. People are adjusting these lightweight tables and chairs in the sun and shade, to...
gather as a group.” The plaza may also provide a boost for adjacent businesses: “We really worked hard to create a successful public space that would really be a boon to local businesses – a place that people would want to linger and spend time. If you create a space that many different groups of all ages and backgrounds feel comfortable, they’ll linger, and as they linger, they’ll patronize local businesses.”

The bigger picture: “I’m just overwhelmed every time I go by the site and see people in it, see people using the space, dragging chairs so they can sit with their friends. I really think that the visual element of planning is so important. You can talk about these projects until you’re blue in the face, but what’s so exciting to me about these temporary projects is they can be done really quickly and people can see what a paradigm shift can look like.”
April 5, 2012

Urban Forest Demonstration Gardens

Jessica Piskorowski (Education + Stewardship Coordinator)

Toronto, ON

Interventionist: Nonprofit

Toronto's LEAF (Local Enhancement + Appreciation of Forests) has existed since 1996, supporting urban forest creation and stewardship. Their Urban Forest Demonstration Gardens were created more recently, with the first of the five plots planted in 2010.

The idea: "We wanted to create some more hands-on opportunities for graduates of our training programs. We wanted some stewardship sites: not just a one-off planting, but something in their neighborhood so that they could have a sense of ownership of it...It was kind of the brainchild of someone high up at TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] and our executive director. He [TTC representative] was interested in making underused areas of turf that they had on their properties into something a little nicer. They decided that having some hardy native species – trees, shrubs, and perennials – was a good way to approach it."

The challenges: Although the TTC and LEAF have a good working relationship, finding appropriate sites can be a challenge. Piskorowski explains: "The TTC has their standards: utilities, what's in their ground, planned construction, whether they can give time to the site with maintenance staff. They give a lot of in-kind time and work for us preparing all the sites." TTC also approves the planting plans to make sure that no digging or root systems will interfere with their buried utilities. LEAF has their own criteria as well, including ensuring there are enough volunteers in the neighborhood to take good care of the site (particularly in the first couple of years), having good visibility, and perhaps most critically, having water access.

The outcome: Five gardens have been planted, and all sites are still maintained. The gardens also receive positive responses from neighbors, according to Piskorowski: "Our volunteers are always saying when they're out there working on the gardens, people stop by and say thank you all the time, just for planting and beautifying the area. People e-mail with suggestions for future plantings, what species they'd like to see."

The bigger picture: "Part of our mission as an organization is to raise awareness, which the gardens factor into. We have signage at them explaining what they're there for, and explaining the partnership between LEAF and TTC. That's huge for raising awareness of what an urban forest
is and how you can transform a space. From a community standpoint, part of our mission is to foster community engagement and a sense of ownership. We've seen a huge outpouring of support from people who have just walked by, and the volunteers on site – some get really attached to the space.”

Posted by mdekle.
Since the mid-2000s, Toronto-based Urban Repair Squad has inspired bike activists internationally with their guerrilla street-painting: they add bike lanes, sharrows, and traffic calming features to urban streets to strengthen bike-ped infrastructure and increase safety.

The idea: “[The group] was born out of the frustration at government officials and City Council passing proposals and plans with millions of dollars attached that didn’t do anything. Five years later, not a single kilometer had been made – [Urban Repair Squad thought] how hard can it be? We can do all of these things by going out and painting all these bike lanes ourselves…Their modus operandi is more along the way of looking at desire lines. From what I’ve seen, everything that is installed comes from looking at what the community needs that could be provided in a very straightforward, simplistic, non-bureaucratic way, not causing harm.”

The challenges: Urban Repair Squad does not have direct communication with the City. Although some of the group’s work is embraced and either left intact or replaced with City-created versions, other additions are scrubbed away, sometimes even the same day.

The outcome: Urban Repair Squad projects typically involve street-painting or installations that carve out space for bicyclists and (less frequently) pedestrians on city streets. Reis notes, “In some cases, it almost seems like the City has tried to adopt some of the ideas of Urban Repair Squad, like Urban Repair Squad were the first people to put in bike boxes. Soon enough, there were bike boxes here and there. They always seemed to be one step ahead in terms of their ideas than the City. That’s what they’re about: to put out new, interesting ideas. This can be done cheaply, it’s not rocket science…All you have to do is get a gallon of paint and a giant slow stencil and you’ll improve safety.”

