

UNION DE VECINOS: ‘DIY Social Spaces’

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

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

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

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

biggest benefit from Tactical Urbanism projects are “the relationships and social networks created during the planning and implementation of the projects.” (Lydon, 127) Union de Vecinos also stresses the importance of building ‘social connectedness’ and relationships through the process. Their goal is also to make long-term change to their neighborhood. “These changes include building a team that creates opportunities to get to know your neighbors and together build simple DIY projects that have long lasting and transformative impacts in the community.

To gain further insight into these community transformations, I interviewed Elizabeth Blaney, the co-director of Union de Vecinos. She explained that with the ‘DIY social spaces’ they approach them with a 6-step protocol, shown in **Figure 4** below. With the neighborhood committees they identify a location, prioritize the issue, design, fundraise, build, and then install and celebrate the project. This protocol is very similar to the five-step design thinking process that is commonly applied to successful Tactical Urbanism projects. Mike Lydon says that in his firm’s experience, “the five-step design thinking process is valuable for producing successful Tactical Urbanism projects.” (Lydon, 172) The design thinking process can be seen in **Figure 5** below. The interventionists first empathize with the needs of the community or come from the community itself, define the site and root causes of the project, ideate (brainstorm) and research ways to improve the problem, prototype or design an intervention, and then test out the project by building and implementing.

Intersection Transformation by Union de Vecinos in Boyle Heights:



Photo Credit: James Rojas



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson

Alleyway Transformation by Union de Vecinos in Boyle Heights:



Photo Credit: Kris Fortin (LA Streetsblog) <http://la.streetsblog.org/2013/05/01/lapd-threatens-closure-of-painted-alleyway-to-public-events-lacking-permits/>



Photo Credit: James Rojas

Blaney told me that there have been 15 total alleyway and intersection transformations across Boyle Heights in East LA—all of them community-initiated and with little to no acknowledgement or assistance from city officials (refer to the pictures from the previous pages). Of the intersections that they transform, they mostly include painting a mural in the middle of the intersection and zebra crosswalks at all four crossings. This slows down traffic and makes the intersection into more of a pedestrian-friendly gathering space. In one alleyway in particular she explained how “one neighborhood created a mini-plaza where they installed solar lighting, repaved the alley, built a community garden, and designed mobile planters to block the streets for meetings and other events they organize.” When children want to play in the alleyway, they can close it off to cars with the homemade planters. I recognized that this concept of turning underused, neglected roadway into plazas is similar to the official plaza/parklet program in LA called People St. Because of their seemingly similar goals, I asked Elizabeth Blaney if her DIY Social Spaces program would ever consider applying for a plaza through the People St. program. She explained how there are hundreds of small alleyways between houses in Boyle Heights that serve as people’s extended yards. Blaney summarized the differences between the programs when she said:

“The People St. program is usually on major roads and commercial corridors. Union de Vecinos focuses on areas that haven’t gotten resources and that are based upon need. Our projects are in unrecognized places—in smaller, residential areas and small alleys that often serve as people’s backyards.”

The alleyways that Union de Vecinos transforms most likely wouldn’t even meet the criteria for size and location that LADOT and People St. require. I will go more into depth about the People St. program later when I discuss city-initiated examples of Tactical Urbanism in LA.

LADOT People St. Plaza vs. Union de Vecinos Alleyway Plaza:



Photo Credit: peoplest.lacity.org (North Hollywood Plaza)



Photo Credit: Kris Fortin (LA Streetsblog) <http://la.streetsblog.org/2013/05/01/lapd-threatens-closure-of-painted-alleyway-to-public-events-lacking-permits/>

The most important aspect of these transformations is that they are created *for and by the community*. As I've mentioned, a major concern with most unauthorized urban interventions are that they catalyze gentrification. With Union de Vecinos' projects the entire process is driven and directed by the community. In my conversation with co-director Elizabeth Blaney, she demonstrated the importance of this process in regards to traffic signs that a Barrio Unido, a neighborhood committee, installed:

"We also want to make sure that the projects increase a use value for the community and not a market value for investors. We do not want our projects to result in gentrification for our own members. So for example, when community members design projects we look at aesthetics and designs to serve a function for the community but not necessarily for potential investors. In the case of Barrio Unido, they wanted to slow down traffic in the alleys. Instead of installing the typical stop signs they designed their stop signs in the shape of a triangle, painted it blue and wrote STOP in Spanish. This created a different type of aesthetics from middle class neighborhoods that added value to current residents but that wouldn't necessarily increase a property value for those looking to move into the neighborhood."

