

GUERILLA URBANISM:
A GUIDE TO BOTTOM-UP ACTIVISM IN URBAN SPACES

by

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ABSTRACT

My research explores the rise of guerilla urbanism in the United States, and how it is correlated with an increase in neoliberal planning practices. Guerilla urbanism is defined in this context as the practice of citizens reclaiming the public realm by enacting change that immediately improves areas neglected by local governments. Guerilla urbanism relies on relatively cheap resources and high accessibility for all who wish to participate. Examples of this include painting crosswalks, putting traffic cones in the street, pop-up benches, DIY bike racks, and guerilla gardening. My research analyzes what specific factors necessitate the need for guerilla urbanism. I hypothesize that the rise in neoliberal planning policies (privatization of land, planning for capital rather than people, and lack of government responsibility) create massive inequalities in urban spaces. The built environment of the United States needs change, and that change is largely being left up to individuals who wish to make their community safer. The entire existence of guerilla urbanism reflects the many ways in which planning policies in the United States have failed to reach the needs of everyone.

I. INTRODUCTION

"We are a small group of community members who have tried for years to request crosswalks and other safe streets infrastructure the official way. At every turn, we've been met with delays, excuses, and inaction from our city government, as well as active hostility to safe streets projects from sitting council members. Car crashes are the number one cause of death of children in Los Angeles. If our city won't keep us safe, we will keep us safe."

-Crosswalk Collective L.A. Spokesperson
(Linton 2022)

Guerilla urbanism is a form of community activism that relies on creating long-term changes to the urban environment through cheap and accessible means. These methods, which range anywhere from painting a crosswalk to putting up a traffic cone to slow traffic, are meant to be easy for anyone to do. The goal of this movement is to reclaim space that has been either lost to privatization, neglected by the city, or both.

My goal with this zine both to raise awareness of the phenomenon of guerilla urbanism, and also to figure out why such a phenomenon exists. I argue that the existence of guerilla urbanism is proof that there is a failure within the system of urban planning that is causing people to take matters into their own hands. In a



Figure 1, L.A. Crosswalk Collective (Linton 2022)

functioning government system, there would be no need for citizens to alter the built environment to increase safety.

Guerilla urbanism goes by many names: DIY-urbanism, bottom-up urbanism, and tactical urbanism. I tend to refer to guerilla urbanism when discussing citizen-led approaches, but that is purely preference. The motivation behind any DIY urbanist action is dependent on the person. David Webb outlines four broad categories of guerilla urbanism.

FOUR APPROACHES TO GUERILLA URBANISM

The four approaches, as described by David Webb in Tactical Urbanism: Delineating a Critical Praxis, are outlined below in Figure 1.1

FIG 1.1	Motivation	Method	Example
Critical Pluralist	to solve design problems in cities	by listening to under-served groups and acting based on their needs	Park-ing days, Pop-up town hall, guerilla gardening
Anarcho-Socialist	to subvert liberal modes of decision making and addresses concerns of the working class	using the built environment as a vector for political demonstration	Painting crosswalks despite pushback against the city.
Neoliberal	to increase public interest in either disinvested or peripheral sites	by emphasizing the merits of development	Pop-up markets, Government-sanctioned tactical urbanist action.
Libertarian Paternalism (individualistic)	to encourage individuals' decision making	using the built environment and design to steer people a certain way	footprints on a sidewalk leading to a recycle bin

Everyone has various motivations for activism. These motivations are not rigid, and there is plenty of room for overlap between these categories. I believe it is important to distinguish the different approaches, because not all guerilla urbanism comes from a place of anti-neoliberal protest. In fact, as we will discuss later, governments can co-opt principles of guerilla urbanism as a form of sanctioned or authorized tactical urbanism.

AUTHORIZED VS. UNAUTHORIZED

Tactical urbanism falls on a spectrum of both authorized (government sanctioned) and unauthorized (non-government sanctioned) activities. Some tactical urbanist projects begin as unsanctioned, activist-led projects that are later co-opted by a municipality. Unsanctioned action has the power to bring attention to problems that the city has ignored or overlooked. Projects that are carried out by activists but funded by the city are known as hybrid projects.

