August 2013

The Formalities of Informal Urbanism: Technical and Scholarly Knowledge at Work in Do-it-Yourself Urban Design

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract:

Among the numerous ways people make illegal or unauthorized alterations to urban space, of particular interest in recent years have been the creative, local, and often anonymous efforts at informal but functional "improvement" to the built environment where the state or property owners have failed to act – practices I call "do-it-yourself urban design." Authorities, planners, and community members alike rightfully wonder about the meanings of these actions, and the questions they raise about rights, responsibilities, benefits, and consequences. Building from a larger qualitative study on DIY urban design across eleven cities, this paper focuses on the motivations, methods, and self-perceptions of the informal placemakers themselves. In particular, it demonstrates the degree to which many members of this group are informed by quite sophisticated knowledge of formal urban theory, planning, and design. I argue that this knowledge enables and inspires their actions, informs their justifications, and produces a complicated degree of self-reflexivity around their place in their communities and the contemporary city more broadly.

The Formalities of Informal Urbanism
Technical and Scholarly Knowledge at Work in Do-it-Yourself Urban Design

The people making illegal alterations to streets, signs, phone booths, and vacant lots in contemporary cities are not always the vandals, delinquents, radicals, or self-possessed artists one would assume. Though certainly there are some of all of these, there is another group of individuals at work as well, acting without permission to make what they see as functional, civic-minded improvements to the built environment. What I call "do-it-yourself urban design" represents a distinct type of unauthorized urban alteration in which community members intervene in the realm of professional urban streetscape planning and design. What is more, these unauthorized "do-it-yourself urban designers" are doing so with professional knowledge, methods, and equipment.

They use learned professional skills to create "guerrilla" improvements that replicate formal design features impeccably – for example, Los Angeles artist Richard Ankrom put years of professional sign-making experience to work "fixing" a major freeway sign so well that his changes remained in place for eight years. As individuals, many can pass fluently in the worlds of city bureaucracy, professional design, and neighborhood activism alike – I met Gil, the man behind the conversion of an overgrown railroad easement into a squatted quarter-acre farm, talking shop at a reception for New York City's "Urban Design Week" in the swanky SoHo showroom of a high-end design publisher. In conversation, they quote statistics and planning theory to stand civil codes on their heads, and reference unprovoked the ideas of deceased theorists and contemporary urbanism. Many are, for this reason, convinced that they are in the right.

In this paper, building out of my larger research project on the phenomenon of DIY urban design, I focus on the backgrounds and methods of typical participants to examine the role that this learned (and sometimes even professional) familiarity with

urban theory, planning, and design plays in their actions. In particular, I show how this knowledge enables and to some extent inspires them to act, and provides part of their justification for doing so. I then discuss questions this raises about their self-reflexivity, positionality, and responsibility for possible impacts – both intentional and unintentional.

Understanding the people behind this phenomenon is central to appreciating their unique impacts on cities and communities, and the potential values and dangers inherent to them. Put simply, city officials, property owners, and casual observers alike tend to assume that people making unauthorized or illegal urban alterations are adolescent troublemakers, vandals, or at best eccentric or self-centered "artists." Rather, their aim is functional, positive, and creative urban design "improvement" where they perceive the city and its formal actors to have failed. In the next section I briefly further define and distinguish the practices that I refer to as DIY urban design, before spending the remainder of the paper discussing these people who create them and the contexts in which they do so.