The DIY Social Spaces program that Union de Vecinos initiates is making immediate and profound impacts in Boyle Heights. These projects are happening in the same area—East LA—that the examples of Latino or Everyday Urbanism are occurring. The work of Union de Vecinos, however, is addressing particular problems with street infrastructure and is more pre-meditated action. As I have illustrated, the DIY Social Spaces also share many aspects of unauthorized Tactical Urbanism; the differences would be that Union de Vecinos isn't necessarily trying to scale up their projects to be official programs and they aren't quantitatively measuring and documenting the impacts. These projects show potential for the city officials to enable and empower this community in East LA to make these changes more lasting.

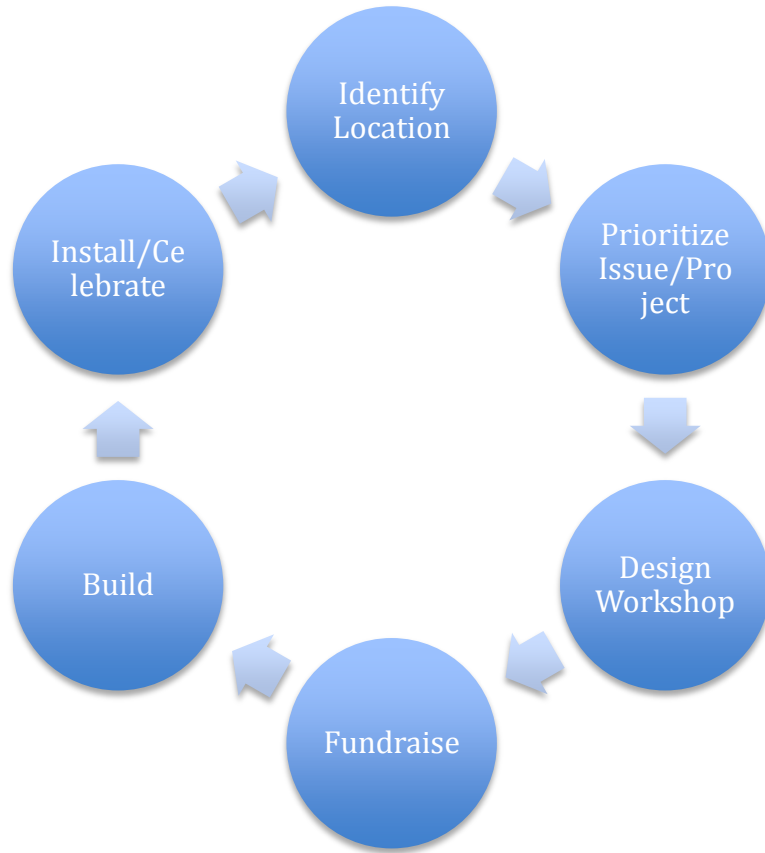


Figure 4: Union de Vecinos 6-step Project Protocol

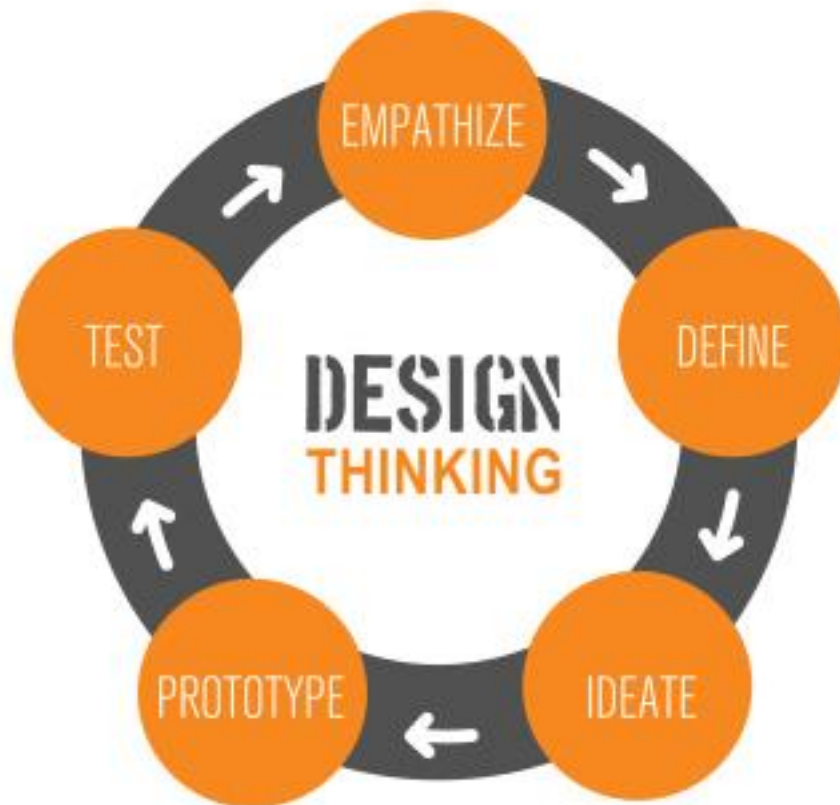


Figure 5: Design Thinking Approach to Tactical Urbanism Photo Credit: http://we-make-money-not-art.com/wow/0tu_design_thinking_diagram.jpg; courtesy of Street Plans Collaborative

‘COMMUNITY LIVING ROOMS’

Part of the improvements by Union de Vecinos included sidewalk benches initiated by the community. Steve Rasmussen Cancian, an architect and designer, collaborated with the community on the designs. Cancian has helped build what has been commonly called ‘Outdoor Living Rooms’ or ‘Community Living Rooms’ in Oakland, and also East, Central, and South Los Angeles. Usually these benches provide much needed seating around the many bus stops in Los Angeles that have no places to sit. Cancian’s street furniture differs from most other examples of unauthorized urban interventions done by architects and designers. He deliberately

collaborates with the community to help address the needs, proper location, and designs of the street furniture; it's a community effort. Robin Abad, whose thesis about Parklets and Plazas I discussed in the literature review, refers to Cancian's projects: "The 'Community Living Rooms' can be carefully distinguished from other typologies of 'tactical urbanism,' which can become associated with gentrification, displacement, and replicating existing patterns of inequity." (Abad, 56) Abad mentions that Cancian has a 'planning to stay' approach to his projects that are for and by the community. In the literature by Donovan Finn and Gordon Douglas on DIY Urbanism, one of their major criticisms of these interventions were gentrification as well, but they both mention the 'Community Living Rooms' as outliers in that discussion. Douglas describes how the furniture is "largely initiated, designed, and built by long-time residents acting in their own neighborhood and with the explicit goal in most cases of improving an under-privileged neighborhood while discouraging gentrification." (Douglas, 2012) The Spontaneous Interventions exhibition that I also referred to in the literature mentions Cancian's projects. I mentioned a quote by a professor named Tom Angotti who wrote that the exhibition 'honored gentrifiers.' If that statement is true, then the 'Community Living Rooms' definitely stand in direct opposition to Angotti's statement.