One such example of a hybrid project happened in Macon, Georgia. What began as a bike lane created by activists was later approved by the city to become a permanent change. The city noticed that after the installation of the pop-up bike lanes, ridership skyrocketed from 80 riders a day to about 200 riders a day. (nextcity.org).

I see no issue with government sanctioned tactical urbanism in most scenarios. Often projects can become too dangerous or expensive for activists to do alone. Working to paint bike lanes on major roadways may be too hazardous without first having road closures.

But of course, there are instances of government interference hindering positive change. One major example is the LA Crosswalk Collective, located in East Los Angeles. The Collective works to paint sidewalks where there is a need for them. The sidewalks improve pedestrian safety and signal to drivers that they need to look out and slow down. The city of Los Angeles has made considerate efforts to paint over the crosswalks, despite them having a positive effect on the community. A spokesperson told streetsblog.org that “At every turn, we’ve been met with delays, excuses, and inaction from our city government... If our city won’t keep us safe, we will keep us safe.”

The city of San Marcos, Texas has co-opted elements of tactical urbanism into their Main Street Program. One such example is when the organization reactivated a section neglected road through cheap methods, such as painting the curbs yellow, power washing sidewalks, and cleaning off historical markers. These simple, yet effective methods served to make the built environment more inviting to pedestrians. This is an example of a small-scale government sanctioned tactical urbanist project. I would argue that government sanctioned tactical urbanism is useful. A form of urban planning that adopts principles of quick action and long-term change is beneficial. In the age of long-term planning, small-scale projects can often be overlooked. It is important to balance both long-range plans and quick, easy changes that can be made in the meantime to improve quality of life.



Figure 2, Main Street Program
(<https://sanmarcostx.gov/655/Main-Street>)

I chose to do an informal poll online using the Subreddit r/tacticalurbanism in order to apply these four categories to real-life scenarios. This community consists of individuals who share their attempts at guerilla, or tactical, urbanism. I created a poll that asked questions about what they did, their motivation for doing a project, and if there were any noticeable effects.

One person worked with their community to build gardens and provide needle disposal containers that are regularly maintained and provide free tutoring for children in the city. All these efforts have resulted in fewer needles on the ground and an increase in pedestrian activity in areas with the community garden. This person's primary motive for these acts of tactical urbanism was to connect the community. They also spent about \$20-50 CAD per project and collected scrap materials for the garden that people did not want.

Another person promoted biking in their city by placing bike wayfinding signage on bike routes. They said that the total amounted to around \$100 CAD.

And finally, someone worked to improve accessibility in their community by placing concrete ramps in areas missing them. They also maintained public benches and installed planters. This person listened to the community and responded accordingly. They report that "elderly people riding their bikes were complaining before the ramp about their backs hurting from this specific curb." and that the planters gained interest from neighbors who all reap the benefits of having fresh herbs open to all. The table and

bench they cleaned up has made community members thankful and it is now more respected (less trash and less graffiti).

All these individual acts of kindness from community members are effective ways to improve the quality of life of citizens. When I hear stories like these, it reminds me of those grim headlines of children raising money to fund their cancer treatment with a lemonade stand. There is a dark undertone. Individuals should not have to be responsible for systemic failures beyond their control. So, what can be done?

These citizen-led actions are useful and should continue to take place. But ideally, the city would then respond to the changes by funding the projects that are beneficial to underserved communities. I think that it is impossible for urban planners to know exactly what every individual community needs, so guerilla urbanism can be used as a tool to signal to the city “hey! we need this here!”

Cities should provide infrastructure for the disabled. Bike lanes should have proper signage for wayfinding. Needle disposal should be accessible to everyone to promote public health and safety. And public seating shouldn’t have to be maintained by unpaid community members.

There is a common theme between the three responses. Everyone who responded wanted to make a change in their community by impacting the built environment in some way. To me, that is the core of what guerilla urbanism is. They were all protesting the fact that there is an absence of something in their city. By filling in the gaps, they show the city that there is a demand for such changes, and that they won’t wait for it to go through city council meetings only to get potentially rejected or told they are being too ambitious.

These actions can be classified in the four aforementioned types of guerilla urbanism. This is only speculation, as the participants in my survey did not state their specific motivation.