DIY Urban Design

From vandalism to interventionist art, sidewalk sleeping or sweeping the sidewalk, the informal alteration or appropriation of the built environment has been a fundamental feature of urban life for as long as their have been cities. My research looks at a particular type of unauthorized alteration in cities of the global north: creative, functional, often discrete, and highly localized interventions intended toward the physical "improvement" of the streetscape and other lived urban spaces, which I call "do-it-yourself urban design" (see also Douglas 2011, 2012, and forthcoming). Examples include painting bike lanes and crosswalks without city approval, turning neglected road medians into flourishing gardens, creating historical markers commemorating unheralded events, replacing corporate advertisements with anonymous art, converting parking

spaces into impromptu parks, installing faux-civic signage to "enact" hoped-for policy changes, and building and placing public street furniture in areas that lack it. Though the terms and definitions vary considerably, broadly this sort of informal urbanism has seen limited but increasing recent attention in social science and urban design discourse (e.g. Overmeyer 2007, Hou 2010, Finn 2012, Ho and Douglas 2012, Iveson 2012) and online (e.g. Lydon 2011, Douglas 2011, Veloz 2011, Burnham 2012, Lerner 2012).

I refer to these phenomena collectively as instances of "DIY urban design," a category that I draw in distinction from the dominant perspectives on the unauthorized alteration of urban space more generally.[1] These informal improvements are more functional and goal oriented than either random vandalism or self-expressive urban art, but also far more personal, limited, apolitical, and place-based than the tactics of broader protest or resistance. They represent a simple willingness to contribute perceived improvements to the local built environment on one's own terms, without permission. As one of my interviewees, part of a group known for installing homemade Adirondack chairs and interactive public message boards on Brooklyn streets and "activating" neglected urban spaces with community dinner parties in improvised parks, put it: "It's sort of unauthorized, and it's somewhat illegal, and it gives us anonymity in there

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[1] The relevant existing research can be read as lumping these practices into three basic categories (discussed at length in Douglas, forthcoming). The first considers many such actions in terms of vandalism, crime, and disorder (e.g. Wilson and Kelling 1982, Sampson and Raudenbush 1999, Keizer, Lindenberg and Steg 2008). The second is more sympathetic, approaching some forms of unauthorized alteration as novel instances of artistic or personal expression and communication, or even popular subculture, analyzing the activities for artistic, textual, or psychological meaning, but not wider context or impact (e.g. Kwon 2002, Bartholome and Snyder 2004, Snyder 2009). The third category discusses certain activities in terms similar to traditional political protest, often with wider goals explicitly stated and some observers suggesting that they qualify as instances of outright "resistance" to authority, capitalism, etc. (e.g. St. John 2004, Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, Lambert-Beatty 2010). The categories are not mutually exclusive, and each perspective does describe some forms of illegal urban intervention in their own right, yet research reveals cases that do not fit primarily within any of them, many of which are, I argue, better understood as instances of DIY urban design.

because of that, but then it's not politically charged, and it's not defacing. […] It's sincerely meant for – it's functional." (qtd. in Douglas, forthcoming)

DIY urban design practices suggest a number of important lines of inquiry. Certainly the interventions themselves have immediate and long-term practical implications for people and places. They also provide powerful (if extreme) examples of the extent to which popular urbanism and urban planning concerns have permeated the collective air in the cities of advanced neoliberal economies (see, e.g., Frank 2012, Tippapart 2012). But the simple fact that people are taking it upon themselves to make these unauthorized "contributions" to the otherwise highly controlled and professionalized cityscape provokes questions about the actors, their motives, inspirations, and justifications, and the social and spatial contexts of their actions.

Methods and Data

My findings are based on more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork comprising a multi-part research design, including in-depth interviews with 62 individuals,[2] predominantly in Los Angeles and New York (n = 35) as well as select cases in Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, London, Mexico City, New Orleans, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Toronto, and Vancouver (27 more), representing 58 different DIY urban design projects. The research also includes participant observation and photographic documentation in nearly all of these cities, and supplementary information from online and archival sources (see Douglas, forthcoming, for a detailed discussion of the methodology employed in the study). Case selection was based on a logic of sequential replication (Yin 2002), following a multiple-case-style "sequential interviewing" methodology (see Small (2009). "Snowball" sampling method and further

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[2] This number does not include interviews also conducted in pilot study with street artists, guerrilla theater performers, Reclaim the Streets activists, and others whose interventions are at the periphery of DIY urban design.

investigation yielded additional potential participants until the point of saturation (no substantively new information gained from successive interviews). While my findings cannot be said to describe everyone in the amorphous and ultimately unknowable population of "DIY urban designers," I have interviewed or otherwise gathered information on every case I have found that meets my definition in these cities (and gathered basic information on a great many more beyond them). While in some cases I refer to interviewees descriptively to protect their anonymity, many individuals explicitly waived this and requested that their names be used in connection with their actions.