The bigger picture: “There’s this battle for public space among advertisers, developers, the City. People say ‘Hey – what about us? What can we do?’ Instead of just saying, ‘Write a letter to your councilor and sign a petition,’ we’re saying no. We’re going to show you. It may not last, but it’s going to be functional and address everyone’s concerns…how can you beat that? It’s pretty gutsy.”
Viva Vancouver

Krisztina Kassay (Planner)

Vancouver, BC

Interventionist: City

Viva Vancouver started in the summer of 2009 with a series of Sunday street closures. The (mostly) positive response led the city to organize a larger initiative, and the program has continued, producing projects that activate innovative, temporary public spaces.

The idea: With the election of new leadership in 2008 came new agenda-setting for Vancouver: "One of the goals they set out very early on was that they wanted to make Vancouver the greenest city in the world by 2020. They rolled out some quick actions... Vancouver was inspired by cities that had done stuff like that as well. One-day special events like street fairs were really popular. The thinking was, geez, our one-day special events are really popular. Toronto's doing this... why don't we try something like that?" The popularity of these initial attempts was reinforced when, during the Winter Olympics, "There was this collective 'aha' moment. People fell in love with walking on the street. It was a key moment in people's experience of the public realm." Now, Kassay notes, "Our goal is to try to make some of this stuff easier to do for community groups if they want to try to take on temporary public space."

The challenges: The program's primary challenges revolve around ensuring that these projects can be carried out successfully, without interfering with different city department's activities: for example, getting in the way of bus routes. A steering committee was assembled to pull together the needed partners for these kinds of projects — cultural services, social policy, urban planning, engineering, transit, police – and overcome potential political hurdles. Part of Kassay's job is to determine the policy changes that need to be made to enable these kinds of projects in the longer-term. Community reactions can be another hurdle: "Especially when something's new, a lot of time people are just going to say no, I don't want it. Convincing people to be guinea pigs for something is kind of tough... You need to find those right champions within a neighborhood."

The outcome: Kassay provides what she calls the "holy trinity" of public space programming: "Sequencing – does it make sense to close something one a week, for an entire weekend? Scale – is it one block, is it two blocks, five blocks, what's appropriate? And activations or activities. We try to harmonize those three – there's no cookie cutter approach." Kassay also addresses the issue of public reaction: "Once you make a commitment to change a space 24/7, suddenly it's not a one-day special event. It's not here and then gone. Suddenly it's like whoa, wait a sec, what are you doing to my block, to my neighborhood. It needs to be negotiated."
The bigger picture: “We definitely try to put ourselves near areas where there are already lots of people walking. We do not focus on revitalizing a dead zone. To us, there’s no energy there to build on...You have to pinpoint where pedestrian and cycling energy spots are and build on it and make it even better. We start with a good place and make it amazing.”

*Header photo: On summer weekends, a five-block section of downtown Vancouver’s Granville Street was converted to a pedestrian-only zone. (Image courtesy Viva Vancouver’s Facebook community.)*

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← Pavement to Parks
Where DIY urbanists are interacting with the city bureaucracy, we've found that cities are employing a number of regulatory strategies in response. Perhaps the most common response – especially initially – is to shoehorn these projects within an existing regulatory apparatus (this code, that permit) even where the “fit” is tenuous at best. The Viva Vancouver program and San Francisco’s Proxy have both struggled with the temporary nature of their projects. Uses are provisional and interim rather than a time-delimited “special event.” Portland’s Depave – whose asphalt- and concrete-removal projects are permanent – initially submitted building permits for their projects, causing some confusion among city staff. The nonprofit has since built a relationship with the City, which has helped smooth permitting processes, and has created a policy committee specifically to address such challenges.

In cases where interventions have reached a certain scale or level of stability, city officials have established new review and permitting procedures specifically for them. Cities may also create new processes in an effort to spark specific types of action. San Francisco has established an application process and review criteria for its Pavement to Parks program, where community groups and businesses can apply to convert on-street parking spaces to mini-parks. Among the criteria are community engagement and support, scale drawings, as well as engineering rules that permit the flow of stormwater into gutters and ensure access to fire hydrants and utility easements. In New York City, the longstanding PlayStreets program features an application process and guidance on selecting appropriate streets for recreational closure.