Figure 1.2 shows the various categories, as well as the potential overlap between the two. I would argue that none of the three participants engaged in the neoliberal approach, as none were concerned with emphasizing the merits of for-profit development.

Fig 1.2	Critical Pluralist	Anarcho-socialist	Neoliberal	Libertarian Paternalism (individualistic)
	adding ramps for the disabled after listening to their concerns	adding wayfinding signs to bike paths creates accessibility for those who rely on bikes or don't have a GPS	I would argue that none of these examples have a neoliberal motivation.	creating needle disposal areas encourages proper disposal of needles
	adding wayfinding signs to bike paths solves a design problem in the city	community gardens provide free food for all		adding wayfinding signs to bike paths encourages decision making by making people more likely to use a bike.
	cleaning benches to encourage use solves a design problem			

There is plenty of overlap between these categories. Guerilla urbanism does not operate on a binary system. The underlying similarity between all these examples is that there is a problem that is fixed through individual efforts that are unauthorized by the city. It is unknown whether these specific examples have been shot down or adopted by their municipalities. But regardless, they use guerilla urbanism as a tool for activism.

II. GUERRILLA URBANISM AS A PROTEST

Guerilla urbanism as a protest is useful at highlighting the areas of urban decay and neglect within the built environment. As I researched this type of approach to urban design, I couldn't help but ask myself why. Why is individual action necessary to make change? Why are there so many areas of neglect that cities don't focus on? Why do people need to make their own bike lanes or build their own access ramps?



Figure 3, DIY Bike Racks (Lyndon & Garcia)

I came to the conclusion that the existence of guerilla urbanism is evidence that the government is continuously failing to provide the essential services necessary for a healthy and safe community. The purpose of a government is to provide these essential services, and guerilla urbanist efforts work as a Band-Aid, a temporary solution covering up a large systemic problem. The underlying issue is that cities, in a neoliberal economy, are built with the end goal of maximum marketability. This prioritization of marketability reduces the role of the urban planner to an enabler of private development to maximize profit by any means necessary. This is not the fault of individual planners. They are not, for the most part, doing their job with malicious intent.

There are planning departments that do respond to guerilla urbanist efforts with malice, as previously discussed with the LA Crosswalk Collective example. But there is also counterexamples of cities adapting to the needs of the citizens and funding the guerilla urbanist efforts. But regardless of all of this, there is still a fundamental flaw with the way we are designing cities, and my goal with this guide is to highlight both the actions that can be done to protest environments of inequity, while also bringing attention to the economic system that created such environments.

It is important to first understand the history of neoliberal economics and how the principles of neoliberal policies create spaces of inequality. David Harvey, a prominent Marxist geographer outlines the history of neoliberal economics in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey states that neoliberalism seeks to “bring all human action into the domain of the market.” The effects of commodifying essential resources (water, safety measures, space, etc.) mean that aspects of life that have no capacity to accumulate wealth are often ignored.

THE PRINCIPLES OF NEOLIBERALISM

The four main principles of neoliberal planning that create environments of inequity are: reliance on market self-regulation, privatization of land, planning for capital, and a lack of government responsibility.

MARKET SELF-REGULATION	PRIVATIZATION	PLANNING FOR CAPITAL	LACK OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY
<p>-Less government regulation of land is considered beneficial to the economy</p> <p>-” The invisible hand of the market” is dictated purely by the wants and needs of consumers</p>	<p>-Privatization of previously public spaces reduces both affordability and accessibility</p> <p>-Private residential developments strengthen class division (Ex: amenities are restricted only to residents of their respective community)</p>	<p>-Cities are planned with marketability as the end goal. They must attract investors and development firms to maximize profit.</p> <p>-Primary agents of change in cities are corporations, whose influence impacts land-use. -Projects are intended for profit, not community enrichment</p>	<p>-Heavy emphasis is placed on self-accountability</p> <p>-Views poverty as a moral short-coming (ex: perpetuating a myth of laziness, or the “Welfare Queen” stereotype)</p> <p>-Creates less pressure for cities to provide essential public resources (ties back to privatization of amenities)</p>

A PROTEST, NOT A SOLUTION

Guerilla urbanism, in certain forms, is a response to this economic framework of neoliberalism. My central argument, the very thing that attracted me to this phenomenon of guerilla urbanism, is that this is a response to the failure of neoliberal capitalist policies to prioritize community building over capital accumulation.