My 62 respondents range in age from their late-20s through late-50s (with most in their early-30s), they are primarily white (though Asians make up a sizeable minority, along with a smaller number of Latinos and African Americans), and they come predominantly from middle-class backgrounds. Many have some post-secondary education, ranging from undergraduate degrees and art school to graduate and professional degrees in many cases. Their day jobs include everything from journalism, art practice, and small business ownership to careers in formal architectural or industrial design and even urban policy and planning.

The particular emphasis in this paper on the role of scholarly and professional urbanism does focus on something of a further selection out of the larger data set; these features do not describe everyone I have classified as a DIY urban designer, and their degrees of familiarity with the official system vary considerably. However, a large majority – individuals representing 51 of the 58 DIY projects in the sample – clearly make use of one or both of the following broad categories of formal knowledge: more *technically*, a familiarity with city policy, development history, planning practice, and relevant tools, materials, and technical know-how; and more *academically*, with reference to critical urban geography, broader planning and development theory, and other scholarly urbanism. I use examples from my research first to simply demonstrate

some of the ways that do-it-yourselfers do employ this knowledge, and then in the remaining space to explore the ways that this relationship with formal urbanism influences their actions, justifications, and potential impacts.

"We had to learn about urban design" – The Use of Technical and Academic Knowledge

The basic demographics of my sample of do-it-yourselfers do a great deal on their own to challenge stereotypes about people who make unauthorized alteration. In fact, considering their education and careers (and the aforementioned growing air of popular urbanism among these groups in general) the point is less that any familiarity with professional and scholarly urbanism is surprising, so much as the degree to which these individuals employ it while creating unauthorized and sometimes quite illegal alterations to public space and private property. As mentioned, some do-it-yourselfers literally work day jobs in urban planning and design (and I return to them below), but I begin by demonstrating the degree to which even many of those without this professional affiliation or background are familiar with the ideas and the worlds of urban theory, planning, and design.

Take Stephen Box, a long-time organizer of "Park(ing) Day" in Los Angeles – a now-global event that began in San Francisco and involves turning parking spaces into temporary parks – and a number of other pedestrianizing projects. He has convincing command not only of the sociological implications of urban parking and open space policies, but of transit usage and neighborhood park acreage statistics in his community. Well versed in city public relations language, he prefers the term "street-opening" (i.e. to pedestrians) to "street-closing," joining a newly popular onomastic debate in progressive planning circles. While speaking to me at a coffee shop near L.A. City Hall, he called out a group of city transportation engineers within earshot of our table for designing for

cars not for people, and then proceeded to tell me about Baron Haussmann's 19th century destruction of Paris. A filmmaker, transit advocate, and community organizer by day, Stephen is a known figure around City Hall, enjoys engaging in legalistic arguments with police officers and city planners, and recently ran for local office himself.

Jordan Seiler, the man behind a campaign to rid New York and other cities of corporate outdoor advertising, likes to quote the American Planning Association's definition of good public spaces. He often references David Harvey too, and months after accompanying him on a late-night mission "replacing" corporate advertising on payphones, I ran into Jordan at an urban studies workshop at the CUNY Graduate Center (to which he has no affiliation). As for the visual pollution that he sees as his target: "Well, you know the average advertising firm wouldn't have spent close to 70 million dollars in 2008 if they didn't think you were looking at their stuff." He also knows city codes and ordinances so well that much of what he targets actually is illegal advertising that the city should technically be doing away with itself. He has invested in the same custom key that advertising companies use to open bus stop advertising windows, and will often do so in broad daylight.