What we've seen so far is thus an initial bureaucratic response followed by piloting and finally policy adaptation. But the phenomenon of DIY urbanism – with its expression of activism at the level of place – offers a new opportunity for design-engagement by the public. By its very nature, such urban interventionism calls into question the traditional approach to land use and building regulation altogether. Cities are responding in the ordinary way with the ordinary tools, but it's worth at least considering whether there is an alternative entirely outside of the normal operating procedure. Good summary of existing stuff/lead-in to our typology.

With this in mind, we outline and offer up for discussion three potential approaches for urban regulatory response to DIY behavior:

- **Piloting** – Cities respond to interventionism within existing regulatory framework but are proactive in identifying which rules will be applied and how.
- **Policy Adaptation** – Cities study their own and other cities’ experiences with DIY urbanism, identify best practices for permitting and review, and adopt new rules. These may either apply only to pre-specified types of interventions or may take the form of improvements to existing code that address a broader range of potential interventions.
- **Property Rights** – Cities define safety and engineering standards in advance and then allow DIY interventions “by right” on property they control (own or lease, with owner permission) and possibly under-utilized, publicly owned spaces. No prior permit is required.

These are not intended as fully-formed policy proposals and they are most certainly not model ordinances. They shouldn't be thought of as three distinct policies but rather as three frameworks for policy. Cities’ responses don't necessarily fall into one (and only one) of the following categories — different projects within a city may elicit different responses. For example, in Portland, City Repair’s projects to reclaim intersections as public squares led to the creation of an intersection repair ordinance (.doc), directly addressing that group’s work. Portland’s Depave, meanwhile, has worked with existing permitting processes and stormwater programs to accomplish its asphalt-removal objectives.

The following pages describe each framework and illustrate how they are already being applied across the continent:
Piloting
Policy Adaptation
Property Rights

Header photo: San Francisco residents declare their intentions for one parking lot at an exhibition organized by SPUR. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Steve Rhodes.)
In the first instance of DIY interventionism, cities often respond in an ad-hoc manner. Something along the following lines may occur:

1. DIY-er does it themselves.
2. Glowing attention from local/social media and design community combined with complaints from neighbors.
3. City says to themselves, “Hey you can't do that.”
4. City figures out why you can't do that.
5. City takes it down or puts it on pause.

What might the 6th step be? In Raleigh, N.C., Walk Raleigh recently experienced steps 1 through 5 almost to a tee. Matt Tomasulo posted some well-designed signs in the public right-of-way that pointed out walking times to various locations. National and international media interviewed Tomasulo and praised the effort. The city’s planning director, Mitch Silver, whose forward thinking helped elect him President of the American Planning Association, delicately balanced the need to enforce city regulations with a welcoming attitude toward the civic-mindedness of the intervention. Silver couldn't identify precisely who was in charge of taking the signs down, so he took them down himself.

Then Silver initiated Step 6. Silver and Tomasulo worked together to create a solution. WalkRaleigh donated the signs to the city, and Silver brought forward a proposal to the City Council allowing a temporary “pilot” posting of the signs in their original locations. Silver asked at a recent conference (link): did Matt do something wrong or is something wrong with our regulations? The answer, it was clear, is the latter.

Cities faced with Raleigh's situation often respond by taking the project down and moving on, but Raleigh's example (as in other cities) points the way toward a proactive approach that not only tolerates but welcomes the civic interventions of its denizens. Cities may fear saying “yes” initially because it implies that they have to say yes every time, when future actions may be less civic-minded and welcome. But by identifying a rule that allows them to say yes, and by gaining the support of a city's elected officials, city administrators have an enforceable stance that can be applied with discretion.

