

Megatrends and the West Midlands

2021:

Tactical urbanism: a global trend key to 'building back better' across West Midlands cities following COVID-19?



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Summary

This think piece puts forward ‘tactical urbanism’ as an increasing global trend which offers great opportunities for shaping inclusive and activated urban public space in West Midlands cities and the Future Business District following COVID-19. Through considering how tactical urbanism is carried out globally across various scales (from individual action to national government programmes), three key opportunities of this trend are identified: 1) low-cost prototyping, 2) tool for envisioning a different future, 3) reducing inequalities in access to shaping city space through increasing inclusivity.

COVID-19 has accelerated this trend globally, demonstrating the value in tactical urbanism as a dynamic and reactive approach to shaping city space, and the opportunities of this trend to thrive within newly connected communities. Looking to the future, there is a trend of tactical urbanism approaches moving from small-scale independent interventions to being co-opted by local government into planning policy and city strategies. To harness the opportunities of this trend in the West Midlands it will be essential to learn from the challenges and successes of local government initiatives globally, with particular attention to ensuring citizen empowerment remains a key objective so that projects can reduce (rather than reproduce) inequalities in the shaping of city space.

Key policy messages

- Tactical urbanism should be further explored as an economically viable approach to designing urban public space in West Midlands cities post COVID-19, including considering allocating funding to this approach within city council budgets.
- Tactical urbanism approaches can reduce inequalities in access compared with traditional urban planning processes and empower citizens to envision a different future for their public space.
- COVID-19 has seen an increased focus on the local and strengthened community connections – tactical urbanism’s citizenry ethos provides an opportunity to capitalise on this moment.
- Key to harnessing the opportunities of this trend in the West Midlands will be learning from the challenges and successes of tactical urbanism projects globally, particularly by opening up channels of communication with local governments around the world who have formally integrated tactical urbanism approaches into city planning policy.

Introduction

According to Mike Lydon, renowned New York based placemaker credited with the widespread use of the term, ‘tactical urbanism’ (hereafter TU) can be defined as ‘an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies’ (Lydon and Garcia, 2015, p.2). The TU approach is used by urban actors at different scales, from individuals and citizen groups, to governments (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). TU projects can range from small,

unsanctioned initiatives such as guerrilla gardening – unofficial planting in disused urban spaces (Sacco, 2020), to official council-led projects such as the temporary closure of roads to traffic and the installation of seating to encourage social cohesion (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). TU is a dynamic and reactive approach, allowing for ideas to be prototyped quickly and providing an antidote to the usual preponderance of planning (Hamdi, 2010).

TU has gained significant momentum as a movement globally in the last fifteen years (Mould, 2014), but the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend and demonstrated the great opportunities this approach offers for cities to ‘build back better’ in the coming years (Moser, Malzieu and Petkova, 2020). With council budgets buckling under the financial strain of COVID-19 (Rhodes, 2020), and strengthened solidarity within local communities (Haldane, 2021), now is a crucial window for action. The option of formally integrating TU approaches into planning policy and city strategy must be given urgent consideration if West Midlands cities are to benefit from the opportunities of this global trend.

Drawing on a number of exciting case studies this growing trend will be examined by looking at who is doing TU, where and how they are doing it, and the opportunities this approach presents. The impact of COVID-19 will then be considered before looking to how this trend is set to develop over the next ten years. Based on this analysis, the opportunities this trend presents for the future of West Midlands cities and the Future Business District will be explored, concluding with suggestions of how the positive impacts of this trend can be harnessed and potential negative impacts mitigated.

Tactical urbanism as a developing trend

People at a range of scales utilise TU as an approach to shaping city space:

- *Individuals*: engaged citizens and social activists implement small-scale, self-funded TU projects e.g. guerrilla knitting to brighten up local urban areas (Figure 1).
- *Groups and organisations*: community activist groups, schools, universities, and businesses implement small TU projects e.g. a ‘build a better block’ initiative was started by concerned citizens in Dallas (USA) in 2010, demonstrating how neighbourhoods could be revitalised through low-cost placemaking activities in just one city block (Better Block, 2021).
- *Local government*: many city councils have formalised TU policy e.g. San Francisco’s citywide parklet program (San Francisco Public Works, 2021) – explained in more depth later.
- *National*: some governments have integrated TU into national policy e.g. New Zealand’s national ‘Innovating Streets for People’ pilot fund (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2020).