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson (Community Living Room)

An urban intervention's path from unsanctioned to sanctioned, illegal to legal, informal to formalized, shows the potential of small-scale, low-cost actions to catalyze more permanent change. These 'Community Living Rooms' are exemplary of this process. In San Francisco in 2010 there was an exhibition titled *DIY Urbanism: Testing the Grounds for Social Change* that featured Cancian's projects. In their description of the street furniture, they talk about the process of the project's formalization in Oakland and Los Angeles:

“At first the outdoor living rooms in West Oakland were regularly hauled away by officials, but more recently the city has informally accepted the installations and offered permits if activists would purchase liability insurance. In Los Angeles, local activists won full permitting for living rooms without fees or requirements to buy insurance, eventually drawing Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to come build a bench.” (SPUR, 2010)

Mike Lydon in his book on Tactical Urbanism states: “the promise of Tactical Urbanism will be reached only if municipal leaders and citizens alike develop a holistic, cross-disciplinary approach to bring the benefits to the places that need them the most.” (Lydon, 20) The criticisms of Tactical Urbanism have been that the primary examples have not represented underserved communities of color and that these unsanctioned initiatives can lead to gentrification. The ‘Community Living Rooms’ by Steven Cancian stands in opposition to these criticisms and further show the potential that community-oriented urban interventions have in transforming the landscape. An article in the New York Times was written about Cancian’s work and described the process that residents go through to implement the street furniture: “Community leaders and residents are asked to help plan a site. Landscape architects do the drawings, and community groups get permits from the Office of Community Beautification within the city’s Department of Public Works. Experts help to cut wood and give other technical assistance to the residents, who build and finish the furniture.” (Steinhauer, 2008) As of 2008, there were over 20 of these projects happening in Los Angeles; it’s harder to gauge how many there must be now. In this example, Los Angeles city officials seem to have acted as enablers instead of restricting enforcers.

