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Tactical Urbanism: A Plan for the Revitalization of Vacant and Decrepit Spaces

Nicklaus McGuire

ABSTRACT: Current research on tactical urbanism suggests that temporary buildings in vacant spaces has given rise to more successful areas and reinvigorated sites for permanent buildings. Tactical urbanism raises three fundamental problems: risks, onsite design, and externalities. This research paper addresses these problems. Specifically, the study focuses on Quartyard in San Diego, California and relies on interviews, participant observation, and reviewing policies. The research will contribute to the literature on tactical urbanism, but it will also be shared with private developers and city officials in the hope of temporary buildings will be used more frequently to revitalize abandoned spaces.

Introduction

Vacant spaces and decrepit buildings are eyesores in many metropolitan cities. Do these spaces have the potential to be transformed into bustling and lively places for people to meet and gather? With the human population ever expanding and natural resources becoming more limited, societies need to utilize spaces that have already been developed and focus on construction within existing building areas. Some questions that begin to arise when thinking about this subject include: are these new buildings economically and socially feasible, does tactical urbanism benefit residents, how is it used, and how are these spaces being designed. This research question examines whether tactical urbanism has a positive effect on the revitalization of cities, and if Quartyard is an example of successful tactical urbanism? Many authors have looked at other tactical urbanism sites and will be discussed later in this proposal. A trend gaining popularity in the design field is the use of tactical urbanism. This term is defined as a collection of low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment, usually in cities, intended to improve local neighborhoods and city gathering places (Pfeifer 2014). According to Mike Lydon, it has five characteristics (Lydon and Garcia, 2015):

1. A deliberate, phased approach to instigating change;
2. An offering of local ideas for local planning challenges;
3. Short-term commitment and realistic expectations;
4. Low-risks, with a possibly high reward;
5. The development of social capital between citizens, and the building of organizational capacity between public/private institutions, nonprofit/NGOs, and their constituents.

This new type of development is a semi-permanent design which is easily changed and adaptable. Tactical urbanism focuses on working with the communities who have small scale demands and have possibilities to become more permanent fixtures. Within the limited time frame available this research project will focus on one particular project site: Quartyard, in San Diego, California.

This research paper examines Quartyard at the human scale and compares it to tactical urbanism as a whole. This paper is divided into five sections: the literature review, the research strategy, findings and analysis, the conclusion, and additional appendices. The literature review focuses on tactical urbanism in a broad sense which will enable a better understanding of successful implementations and will be divided into three subgroups: what are the social and economic benefits, who do they benefit and how are they used, and how these sites are designed. The research strategy is a qualitative case study that which relies on multiple interview types and participant observation. The findings and analysis section focuses on deciphering the data obtained from the research section and is divided into smaller sections relating to scale of interviews with accompanying graphs and diagrams. Finally, the conclusion will solidify the question regarding Quartyard as a successful application of tactical urbanism. The conclusion's predictable goal is to prove Quartyard is an excellent example of tactical urbanism.

Literature Review

Social and Economic Benefits? The first major topic in this review is to discover if there are any social and economic benefits to tactical and temporary urbanism. Social and economic benefits should be a cornerstone

in any present-day project; however, Mara Ferreri has made some observations within Europe and North America, “Many city authorities in Europe and North America that are charged with the task of encouraging the revitalization and redevelopment of urban areas are now finding that, for the most part, they lack the resources, power and control to implement formal masterplans” (Ferreri 2015, 183). More planners and designers are starting to try less formal planning ideas are looking towards smaller designs with multiple temporary phases aimed at potential of sites (Ferreri 2015). Authors Ho and Lam agree with Ferreri and add, “By default, a pop-up shop has a single ambition: to generate economic revenue from its products and services. A MVP (minimum viable product) approach to urban planning would add other criteria and metrics to its objectives including the cultivation of social capital, educational values, and economic balances” (Greco 2012). There are temporary installations that can stimulate markets, and these systems can reside in an area until a more standard use develops. Temporary urbanism has the potential to reactivate areas and add value to a city while preventing homelessness (Ferreri 2015) (Dovey 2014). Multiple authors agreed that temporary urbanism has the potential to be more beneficial economically and socially by discovering the wants and needs of the community before building a large shell and hoping the filled space is successful.