When the various (and actually largely unaffiliated) individuals often referred to as the "Los Angeles Department of DIY" began painting their own bike lanes in the city, they consulted planning documents and city codes, purchased professional lane-striping equipment and work vests, and carefully crafted accurate stencils and signs. "When I was in the hardware store, I just told them that I was a manager at the Department [of Transportation] and we needed to do something to the curb," explained one man who was involved, "and they showed me the best one." What's more, as he put it, "we had to learn about urban design […] we had to learn about where a good place for a bike lane would be." To encourage turning a central L.A. corner into a park rather than the condo slated for it, they created a massive, painstakingly official-looking "coming soon" sign for the

park, accurate right down to city contact information and the translation into Spanish and Korean. The local signmaker they hired to print it thought he was scoring a city contract.

In the first case, a formerly-apathetic community member does not just speak up when he notices the planning process is out of balance, but learns the planning doctrine and starts changing things. In the next, a formally trained artist, sick of corporate advertisers cluttering and financially exploiting the city's public spaces, reads the law and takes matters into his own hands. In the last, Angelenos of widely differing ages and occupations, tired of waiting for the city to improve their streets, decide to learn how the city does it and do it themselves. Not only are they taking matters into their own hands, but they are doing so with savvy, knowledge, and skills that reveal an acquired awareness of the formal planning and design context.

Some interventionists make use of technical skills and purpose-built tools. Many learn about the appropriate places, materials, and even design guidelines for the types of additions they want to make, and the codes and laws that govern them. Still others call upon the ideals of planning theory past or present, or reference the ideas of academic urban studies theorists. Most of these individuals – those in the examples above, and a majority of all my interviewees – have essentially sought out this knowledge as part of making these improvements, whether to improve the functionality of the intervention, or with hopes of greater legitimacy (for themselves and the work), or simply because they enjoy learning about how to "do it right."

For a number of DIY urban designers, however, it is actually the formal knowledge and skills that come first, followed by the inspiration to act informally. One of the best examples of this is Richard Ankrom's "guerrilla public service," mentioned at the outset. He put his years of professional sign-making experience to work "fixing" a confusing major freeway sign. The story of his intervention speaks volumes:

I had gotten lost twenty years earlier when I didn't live in the neighborhood. And then when I moved here and drove under the same [sign] I realized 'oh well that's why I got lost!' […] Since I'm in the business I realized of course who else is gonna do it? Who else is more qualified? And who could actually just go install, with no question, just get it done. […] So I did a bunch of homework on it first, to make sure if that [missing information] did belong there. There may have been a technical reason why they left it off. I couldn't find it, so I went ahead with the project. […] It was important because I didn't want them to have any excuse to remove it! Not because of shoddy material, not because it was improperly fabricated. And also too just the skill set that I've learned in the sign business, of what materials you use, and why. So I did the homework and I checked the engineering specs. And I also checked in the field because they don't always match. So that's, I mean, I just basically followed directions like I would any other sign.

In Phoenix, the woman behind a collaborative sustainable planning effort on the wall of an abandoned building there (among other DIY interventions) is also the director of an influential environmental quality consulting and public relations firm. Ali Pulver, a YouTube employee with a master's in industrial design and a background in new product marketing, put her skills to use creating a series of portable tables, seating, and accessories that exploit features of the existing urban landscape to make it easier to sit and eat on the streets of New York. Baltimore resident Graham Coreil-Allen draws on his schooling in architecture and urban planning as well as art to create public walking tours, maps, and information kiosks that highlight and critique overlooked public spaces.

This goes further. The "SignChair" and "SignBench" – other DIY street furniture installations that provide places to sit near bus stops and elsewhere on the car-oriented streetscapes of Los Angeles – were created by two professional industrial designers. DoTank, an informal design collective mentioned above, is composed almost entirely of people who work day jobs as urban designers and engineers. Jay Griffith, the so-called

"Johnny Appleseed of Venice," is a high-profile landscape designer in Southern California. One of Mexico City's most ardent painters of unauthorized bicycle lanes literally works for the city government's bicycle division.