Step 6 identifies rough-and-ready responses that the city can take to both enable the activity and place it within its current regulatory framework. It requires first and foremost high-level visionary leadership to provide support for the effort. Since a pilot will require potentially novel interpretations and applications of existing code, those responsible for enforcement are unlikely to stick their necks out without assurance that they are supported at the highest levels. In cities with strong mayors (council-mayor), this probably requires the direct and vocal support of the mayor. In places governed by council-manager systems, the manager or planning director may have the clout necessary to shepherd the pilot. (See the National League of Cities for an explanation of different forms of municipal governance.)

A city should begin by identifying the appropriate regulatory channels for the action. Is it the building code, an application process for encroachments (into public right-of-way), a special events permit, or something else? They should then identify a point person who is responsible for coordinating with the city bureaucracy so that they understand what the policy is, how it is being applied through existing regulations, and how to respond to interventions when they occur. This coordinator should keep an inventory of regulatory barriers, how they
were resolved, and what might be changed more permanently through policy adaptation.

Following the success of Vancouver’s efforts to activate city spaces for the 2010 Winter Olympics, the city initiated Viva Vancouver as a more permanent vehicle for interventions in streets and public spaces that would promote walking and biking and enhance livability throughout the metro. The city selected a planner as a point person, but placed the program within the city’s engineering department, which was responsible for implementing the actions. They also created a steering committee with representatives from the police, cultural services, social policy, the transit authority, engineering, and planning to ensure that all department’s interests were being met. This program then became the vehicle for testing new DIY urbanist projects: deploying external or City-generated ideas, coordinated among various departments, and evaluating results. Viva Vancouver’s main planning staff-person works beyond committee meetings to identify longer-term policy changes that would enable citizens to create such projects independently.

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Header photo: Two chairs left at a bus stop make for a “pilot” bus shelter. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Robert W. White.)

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Policy Adaptation

The pilot or ad-hoc approach allows a city to get some experience and comfort with DIY interventions before enacting more permanent regulatory change. It may also allow time to see whether the trend in a particular city is growing and enduring or fleeting and isolated. Once a city and DIY-ers have a history of interaction, hopefully they will develop strong channels for communication, trust in one another's positive intentions, and a shared understanding of how regulations should change to accommodate the activity. The pilot coordinator should lead this process with close involvement from public works officials, the city attorney, and political leaders. It may even be necessary to employ code professionals as consultants in the effort. The continuing support of high-level officials, as described in the pilot stage, is crucial. The buy-in of city councilors or aldermen will be of growing importance.

The scale of adaptation can be small and delimited or can it be large and encompassing. In some cases, a minor tweaking of "special events" permits may be required so as to allow temporary (though not necessarily short-term) structures or changes to the right-of-way. San Francisco's Proxy is an effort to provide temporary or interim community development on lots awaiting future development. After the city's Central Freeway was removed, the city was left with valuable new urban space for which it sought opportunities to reinvigorate the surrounding Hayes Valley community. When the economic collapse of 2008 forced the city to put on hold its plans for more affordable housing, San Francisco sought proposals for temporary uses of the vacant land. Envelope A+D won the city's RFP (request for proposals) process with a plan to place shipping containers on a two-block site for use as small shops. Though the project is "temporary", it wasn't the sort of special event that codes and permits for temporary spaces were intended for. As a result, the developer and the city had to identify novel ways to meet existing requirements for things like seismic stability and utility connections. It had to adapt its policy to a new form in the built environment.

In other cases, an entirely new review and permitting regime may be required. San Francisco's Pavement to Parks program involves an
application process with requirements for community input, design and engineering review, and health and safety standards. The administrative costs of the program are covered by application and renewal fees, which amount to around $2500. The conversion of parking spaces to parklets and empty rights-of-way to plazas raised a number of issues that cut across departmental lines. Parklets must be elevated so as to allow the free flow of stormwater into the street’s gutters. This runoff tends to carry litter and debris, so there must be a way to clean out the underside. The city’s transportation department loses out on meter revenues they would have gotten from the parking space. Negotiations led to the replacement of some, but not all, of these foregone revenues. The fire department obviously had to ensure access to its fire hydrants, and the space couldn’t block access to utility easements such as electric meters or manhole covers. Despite these costs and challenges, many businesses sponsor parklets because it provides a pleasant extension of their business. This incentive has to be balanced with the city’s need to ensure that publicly-owned space remains truly public space. Applicants are asked not to provide furniture that is identical to its existing cafe seating, for instance, and cannot reserve the space to exclusive customer use. Finally, the city requires sponsors to carry liability insurance in which the city and county of San Francisco are named as additional insured. Liability is among the first concerns of city officials, though in Vancouver, they are studying the possibility of carrying the required liability insurance directly.