The many positive social and economic benefits there are factors that still may not be resolved. Temporary buildings will not fix the deep problems in a city. Partially completed buildings can be an “insidious form of urban blight” raising more criticism where much hope had been raised (Bishop 2015).

Who Do They Benefit? How Are They Used? If planners and designers want a project to be successful they need to know who the newly crafted spaces will benefit. How spaces are originally intended compared to how they are actually used is an important dynamic when considering design ideas. One of temporary and tactical urbanism’s main long term goal is to have government help everyday people become empowered within their community, and after being empowered communities see positive development that benefits residents and improves land uses (Lydon and Garcia 2015).

Temporary urbanism can promote the uses of city space. It can “democratize” these areas that were to have extended closures -- it would provide a space geared towards community utilization rather private uses. These temporary sites can provide amusement and pleasure while permanent development progresses (Bishop 2015). There many benefits associated with tactical urbanism; however, Bishop still cautions, “But like all phenomena there can be a more sinister and cynical application. It is unsurprising that the corporate world has latched on to

pop-ups in a big way. Pop-up shops selling designer brands and whole designer malls, such as Box Park in London’s Shoreditch, are manifestations of this” (Bishop 2015, 12). Successful implementations have a problem with becoming flooded with corporate brands which losing touch with the grassroots movement and having all projects being comprised of similar programming.

The people who most benefit from these temporary uses, according to Ferrari, are those with creative minds who are trying to create urban spaces that reflect their vision of the future. “Empty properties spoil town centers, destroy economic and social value, and waste resources that we cannot afford to leave idle” (Ferreri 2015, 187). Positive community-led uses tend to bring more communities to town centers and revitalize the street and begins to promote connectivity. This connectivity begins to identify “spatial vacuums” produced by a loss of investment in an area. Flexible tactical urbanism creates a more adaptive community life and promotes the use of wasted space (Ferreri 2015) (Dovey 2014). This type of urbanism is a benefits communities by filling gaps within cities and making connections between people and space considerably more efficient.

How Are These Sites Designed? The way in which sites and buildings are designed weighs heavily on a specific project’s success or failure. If a project is under designed the public space can be overwhelming and unwelcoming; conversely, if a space is over designed it can be perceived as crowded and cumbersome. Joann Greco emphasizes “light, quicker, cheaper” solutions and in her article quotes David Alumbaugh, director of city design for the San Francisco Planning Department, “We have some basic parameters about their size, their ability to be removable, and their accessibility, but the creativity we see within those parameters has been the most wonderful part of the program. Not just in the sense of the actual structures, but in the stories behind them, their design, and their funding” (Greco 2012). One factor that seems to be a common ideal is the integration of all parties, not just a mixing of homogenous factors. Having a variety of inputs allows for a more diverse design which makes projects more accepted by larger groups of people. Successful spaces have multiple focuses in which there is a potential for residents to coexist and meet. These spaces should not be “static”, but be dynamic and progressive (Massey 2005).

Several scholars have agreed there should be some form of control, but government needs to remain flexible. Planning Departments need to promote flexible small phasing plans rather than concrete plans following the “if we build it, the will come” ideology. They should have more open time frames and more strategic plans that can easily react to shifting communities. tactical urbanism cultivates the “everyday” and is founded on resident relationships (Dovey 2014).

These small incisions within communities are “laboratories in real-scale.” They give the opportunity to learn and to grow a space before a permanent solution can be built (Kossak 2012). Temporary site designs through a tactical urbanism model can show the potential success of a project before a permanent product has been built. This model would potentially eliminate a major loss if a product is unsuccessful. McFarlane explains, “The implication is that assemblage, through its focus on description of how everyday relations are put together and change over time, reveals urban multiplicities: . . . socio-material alignments through the diverse uses and imaginaries of urban sites, objects, institutions and networks” (MacFarlane 2011, 735). The authors have demonstrated the potential of tactical urbanism design ideals increasing the success of certain development potentials.