ECO-VILLAGE INTERSECTION REPAIR

The Los Angeles Eco-Village is a community that has a Do-it-Yourself spirit deeply engrained in the way they live. The two-block neighborhood is located three miles west of downtown LA in Koreatown. The community is described on their website as an “intentional

community” that “demonstrates processes for achieving lower environmental impacts while raising the quality of community life.” I took a tour of this community by its founder Lois Arkin to see first hand the way in which the community has retrofitted their lifestyle to contrast the privatized, auto-dominated landscape of Los Angeles. On the inner side of the building there is an enclosed courtyard that has a huge food-producing garden and their residents have rebuilt their homes to include French doors that open up into the courtyard. Besides the small-scale changes to the everyday built environment that I focus on in this paper, the residents living here carry that same DIY spirit into seemingly every aspect of their lives.



Photo Credit: Yuki (Los Angeles Eco-Village)

<https://laecovillage.wordpress.com/2009/09/14/intersection-repair-event-12-june-2009/>

What really jumped out to me on the tour was the intersection in front of their building that resembled a plaza. On multiple occasions the Los Angeles Eco-Village has invited Mark

Lakeman, the initiator of ‘Intersection Repair,’ to facilitate the transformation of the intersection in front of the Eco-Village community. ‘Intersection Repair’ is a community-led transformation of an intersection into a gathering space. This process was adopted as an official ordinance in Portland in 2000 that allows ‘Intersection Repair’ to be replicated across the city. Although ‘Intersection Repair’ occurred at the Eco-Village in Koreatown, in Los Angeles no such ordinance exists; it’s illegal. After talking with the founder of the Eco-Village, Lois Arkin, she told me that they tried to negotiate with the city, but got caught up in the many overlapping layers of Los Angeles government. She said: “When we first did it [the intersection repair] in 2005, I reached out to several different City Departments (Transportation, Bureau of Street Services, Council Office 13) and staff either referred me to another Department which I'd already talked to or simply didn't have a response. So we just ‘did it.’ And there have been no complaints.” This echoes the reason why so many people have been initiating these unsanctioned city-improvement projects on their own.

I placed this intersection transformation in the ‘Functional & Communal’ section because it addresses a need to slow down traffic and was involved by a majority of the two-block neighborhood. Lois Arkin told me: “We flyered the neighborhood when we did this all three times and really got the neighborhood kids and families involved, as well as some of our broader constituency.” Families and people of all ages from the community helped paint the intersection that included a mural covering the entire center, striped crosswalks, and added seating and trees on the adjacent bulb-out. It’s also important to note that this intervention occurred in an underserved neighborhood that, according to the Eco-Village website, “includes approximately 15 ethnic groups,” and “incomes are very low to middle but primarily lower.” This is also an example of Tactical Urbanism that occurs *for and by* a lower-income neighborhood and

successfully transforms the built environment to make it safer for everyone. This intervention also seems extremely unlikely to cause any gentrification because of the nature of the intentional community living there. The website explains: “the buildings and land have been removed from the speculative real estate market and will continue to provide permanently affordable housing for low to moderate income households.”

Lois Arkin also shared with me that they have applied through the People St. program of Los Angeles to transform an alleyway adjacent to their building into a plaza. Their application wasn't accepted, but they plan to reapply during the next application cycle. Arkin said that their vision is to make their two-block neighborhood completely car-free, and the People St. plaza would, in addition to the existing 'Intersection Repair' put them closer to that goal.

Upon further analysis, the 'Intersection Repair' initiated by the Eco-Village, and the intersection transformations done by Union de Vecinos seem extremely similar (Refer to the pictures on the next page) Both projects include painted murals in the middle of the intersection and illegally striped crosswalks. There seems to be potential for the city to look into a similar ordinance as Portland, allowing neighborhoods to legally replicate this intersection transformation. Obviously the context of the landscape and politics in Portland is extremely different from Los Angeles, but an interest from communities to slow down traffic and provide public space in their intersection has clearly been demonstrated.