Figure 1: Guerrilla knitting in Melbourne, Australia (Author, 2019)

There are three key opportunities of TU as an approach to shaping urban space:

1) Low-cost prototyping:

The TU approach is an effective way to ‘prototype’ ideas for change to public space because the short-term, low-cost nature of projects means that ideas can be physically tested in real-life settings, and public opinion can be gauged without heavy funding investment (Pine, 2020). The feedback from short-term, low-cost interventions can be taken forward to inform more effective decisions about long-term change and investment. The cost-effectiveness of TU has contributed to its rise in popularity following the 2008 financial crisis and consequent funding challenges faced by urban planning departments across the world (Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

2) Tool for envisioning a different future:

Through making temporary changes to urban public space, TU interventions have the power to make citizens fundamentally question their understanding of the function of public space without the perceived threat of a change being permanent, as expressed by Claire Davis – project lead for Auckland City Council’s TU program ‘Tactical Auckland’:

‘We can put people at ease by saying it’s [TU project] a temporary change and if people don’t like it we can take it out [...] so it makes people feel better about the project being there [...] people are generally quite fearful of change’ (Davis, 2021; interviewed by author in a [vlog](#) as part of the 2021 Rethink Re:Place Festival of Tactical Urbanism).

3) Inclusivity and reducing inequalities:

Community involvement within traditional, top-down urban planning processes (e.g. online consultations) has been criticised for its lack of inclusivity (e.g. Yi Jian, Luo and Chan, 2020). TU approaches empower citizens to participate in the design of interventions and create changes to urban space which they can physically explore and respond to – an opportunity of TU also discussed by Davis:

'It is generally easier to understand a physical project, and to comment on it and feedback on it, rather than looking at it by studying a plan drawing online [...] a lot of people struggle to understand plan drawings [...] it is hard to imagine it in a live space [...] there's a lot more potential for it to reach a wider audience and to get quite different responses because people actually experience the project first hand [...] the potential buy-in from the community and stakeholders is generally much higher' (Davis, 2021; interviewed by author).

The success of tactical urbanism in Times Square, New York

TU projects have had great success in regenerating urban areas across the world (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). Times Square in New York is a particularly successful example of how TU can transform a business district for the better, bringing both placemaking and economic benefits. Over a single night in 2009, the New York Department for Transportation used deckchairs, flowerpots and paint to radically transform Manhattan's central traffic hub into a temporarily pedestrianised area which was safe and welcoming (Moore, 2013). The intervention was a resounding success, with members of the public excited about the new sense of place and social connection that the pedestrianisation brought, and business owners reassured that (contrary to their initial concerns) footfall and revenue would increase (Moore, 2013). After the successful initial trial period, \$55 million investment was given to make the development permanent creating Times Square as we know it today (Cruz, 2014) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Times Square following the completion of the pedestrianisation (Author, 2017)

Impact of COVID-19 on this global trend

During the COVID-19 pandemic a significant increase in the use of TU techniques has been documented across the world (Gylaitis, 2020). It will now be considered why this might be, and what this demonstrates about the opportunities this trend presents looking to the future.

TU as a dynamic and reactive approach for shaping urban space

COVID-19 created a need for rapid changes to urban environments to accommodate social distancing (Cutieru, 2020). Traditional urban planning procedures and consultation processes would have been too slow to enact these urgent changes, so TU approaches were adopted by local governments across the world (Halpern and Sarti, 2020). For example, in Brighton (UK) a road along the seafront was temporarily pedestrianised, using barriers to close off access for cars and create more space for people to exercise safely (Figure 3) (Barlow, 2020). The speed at which projects such as this were able to be enacted demonstrates the value of tactical urbanism as a reactive and dynamic approach to transforming urban public space and meeting people's needs.



Figure 3 - Madeira Drive in Brighton (UK) temporarily closed to cars in response to COVID-19 crisis

TU thrives within connected communities

COVID-19 increased people's focus on their local area and many areas have seen a growth in community connectedness, such as COVID Mutual Aid groups connecting citizens through social media platforms (Kavada, 2020). TU approaches thrive within connected communities because they capitalise on bottom-up action at the local scale (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). (For further discussion on communities, COVID-19 and TU, see [interview](#) with internationally renowned urbanist Mike Lydon conducted by author in 2020).

TU as a tool for envisioning how to 'build back better'

COVID-19 has undoubtedly been a catalyst for change around the world, raising questions of how to 'build back better' across many aspects of society globally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). TU projects during COVID-19 have demonstrated what a powerful tool it can be for helping citizens to envision a different future, such as challenging people's ingrained assumptions around the allocation of street space to cars (Wenger, 2020). In Denver, USA, 15.9 miles of city streets were closed to cars temporarily to accommodate social distancing, allowing people to enjoy socially distanced coffees, children to play and musicians to busk (Wenger, 2020). The response from citizens and businesses to this temporary (and previously unimaginable) measure was so positive that many of these changes are being permanently implemented as part of Denver's new 'Shared Streets' program (Denvergov.org, 2021).

Looking to the future: how might the TU trend develop globally over the next 10 years?

TU as an approach to shaping cities is a trend that has been predicted to increase globally over the coming years (Lydon and Garcia, 2015), and the 'shock' of COVID-19 has provided greater impetus for testing the opportunities of this approach globally (Honey-Rosés et. al., 2020). Particularly within this trend it is likely TU approaches will be increasingly co-opted by city councils as the financial benefits of the approach become more apparent (Mould, 2014). This trend of informal, small-scale TU interventions becoming co-opted into city strategy and policy is already apparent in many places. Parklets and traffic calming measures are just two examples of how this trend is appearing.