The specific objective for this proposal is to study the potential effects of tactical urbanism on a city. I expect tactical Urbanism will have a positive effect on the revitalization of cities. My research will provide insight into tactical urbanisms effect by studying the development of Quartyard in Downtown San Diego by researching the potential risks, onsite design, and possible externalities.

Research Strategy

The research strategy for this case study follows guidelines set forth from author Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia in *Tactical Urbanism: Short Term Action Long Term Change*. The questions and methods for obtaining data are based from these characteristics given in the introduction. The main source of data collection is from interviews because the Quartyard Project is a grassroots movement. Grassroots movements are smaller and allow for easier access to the designers because they are very interested in working with people for whom their projects can benefit the most. Since tactical urbanism projects are designed for people, the best way to learn if the project is successful is to interview people who were intended to use it the most. Finally, participant observation allows for site visits to see how people are interacting with the space.

The research questions are divided into two sets. One question set is designed for the project Architects asking questions relating to the site’s origins through the implementation and deciding if the project is a success. The second set of questions are directed to the people who visit Quartyard. These questions include:

1. What were some reasons why you began this project?
2. What were some of the obstacles you faced?
3. Were there any particular regulations that needed to be dealt with?
4. Why do you feel the programed space is effective?
5. Is the project being used as it was designed or has it been used in new and different ways?
6. Has there been an overwhelming amount of positive

or negative feedback for a permanent installation?

7. What effects do you think this space has on the surrounding community?
8. Why do you feel tactical urbanism is a strong strategy for design?

The questions above are specifically aimed at a narrow group of people for longer answers that enable more focused research to the inner working mechanics of Quartyard. The set of questions below are aimed at the program users, adjacent businesses, and residents. These questions include:

1. How far away do you live from here?
2. How often do you come here?
3. Do you think this space is effective?
4. How has Quartyard affected you?

These questions are briefer allowing for easier access to a much larger sample of people who are more willing to submit to random interview questions. These questions are phrased to be one or two short answers.

The primary shortcomings associated with this project is due to a short time constraint. This research covers the basics of financials, but not the hard numbers of five to ten year land deals and the profit margins associated with a successful business. Instead this research only covers the overall ideas of inexpensive design options to lower the Quartyard’s overall bottom line for investors; however this case study does explore the low risk – high reward aspect associated with this site.

Findings and Analysis

Designer Interviews and Creation: The primary source of information from interviews was from the original designers of Quartyard: Philip Auchettl, David Lowenstein, and Jason Grauten. The Quartyard was originally a thesis project from Architecture students at New School of Architecture and Design in Downtown San Diego. New School of Architecture and Design is located one block from where the Quartyard would finally be built. Auchettl, Lowenstein, and Grauten began by looking at Downtown San Diego’s lack of any public social gathering areas, but they did notice an abundance of void space downtown. They noticed there was no place close to their school where they could get a beer after class, listen to music, or even have a dog. They noticed a lot of vacant properties that were being held for future developments. Auchettl posed the question, “how can we put something temporary in as a placeholder for that future development while creating a pedestrian friendly exciting area that revitalizes the area for that new development” (Auchettl)? The students wanted an Urban Park that had outdoor free space to capitalize on San Diego’s yearly warm days and a place that was free to the public. They wanted to design

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“a backyard for everyone” and activate it with things people would want in their own backyards like a place to get BBQ sausages, get a cold beer, play social games, and have a safe place for beloved pets to run and play, something that Downtown San Diego desperately needed.