The policy adaptation approach is a lasting response to DIY interventions and probably works best for specifically defined interventions, such as Pavement to Parks or New York’s PlayStreets. However, there are cases in which the appropriate policy adaptation isn’t tied to a particular program but rather changes the rules for everyone engaged in public space. For instance, a number of (usually secretive) groups, including Toronto’s Urban Repair Squad, promote bicycling and walking through extra-legal interventions to the street itself. They paint bicycle lanes, “sharrows”, or artistic and highly visible crosswalks in places where they believe they are most needed. In these cases, the interventionists are protesting cities’ failures of implementation – either through long delays or due to high costs – and the complaint suggests very specific policy responses. City officials could dedicate more funding or speed implementation of bicycle and pedestrian plans. Or, as is suggested by the interventionism, they could empower citizens themselves to take on responsibilities for implementation. Just as one example, if cities can extend policing through “neighborhood watch” programs, why can they not also provide training and rules so that citizens themselves can paint their designated bicycle lanes? Cities could specify the paint to be used and the appropriate signage and symbology (from the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices), then check only for post-hoc compliance.

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Header photo: In New York, streets have been set aside for play for nearly a century. (Image courtesy Creative Commons license from Flickr user Kevan Davis.)
The final policy approach to DIY interventionism is a maximally permissive regime in which citizens are given rights to the spaces they own, either as private property owners or citizens who share ownership of public space. The existing framework for controlling land uses and buildings is justified for two major reasons: that structures must not be dangerous to the people that inhabit them, and that land development entails lasting and irreversible (in the medium-term) change to the urban environment. A “property rights” approach to DIY urbanism satisfies the first requirement (of health and safety) and renders irrelevant the latter concern: the structure (if there is a structure at all) is inherently suggestive and ephemeral. It is intended to provide a sort of experimental bridge between current use and permanent use. It is by its very nature neither lasting nor irreversible.

As far as we know, no city has employed a framework in which DIY interventions are allowed “by right” and without prior review. But the DIY movement represents a fundamental re-thinking of the regulatory regime that governs the built environment. It is a protest not only against the physical condition of the public realm but also against the political and procedural limitations that gives shape and meaning to urban space. For that reason, it’s worth at least considering how a city might transform its regulatory response in such a way that is maximally accommodating to the vision put forth (intentionally or not) by DIY-ers, tactical urbanists, and the interventionist spirit.

In this approach, the city would define the scope of rights available to citizens seeking temporary, provisional, or suggestive changes to urban space. It could do this by first creating a typology of interventions, listing the public interests (especially health and safety) that must be protected in each intervention, and providing explicit allowance for activity within this scope. This typology might be:

1. Markings or signage on the street and in transportation-related rights-of-way.
2. Parks, plazas, and open space made available to the public on under-utilized land. (For example community gardens.)
3. Temporary or interim land uses that contain occupied structures such as shipping containers.
4. Temporary street closures such as PlayStreets or ciclovia, which may be placed within the first class or classified independently.

In each case, a sort of miniature code could be adopted to ensure that each intervention protects the health and safety of users and that other public uses are not unduly obstructed by the intervention. For example, markings on streets would meet universal standards for traffic symbology by using only established icons, fonts, and font sizes. Temporary structures like shipping containers would need to meet federal accessibility rules, requirements for emergency exits, proper electric and utility connections, and adequate ventilation. Permits, if required at all, would be minimal, simple to apply for, speedily processed, and cost a nominal fee. Inspections and code enforcement officials might give a sort of “certificate of occupancy” after work is completed but before it is open to the public, or it could review the project only in response to complaints.