As such, practical and academic urbanism knowledge is being sought by everyday community members in order to affect the change they want to see, while others are seeing a need that their existing skills and even professional occupations leave them well-qualified to address, and so choose to act informally. Regardless, whether talking to a do-it-yourselfer who fully "daylights" as a design professional or another who is simply committed to acquiring the requisite information to make meaningful, functional improvements, formal knowledge is a central feature of this very informal intervention. How this knowledge helps us to understand *why* they choose to act without permission in the ways that they do is the subject of the next two sections.

"If you're a city planner, there's only so much you can plan for" – Filling in for Failed Bureaucracy

The base motivation for DIY urban design intervention is almost always described as seeing a "need" and/or an "opportunity" to make what the individual in question views as an improvement to the built environment in their community. In acting, they often see themselves as stepping up where the city or a private property owner has dropped the ball. But rather than writing a letter to the city council, DIY urban designers are doing it themselves without authorization, yet, as we have seen, with some degree of professional know-how. In order to understand why these individuals are going to these lengths themselves, and walking the line between unauthorized actions and official ways of doing things, their familiarity with official regulations, planning codes, and especially the workings of civic planning and policy bureaucracy is a central consideration.

A project by the Los Angeles group Heavy Trash in 2000, "announcing" a new subway line with eight "Future Station Location" signs along the 15-mile would-be route, explicitly intended to spur the city to action on mass transit (Heavy Trash 2004), much like the faux-official park proposal described above. Even if sometimes wildly fantastic, the illustrated development proposals designed and posted by participants in the Hypothetical Development Organization in New Orleans are implicit calls for real development action, as are the ideas found on the aforementioned "Phoenix Chalkboard." Other interventionists responsible for pop-up parks, bike infrastructure, or the like, say they would love for the city to be doing a better job, effectively so they would not have to. "I wish the city would just do it," explained a woman who helped craft home-made "Bicycle Boulevard" signage for a popular cycling route in L.A., "I'd definitely prefer it because I've been ruined by going to places like Portland and being like 'look at what they do, they just do it.' […] I like when the city actually helps you to do the thing, and it doesn't have to be all activist-y."

Such preferences aside, however, there is also a strong feeling that this is wishful thinking. Most DIYers I spoke with believe that city bureaucracy is too slow-moving and simply will not or cannot do it "right" anyway, an assessment clearly informed by the frustrated familiarity that many have with the formal planning process. "I'm not sure if the city would be capable of it," said another Angeleno involved in creating unauthorized bicycle infrastructure. "Like how many of the people who work for the Department of Planning live in Los Angeles, like L.A. proper? I'm sure they don't live in my neighborhood. And I think it takes that like on-the-ground acting and moving to see what can be done and what needs to be done." "It would be great if the city did it, but I think for us to expect and wait and hope for the city to do something like this is unrealistic," said Kim, one of the creators of the SignChair. Stacey, the woman behind the Phoenix Chalkboard, knows from experience that "It's easier to just do things rather than deal

with the bureaucracy." Indeed, one of the founders of Dallas' DIY community improvement phenomenon "Better Block" was a professional city planner who only after leaving that job found himself physically creating needed improvements (in his case, a bike lane) for the first time. It is perhaps for this reason that Stephen, as already described, is no fan of formal urban design work at all, referring to private design firms as "bourgeois commercial pig dogs" and deriding city planners as "well-trained fleas" who "are really busy drinking coffee and shit."

Ali, the aforementioned creator of a series of tables, seating, and other infrastructural add-ons she calls "Pop-Up Lunch," sums it up this way:

> If you're a city planner, you're like, there's only so much you can plan for. You can't do a focus group around how people are going to use the city! […] Because we'd never get anything done! […] It's like, one, it's so slow, but two, there is this notion of people will fight it until they see it! And then you have to show them what it could be... they could be pissed off, but you have to do it, because you can't just keep talking about it.