The project was fraught with difficulties and most claimed this type of project was impossible. Numerous times the team would be told there was no way they would get funding or permits, and that the city would never agree to such an endeavor. In the beginning of the project a large majority of the time was spent outside the studio and dedicated to gaining community support. The remaining thirty percent was intense design work. Being graduate students, the team had little money of their own to put forth to undertake this project and instead started a Kickstarter for the program. The Kickstarter raised \$60,067 in donations in only thirty days. This community support showed the students that not only were they interested in the project, but the community was invested too. This enabled them to approach investors and prove the community backing for this project. Having gained support the students met with the Mayor’s office, the City of San Diego, Civic SD, and the city attorney. They had no legal representation but were still able to negotiate the lease from the city. Originally they only asked for a small 40ft x 20ft section of the lot, but the city excitedly the city asked, “why not take the rest of the 25,000sq ft?” After a couple of months the project was underway, and it was completed in 2014.

The city gave Quartyard a two year lease with an option to extend for a one more year. They needed to find a way to balance community needs and still make money. Quartyard was only planned to be there for a few years so the team needed to make sure the site could pay itself off. This led to the team also having to balance financial realities against sustainable goals. They had to strike balance in which they had to remain profitable while still using costly sustainable materials. The end choice was to primarily use recycled shipping containers to build the entire venue. So everything except the stage was made from shipping containers.

Key Architecture and Design Elements: The use of shipping containers has been done in many other countries including England and Australia so Quartyard was not a pioneer, but it was a pioneer in San Diego. Auchettl remarked about the first time they presented this idea to the City of San Diego Engineer, he stated, “The city engineering almost fell out of his chair when we proposed this idea to him, but we brought in outside experts to assure the city the shipping containers wouldn’t fall over” (Auchettl). Projects that use shipping containers usually leave them the colors they are currently or oftentimes paint them dark grey or black. The team decided since they had never seen white shipping container project they would do this for two reasons, first they felt it would add a clean

aesthetic to the site and second the color white would help the shipping containers with heat gain. The rest of the site is the definition of sustainability. There are a total of nine shipping containers, all of which are recycled. Every tree is planted in recycled dumpsters which double as standing tables, the trash cans are all recycled oil drums, and all the tables’ onsite are made from reclaimed wood. The Quartyard project managers wanted to elicit the benefits and beauty of sustainable materials and show the feasibility of using recycled and reclaimed materials.

The team wanted Quartyard to be completely outdoors and used San Diego’s climate to their benefit. The community was really excited about having some sort of outdoor space where they could gather and socialize. They used renderings as a marketing tool because everyone wanted to know what they were going to get, but the original designs were quite different from what would eventually be built.

The original designs had only a small expectation for music. Initially the site was meant to have small gatherings for music, but later the site evolved into a very music heavy venue. These concerts would bring upwards of 1,500 people to Quartyard, and fortunately the Quartyard’s conditional use permit covered events at this scale. Lowenstein stated, “We didn’t expect this amount much focus on music, but we just went with it. We are fine if people want to use this space differently, since we designed it for the people. People have brought many different ideas to use in this space that we would have never thought of ourselves and we embrace it” (Lowenstein).



Figure 1: Completed stage for large music venues
Source: Radlabs SC

Community Feedback: Overall, there has been a generous amount of positive feedback for Quartyard and there has not been much negativity associated with the project. Nearby property owners do not mind the temporary use space because they know the site is not permanent and are not worried about this affecting their

property values. Conversely, the community had an overwhelmingly positive reaction for the site. In fact, a petition arose and was developed to keep the Quartyard as a permanent fixture. The Save Quartyard petition praises Quartyard claiming by “focusing on sustainable design in blighted areas, has become a major neighborhood gather space that now serves an average of 9,000 residents and visitors each month” (Vasquez). Currently the petition is at 3,000 signatures. The project has been so successful that the city wrote a new conditional use permit using Quartyard as a case study within that new permit. This new permit shows how much of an influence this implementation of tactical urbanism has brought to Downtown San Diego. The benefit of temporary buildings is their ability to be moved, Auchettl declares, “if the city decides to build a high rise here, we’ll pick up our shipping containers, move them and start reactivation and rejuvenating somewhere else” (Auchettl).