LA Eco-Village Intersection vs. Union de Vecinos Intersection



Photo Credit: Yuki (Los Angeles Eco-Village)

<https://laecovillage.wordpress.com/2009/09/14/intersection-repair-event-12-june-2009/>



Photo Credit: Charlie Simpson (Union de Vecinos Intersection Transformation)

‘GUERRILLA GARDENING’: LA GREEN GROUNDS AND RON FINLEY

In 2010, Ron Finley, with the community volunteer organization called LA Green Grounds, transformed the public piece of land between the sidewalk and the street in front of his house into an edible garden. The city gave him a citation that turned into a warrant, commanding him to take down the garden. After the surrounding community petitioned to keep the garden, they were allowed to keep it if they paid a permit. Ron Finley and LA Green Grounds were addressing a need in the community; their intent was simply to provide a food source for the many people living in South Los Angeles. LA Green Grounds is a grass-roots organization that helps communities build community gardens on front lawns and vacant lots; it’s a communal effort to address a deficit in food access. According to Ron Finley’s famous TED talk describing his ‘guerrilla gardening,’ South LA is a food desert, meaning there is no supermarket or access to healthy food in the community. Finley also described how Los Angeles leads the nation in publicly owned vacant lots—26 square miles, which is the equivalent to 20 Central Parks.



Photo Credit: Nick Weinberg <http://blog.ted.com/no-more-citations-for-curb-side-veggies-in-los-angeles/>

The unsanctioned actions of Ron Finley and LA Green Grounds seem to have paid off. According to an article from the popular ‘Next City’ media source, Los Angeles has now approved an ordinance to allow growing edible gardens on public land without having to pay a permit. “A new Los Angeles ordinance goes into effect this month (April 19th) that will allow residents to garden on city property without a permit. Thanks to an act of ‘guerrilla gardening’ by South Central L.A. resident Ron Finley, Los Angelenos will no longer have to pay the \$400 permit to garden in the city-owned land *between the street* and the sidewalk.” (Stanley, 2015) It may be unlikely that the actions of Ron Finley directly led to this *enabling* response from the city, but he definitely provided a ton of inspiration. In this case the small-scale, unauthorized, community-oriented action, that was addressing a need in the community, catalyzed long-term change for all of Los Angeles. People who want to grow food on vacant city property now can. The details and restrictions of this ordinance aren’t available yet, but the news is certainly inspiring.

FUNCTIONAL & COMMUNAL: CONCLUSION

If some of the challenges and issues recurring in unsanctioned Tactical Urbanism deal with gentrification and equity in terms of finding examples in underserved, lower-income communities, then the functional and community-oriented interventions in Los Angeles that I’ve discussed provide counterpoints and potential to expand the scope of Tactical Urbanism. The ‘DIY Social Spaces’ of Union de Vecinos, ‘Community Living Rooms’ from Steve Cancian, ‘Intersection Repair’ from the LA Eco-Village, and ‘guerrilla gardening’ from LA Green Grounds, exemplify the powerful potential that small-scale, community-oriented action can have in catalyzing longer-term change for the existing community.

FUNCTIONAL & INDIVIDUAL

By ‘functional & individual,’ I refer to Gordon Douglas’s definition: “Small-scale and creative, unauthorized yet intentionally functional and civic-minded ‘contributions’ or ‘improvements’ to urban spaces in forms inspired by official infrastructure... Individuals or informal groups challenge expected, regulated uses of particular spaces through unauthorized direct action.” (Douglas, 2013) The emphasis with these interventions is that they are unauthorized, done by individuals or small groups, and intended to address a need in the built environment. As expressed in the literature review, these types of interventions are heavily criticized for being catalysts for gentrification—outsiders or individuals making changes that may or may not represent the community’s needs and desires. Because these types of interventions are highly contestable, they deserve attention. **Figure 6** is a matrix of these ‘functional & individual’ interventions, describing the action, initiator, and when and where they took place in Los Angeles. I want to note that some of the interventions I list in the table, because they were anonymous, may have actually been done with some level of community input, but it’s hard to know because they often show up spontaneously over night. From within Table 6, I will briefly discuss the various bicycle improvements done by the ‘LA Department of DIY’ and ‘Socal Guerrilla Gardening.’