In light of this understanding, another interviewee suggested to me that the city should just allow improvements to be made by people like him, following official standards: "Members of the public should be allowed to look at the bike plan, and if there's a place where we can do it […] up to spec and everything, we should be able to put it in ourselves." This is, like many of the examples given above, indicative of considerable confidence (not to mention, arguably, hubris). DIYers see their improvements as valuable, and are sure of their own ability to make them so.

It is in this spirit that a spokesman for Toronto's "Urban Repair Squad," among the first groups to begin illegally installing cycling infrastructure, explained that "the group kind of fulfills an official function." Jordan, with his efforts to remove illegal advertising, would agree, as would people like Richard, whose freeway sign

improvement was so well done and widely appreciated that the California Department of Transportation left it up for years, and even kept his design changes when finally replacing it during routine maintenance. It is perhaps further indicative of this sort of self-understanding among do-it-yourselfers that some dress as city road workers, tour guides, and other officials when creating their improvements. In Graham's words, "I wear a uniform [when leading walking tours] because I'm an expert on public space." Their knowledge of urbanism not only informs their actions, it gives them confidence that what they are doing is the right thing for the city.

"Maybe I really should be allowed to be doing what I'm doing" – Urban Theory as Further Justification

The diffusion of scholarly and professional urbanism among DIY urban designers and its accompanying self-confidence is also tied up in another important motivation and justification for their tactics: a belief in the inherent value of unauthorized or bottom-up intervention itself. Such tactics are viewed by many of my interviewees as central to a more dynamic, democratic, and locally-sensitive approach to urban design that they desire (often even professionally). While their individual actions are small, many say they hope to inspire others to look at things differently and question the place of informality in the city. "Why not do it formally?" says a member of DoTank, repeating my question, "I think seeing something without the lens of like 'oh this is sponsored by this group' […] that works against the idea of trying to have others repeat it." Ali picks up on this:

There's something wonderful in the bottom up approach. […] It almost might seem inauthentic if – like, as the city, you're setting up the framework, you're setting up the structure. I want to see what people will do with it. And just like being a bit more fun or, you know, not endangering people, but like supporting the things that people are doing on their own.

This sort of thinking is informed by academic urbanism, in keeping with themes present at planning, design, and urban studies conferences in recent years and the critical urban theory of the past half century. One creator of L.A.'s aspirational "Park for the People" sign professed admiration for the work of Guy Dubord and Michel de Certeau, heralding the value of "These little things, that if you make these little things better for people, they might not even notice them, but it encourages them to act differently." Another Angeleno, responsible for signposting traffic islands as "national park" land, referred me to the book *Everyday Urbanism* by UC Berkeley landscape planner and theorist Margaret Crawford. A member of the Mexico City collective Haz Ciudad, who take it upon themselves to stripe crosswalks and paint bike lanes in that city, told me at length about the writing of the social psychologist Pablo Fernández Christlieb, whose work on "the spirit of the street" and "everyday culture" inspires his own actions. Jordan offered an especially thoughtful example of all this that brings in many other elements described above as well:

> Often we have this notion that things are not really ours, or changeable, these spaces. And what David Harvey was saying […] that we're all participants in the creation of these spaces, and really kind of embodying that and, um, accepting that it's one of your responsibilities as a public citizen to go out and kind of create the environment in which you want to exist. […] And just by going out and physically doing something you gain a political power, that the resisting forces are really gonna have to pose a better argument, you know why should you be allowed to be doing that. When you start to get into that conversation, maybe I really should be allowed to be doing what I'm doing, and by virtue of just doing it, I kind of prove that.

There are then a variety of interconnected reasons that these individuals take action to "improve" the built environments of their communities without permission, from the most pragmatic to the almost whimsical. To varying degrees, however, familiarity with planning, design, and academic urbanism almost always plays a role.

This knowledge not only inspires and enables them to act, but suggests on their parts considerable consciousness of, and confidence in, the place and impact of their action. It thus may also leave them in all the more culpable a position with regard to the impacts they have. In the final section, I briefly consider broader questions of context and impact.