Parklets

In 2005, a San Francisco based art collective 'Rebar' paid money into a parking meter so they could legally occupy a car parking space for the day (Littke, 2016). Instead of parking a car, they placed turf, a bench and a tree in the space to create a miniature park – a 'parklet'. This catalysed an annual international event 'PARK(ing) Day' which encourages the re-purposing of on-street car parking spaces for the day and by 2011 had seen 975 parks created in 162 cities including the UK (Herman and Rodgers, 2020). Seeing the success of this informal approach, San Francisco city council developed a formalised parklet programme 'Pavements to Parks' (now called 'Ground Play') which assists citizens in designing, funding and building permanent parklets around the city (GroundPlay, 2021). These are then usually maintained by residents, neighbouring businesses and community organisations who benefit from an increase in pedestrian activity (Birdsall, 2013). Following the success of this program, similar programs have been initiated by city councils globally from Boston (Boston.gov, 2021) to Melbourne (Moreland City Council, 2021).



Figure 4 - Freewheel Parklet, Valencia Street San Francisco ([Image by Mark Hogan on Wikipedia.](#))

Traffic calming measures

This trend of moving from informal to formal can similarly be seen in TU projects around traffic calming. Citizen-led TU projects have frequently used informal strategies such as cones and chalk to demonstrate how street space could be redistributed and traffic slowed to make streets safer for pedestrians (Tactical Urbanism Guide, 2021). Following the success of these temporary citizen-led interventions, similarly creative techniques have since been formally integrated into traffic calming strategies by councils across the world, for example 3D crossings in Iceland and brightly coloured traffic calming spots in Auckland, New Zealand.



Figure 5: Traffic calming in Auckland's Sale Street in 2019 (reproduced with permission from Tactical Auckland)

COVID-19 is accelerating funding for TU projects, both currently as an emergency response to the pandemic, but also extending into the future of designing cities post-COVID. For example, New Zealand was the first country to make tactical urbanism part of its official government policy response to the pandemic (Reid, 2020) by launching the NZD \$7 million 'Innovating Streets for People' pilot fund in August 2020 which will provide funding for city council projects in the coming years (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2021).

Opportunities of the trend of TU for West Midland Cities and the Future Business District

There are promising TU projects currently ongoing in West Midlands Cities. The Active Wellbeing Society (a cooperative working to build healthy, happy and connected communities) has initiated a project called 'Reclaiming the Commons' which encourages citizens to use the TU technique of stencils and chalk to redesign their local area e.g. marking where they would like to see bike lanes (The Active Wellbeing Society, 2021). As part of Birmingham City Council's 'Places for People' project (Birmingham.gov.uk, 2021), a low-traffic neighbourhood is currently being trialled in Kings Heath, involving using wooden planters and bollards along certain streets to restrict access to cars and make the area safer and more inviting for children to play and neighbours to interact (Kings Heath LTN, 2021).

Drawing on this existing enthusiasm for TU approaches in Birmingham and based on the broader analysis of the opportunities of TU globally, there are three particular opportunities this trend presents for West Midlands cities and the Future Business District. TU can be used to:

- Create business districts that are *places* and not just spaces – using TU as a placemaking tool to trial ideas for financial and social regeneration.

- Harness the power of community engagement in this critical period of strengthened community connection following COVID-19.
- Reduce inequalities in access to the design of urban public space through supporting citizens to implement low-cost interventions which demonstrate alternative visions of space in an accessible manner.

While these opportunities hold much promise, it is important to remain vigilant to the risk of local government co-option leading to TU becoming ‘divorced from its citizenry and activist ethos’ (Mould, 2014) and feeding into neoliberal agendas (Peck, 2005). Crucially, if TU is to successfully reduce inequalities and increase sense of place in West Midlands cities and the Future Business District, it is vital that centrally funding this approach does not mean a loss of inclusivity or community empowerment. Looking at best practice examples of community empowerment and inclusion within council-led TU programmes globally will therefore be essential to ensuring this approach is effective in West Midlands cities.

Harnessing the opportunities of this trend and mitigating potential negatives:

In order to facilitate the positive impacts of this global trend of TU (and mitigate the potential negatives), this analysis puts forward the following implications and recommendations:

- Explore the possibility of allocating greater funding to TU approaches within council urban planning budgets for West Midlands cities.
- Ensure that if TU approaches are being co-opted by local government, that objectives of community empowerment and inclusion are still met.
- Consider using TU as an approach for prototyping placemaking ideas within the Future Business District, drawing lessons from the financial and social successes of projects globally (such as the pedestrianisation of Times Square, New York).
- Open up constructive channels of discussion between stakeholders in the West Midlands with local governments globally who have developed TU programmes (such as Auckland City Council), learning from the challenges they faced and understanding the transferability of their successes to West Midlands cities.

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