Neoliberal urban planning only further serves the capitalist class and strengthens the already expanding class division in the United States. This division is shown in the built environment. One obvious way is through the privatization of the public sector, which creates unequal access to amenities. Capitalists will argue that privatization is a

good thing, because paying more for a service will result in better quality. The obvious problem with this logic is that impoverished people will not be able to afford the services that the wealthy can. This logic further serves as a basis from which people view poverty as a moral short-coming, rather than an inevitability in certain circumstances. Public spaces in the modern city are built with the goal of consumption, and anything that excludes consumption is not given priority.

Gated communities are an example of a land use practice that serves to further solidify class division through the built environment. These communities contribute to the death of community, as being separated by a gate and fence contributes to an 'us vs. them' mentality. These developments are found everywhere in suburbia with increasing prevalence. This represents a loss of public space because the amenities within these neighborhoods (pools, parks, shade, benches) are not open to all, but rather are reserved for those who can afford it.

Zukin (1995) uses the redesign of Bryant Park in New York as an example of where a space was used to discourage non-consumption by the incorporation of both consumption and entertainment. This space, which was previously more economically diverse, has been reserved to the middle class due to its commercialization. The park is legally open to all, but due to the space's redesign, it now discourages passive non-consumption. The class and race division in our country is quite literally paved into the landscape.

Guerilla urbanism can be used as a way in which people seek to reclaim public spaces lost to privatization. Even if specific groups of guerilla urbanists have no political objective, they are still reacting to a general feeling of discontent within their built environment. Pop-up parks are an example of this reaction to the loss of public spaces that do not require consumption.

The increasing prevalence of private spaces, or even public spaces that require consumption, acts as a war on poverty. This ties back into my previous argument, that cities are being designed with the goal of maximizing profit, rather than serving the people. The policy makers and planners want to criminalize homelessness and discourage non-consumption by any means possible.

There is a tendency within the guerilla, or tactical urbanism, to serve the system of neoliberalism. I would argue that pop-up markets, which serve as a space for pedestrians to break free of car-dependency but with the added expectation that consumption is required, are an example of the neoliberal co-option of tactical urbanism.

The reason I describe guerilla urbanism as a Band-Aid is because it fails to escape the confines of the capitalist structure. One of the most prominent pamphlets in the tactical urbanism world is the Lydon and Garcia Tactical Urbanism handbook. Mould (2014) makes the connection between the similar rhetoric used in the flawed Creative Class theory popularized by Richard Florida, and the rhetoric used in Lydon and Garcia's TU handbook. Mould argues that the "TU promotional material aligns with characteristics of the gentrification process." because they place heavy emphasis on the young, educated class to come into an area and "fix it".

This is the same language used in Florida's Creative Class theory. So, is guerilla urbanism really as 'for the people' as it seems? I would argue that no, it is not. This is an unintentional consequence of any activism under a repressive capitalist system. The nature of capitalism is that any sort of autonomy granted is later recuperated.

Mould then goes on to state that cities co-opt guerilla urbanism into the political sphere as an attempt to capitalize on the 'cool' urban aesthetic. The protest that starts as a reaction to the urban decay as a result of neoliberalism is eventually consumed back into the capitalist economic system. Cities will adopt the parts that are marketable. This creates the issue of gentrification of space. This is not the fault of activists, but rather the system that they were protesting against.

III. CONCLUSION

Overall, guerilla urbanism serves to bring attention to areas that have been neglected in the face of neoliberal planning policies that rely on reliance on market self-regulation, privatization of land, planning for capital, and a lack of government responsibility. The protest of guerilla urbanism differs from other demonstrations because it changes the built environment in some way. These methods can include pop-up parks, DIY benches, Park-ing Days, weed bombing, DIY bike lanes, adding ramps for accessibility, etc.

It is important to not discourage protest. I believe that the guerilla urbanism movement does a great job at bringing attention to areas of neglect in urban spaces, and any action against such decay is better than nothing. My goal with this is to both raise awareness of the phenomenon of guerilla urbanism, and to figure out why such a phenomenon exists. I argue that the existence of guerilla urbanism is proof that there is a failure within the system of urban planning that is causing people to take action

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