"Less of a social experiment and more of a resource": The Self-Conscious Context and Impact of DIY Urban Design

If do-it-yourselfers demonstrate so much knowledge of professional and scholarly urban theory, planning, and design in their actions, are they also aware of these wider issues of context and impact surrounding them? I consider this by briefly discussing two further questions raised by the knowledge and reflexivity of DIY urban designers, one concerning their own social context, the other the wider impact of their actions.

The first, already alluded above, begins with asking why these individuals who by and large possess considerable political, social, and economic capital choose to make improvements themselves and often illegally. Surely they have more ability than most to make the changes they desire through formal channels. Indeed, one organizer of a campaign to place benches and planters on neglected streets of South Los Angeles is the Reverend Monsignor David O'Connell, the highly-regarded pastor at St. Michael's Parish church, and the project itself is the brainchild of a well-known landscape architect. So why are people in this position – including some whose day jobs involve making the same sorts of changes officially – designing and installing urban design improvements without permission? In addition to their beliefs in the quality of their contributions and the intrinsic value of the informal, their relative privilege may itself play a role.

As informed urbanists, do-it-yourselfers understand their own place in the city – as largely middle-class and in most cases white, perhaps members of the "creative class" – and as such they also understand that they will probably, at the minimum, get away

with it. Run-ins with the law that my interviewees have described during even quite flagrantly "illegal" interventions have always ended without arrest, and sometimes even feature congenial conversation. For instance, Jordan told me of an occasion on which police approached him while removing a corporate advertisement from a Manhattan bus stop; he explained exactly what he was doing and received a friendly 'carry on.' Stephen, when occupying a parking spot on an L.A. street with an impromptu park, took it even further, welcoming the opportunity to have a "land-use discussion" with police:

> So we get to have a discussion about, seriously, who do the streets belong to? And why do we have space allocated for parking? So that you can store your personal property? You know I'd like to put a piano there. […] But what about 20 bicycles? What about me? I think I think I'll live here, because it's the best real-estate deal in town. You know Donald Shoup? He wrote *The High Cost of Free Parking*, used to be a professor at UCLA […] So, now we're having a conversation. And by the way we won, with [the police].

Not everyone welcomes these interactions; certainly others are much more concerned with anonymity and 'stealth.' But one still has to wonder if a teenager from a less privileged background or with a less privileging appearance could expect the same broadly supportive response if they decided to soften a square curb with concrete, convert an abandoned payphone, or put up a street sign without permission.

My interviewees express only tangential consideration of privilege on this level, with most viewing it as more a question of their perspective and skills (and, to be fair, their demonstration of technical knowledge may provide them some legitimacy), but it can sometimes seem paternalistic. As one member of L.A.'s Department of DIY put it, "I know like the teenage girl riding her dad's bike around, she's not going to think like 'I should cement a curb here' and she probably doesn't have the resources to do it."

The complicated relationship that some do-it-yourselfers have with privilege and their own role in the city also raises questions about the broader impacts that they have. Members of this group are confident in the validity of their "improvements" because they believe they are essentially as good as the real thing and that there is added value in their approach. But then do familiarity with the principles of urban design, knowledge of city codes and plans, and claims in some cases to be doing the city's work, imply an obligation to the general public to truly 'do good' in the projects they undertake? Most immediately, there are basic concerns about the possibility of someone being injured. More to the point though, if a reading in urbanism, critical theory, and urban policy includes awareness of the state disinvestment and commodification of urban space that DIY urban design responds to, should it also imply awareness of other concerns of the neoliberal city, such as insensitive development or gentrification? Because of the form and content of most DIY improvements and the backgrounds of their creators, many risk contributing to the same uneven development trends they might aim locally to resist.