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Header photo: Across the continent, rogue knitters have taken to “bombing” public space with colorful decorations. Whose space is it? (Image)
Communities that want to support DIY activity in the urban environment might start by identifying the spaces they have available for intervention. Planners can begin by using Geographic Information Systems software to identify pieces of land that meet a given set of criteria. This might include zoning designations, whether the lot is vacant, whether it is owned by a public entity, or if it is designated as outdoor or natural space. With this information they can display types of spaces as well as analyze how much land is available and where. They can eventually use these maps to conduct field assessments of sites to understand what's physically present on the site, what environmental conditions (good or bad) may exist, or whether the site is in an undesirable area or contains dangerous refuse. Most importantly, of course, they can find out whether the users or owners of the space would welcome the DIY-er. From these investigations planners could generate a database of land that could eventually be zoned or otherwise targeted for appropriate DIY intervention.

Public Service Announcement: The following maps are NOT an invitation to encroach on these (often private) lands.

As just one example for one city — Durham, N.C. — we've conducted a pilot analysis of the city-county planning department's parcel-level data. This data includes its current land use, assessed value (for property taxes), and other characteristics of the plot of land. We focused on two broadly defined types of land: vacant space and public or semi-public space. The effort is just a preliminary one. We haven't physically checked land identified on this map, we haven't thoroughly analyzed it (e.g. how much land of each type is within downtown), and we haven't run it by city officials or property owners. The idea is to give you a flavor of just how much possibility exists in our urban spaces and the variety of forms that land may take.

Vacant space included any land that was listed as a vacant use, which we then grouped into several categories: publicly-owned, community service or land held for redevelopment (renewal), outdoor open space, commercial, residential, industrial, utilities, parking, and other. These are themselves aggregations of the city's much more complex categorization: residential small lot, residential large tract, residential agriculture, etc., and so forth. We haven't thoroughly investigated how land is categorized and by whom, so we can't be 100% confident in the accuracy of our interpretations. Nevertheless, the map passed a "common sense" test in which we verified a few sample properties for their uses. As you can see below, downtown Durham has a large amount of vacant land intended for commercial use. Surrounding the core of downtown is a great deal of vacant residential lots as well as vacant land held for community services or future redevelopment. These may include, for example, new public housing developments or expansion plans for Duke University. Altogether, vacant lots in Durham County account for 39% of its total land area: more than 107 square miles.
An analysis of the “public realm” or semi-public realm was conducted in much the same way. In this case we analyzed land that is currently classified as used for community services, government use, outdoor and recreational open space, land at schools, libraries, and museums, utilities, and parking and private roads. While much of this land is not, in fact, public — it is not owned by a public agency and it is not open to all — much of it is at least reasonably open to the general public. College campuses, public libraries, not-for-profit museums, churches, and schools all often invite visitors into their outdoor spaces. As such, this category represents land commonly used by members of the Durham community within certain limits. Cities could begin to understand how much of this space they have and then identify willing partners for DIY endeavors. In downtown, the bulk of these spaces are made up of government buildings, community facilities, educational campuses, and — of course — surface and structured parking areas. These lands may constitute nearly 8 percent of the county’s land area and more than 21 square miles.
About Us

Pop-up Planning is a project created by Maire Dekle and Micah Kordsmeier to fulfill the Master’s Project requirements in the Department of City & Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They were advised by Dr. Thomas J. Campanella, and wish to thank Tom for his enthusiastic support of this project. They’d also like to thank those DIY-ers, designers, and city staff who agreed to be interviewed for their time, candor, and insight.

**Maire Dekle** is specializing in Placemaking and Community Development. She has too many interests for her own good, but is particularly curious about what makes a well-used, dynamic public space; the development of urban food systems; and children's experience of the built environment. If you'd like to talk about these interests, this project, or the re-making of cities in general, Maire can be reached at maire.dekle@gmail.com or via Google+.

**Micah Kordsmeier** is concentrating in Placemaking and Real Estate Development. His interests lie in the repurposing of place and space – whether it's DIY urbanism, historic preservation, or just people doing what planners didn't mean for them to do. Oh, also, the promise of personal digital fabrication for the built environment and the practice of city making. In former and current lives, Micah has been a program manager (here), a Fab Lab founder (here), a research analyst, and a whole lot of intern (here, here, here, and here). He doesn't maintain a blog, he neglects his twitter feed, and he can't seem to manage adding Google+ to his social networking chores, er, routine. But you can reach him by email at micah.kordsmeier@gmail.com.