When I bring up the possibility that some interventions could have these consequences, do-it-yourselfers are concerned and sympathetic without fail, again revealing a thoughtful appreciation for the dynamics of the contemporary city. Steve Cancian's "Urban Living Rooms" in Oakland and L.A. are explicitly aimed at creating community-built improvements *without* encouraging gentrification. Other interventionists, like Graham in Baltimore, expressed a wish to avoid just "parachuting in" to neighborhoods they do not have a close connection to, while others worried about just the opposite. Ryan, a Chicagoan who created a series of free public book exchanges out of curbside magazine racks, noted that, as he thought about where he was installing these book boxes, he began to consider places where they might be more "needed":

> I should be doing this more in neighborhoods where it's less of a social experiment
> and more of a resource. [...] I stopped with Pilsen, but that had me thinking about like

Rogers Park or neighborhoods where there'd be kids that maybe would be more interested in getting the free books or whatever. And even parents, because they said in Pilsen that there were parents that were coming and getting children's books out of there with their kids and everything. So that was definitely interesting to hear about it turning into a resource for the community.

But in general, whether as a small, sensible improvement from which everyone will benefit, a way to brighten a blighted area, or something the city should be doing anyway, most DIY urban designers consistently argue that their own projects are too subtle, too harmless, or too well-thought-out to really have unintended negative consequences. Furthermore, while many respondents certainly demonstrated sensitivity around poverty and inequality in neighborhood conditions, some see issues such as gentrification as inevitable, unrelated to their work, or even, to the degree that they may be responsible, really not all that bad. "I know from like living and being in my neighborhood, in my area, like what improvements could be made to benefit lots of people in my situation," explained the L.A. Department of DIY member who, as evinced above, also feels that some other residents may not have the resources or even the *idea* to make these improvements.

Going further, it is worth considering that even the generally laudable spirit of the actions – that it is up to "the people" to step up and do it – may only further enable the retreat of the state and foster the individualistic order that pervades the neoliberal city. It could be that this is where the diffusion of technical and academic knowledge cannot quite keep up with progressive ideals. (One may need to be familiar with a good deal of neo-Marxist critical theory, for instance, to conclude that even if unauthorized improvement is a reaction to neoliberalism and a symbol of organic, positive creative action, in many cities development capital is quite happy to simultaneously ignore minor

assaults and take full advantage of *any* "sign of life," including illegal but trendy unauthorized improvements [see Von Hassel, 2002, Edwards, 2009, Lerner, 2012].)

Conclusion

Do-it-yourself urban designers have begun to challenge the modern assumption that the urban built environment is highly controlled and open only to professional alteration, bringing to it an ethic of popular reinterpretation. What I have demonstrated here is that that many of them do so using the same tools, guidelines, and broader considerations *as* professionals. (Some of them literally *are* professionals.) These are not your average concerned community members, but highly-informed actors who learn the facts, use the tools, and quote the rationales of theorists and scholars to inform and justify the unauthorized improvements that they take it upon themselves to make. In most cases, they see their work as a perfectly appropriate alternative to more official alterations.

My findings about the backgrounds, motivations, and practices of DIY urban designers suggest that the diffusion of relevant professional and scholarly knowledge occurs in two related ways: with everyday community members seeking information in order to more effectively make changes themselves, and with actual design and planning professionals seeing an opportunity or need and bringing their know-how to the streets. I have argued that this knowledge informs both their actions and their motivations, and suggested that it produces a self-reflexivity on their parts that at once emboldens them and raises dilemmas about privilege and unintended consequences.

More broadly, I have shed light here on some of these new ways that people seek to improve their communities on their own and without permission. Such a trend rightly concerns urban planners and policy-makers as much as community members and property owners, as it implies challenges to the status quo in the otherwise proscribed and controlled space of the contemporary city, including the question of who is entitled or

allowed to do this work. Finally, it is worth noting that DIY urban design may in fact assert a sort of "right to the city" claim (Lefebvre 1968, Harvey 2008). Though there are myriad practical and theoretical complications with this, the fact that many do-it-yourselfers make such claims intentionally and sometimes with explicit reference to that idea and the other complex theories of its author, might bode well for the possibility of just the sort of critical consciousness that urban theorists like Lefebvre yearned for.

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