Externalities and User Interviews: Next, a wider array of people were interviewed who use the site by examining key factors. These questions were asked on a Sunday afternoon from 1pm to 3pm, 50 individuals were asked four questions each, as stated in the research methods section. The chances of receiving much negative feedback is slim; however, from online reviews there are people who visit Quartyard and have negative feelings.

Travel Time to Quartyard: The first question posed was: how many minutes did it take to travel from residents homes to Quartyard? As shown in Figure 2, the majority of people stated (56%) that Quartyard was within a five minute walk from where they lived. 33% of people interviewed said the walk took about ten minutes. Finally 11% claimed it took 15 minutes. Which was surprisingly the longest amount of time it took anyone in the sample to arrive at the site.

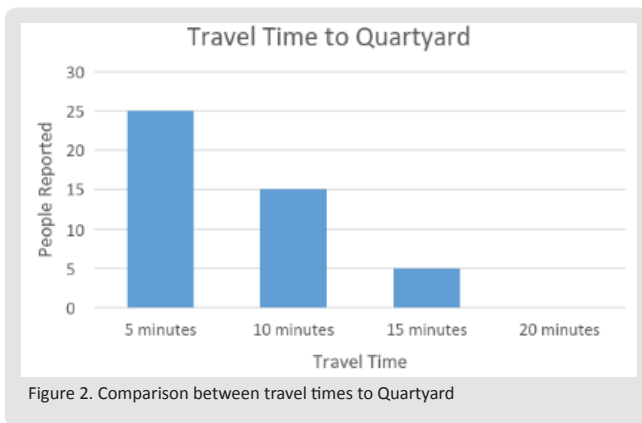


Figure 2. Comparison between travel times to Quartyard

This chart shows the key demographics of people who the site was designed for and those same targeted people are easily able to access the site.

Visits per Month: The next question asked was how often people visited Quartyard per month and there was a

huge split between the data which yielded some interesting results. As shown in Figure 3, 40% of people interviewed said one to two times per month, 13% claimed three to four times per month, 11% claimed five to six times per month and 36% people noted six or more times per month. One interesting dynamic which appeared during many interviews was not a question originally asked during the research. More than 60% of the people interviewed said it was their first time there also stated they were told to visit by friends and they would definitely be coming to Quartyard more often. This “word of mouth” success promotes to a growing trend of social capital building.



Figure 3. Comparison of number of people vs total visits per month

Key Trends: While doing research there was a few key trends that began to emerge. These trends show an increasing amount of popularity for Quartyard and the “word of mouth” effectiveness to attract more people. Also the demographic of people who lived within five minutes and visited six or more times a month also happened to be dog owners. The dog park within the site is the only off leash dog park in Downtown San Diego and this is where the most positivity came from the interviews. This dog park is a convenient area for dog owners to bring their dogs and allow them to socialize with other dogs. It enables them to be released from their leashes to run and play safely in an enclosed area while simultaneously allowing their owners to relax in the open air, enjoy a beer, and socialize with other dog owners from the area.

Other Questions: The remaining two questions if the space was used effectively and how has the Quartyard affected people. The majority of people interviewed all claimed the site was effective and they liked the openness of the site, the moveable furniture, the diversity of food trucks and amenities that could be brought into the site. One of the main appeals of the Quartyard was its dog friendly environment that provided a place for dogs to roam free. Many people stressed how much they appreciated the dog park being enclosed which allowed their pets to run around while they were able to get something to eat.

The next question asked had a resoundingly similar

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answer from most people. Nearly every person interviewed said Quartyard had a positive effect on the community and the site was a beneficial asset to the Downtown area. There may be a slight implication of gentrification because people are able to get a beer and walk their dog. This is a null point due to the site already being planned for construction after five years causing gentrification to the site which is not Quartyard's intent. Once again the dog park had the biggest effect on most people because this site was so near to their homes they were easily able to bring their pets to the site. Many people remarked, Quartyard is the only place in Downtown that allows people to bring their families, pets, and enjoy the sun in an urban setting.

Conclusion

Many factors affect a successful Downtown environment and the case of Quartyard is an example of a strategy that brings activity and involves the community. Tactical urbanism studies show positive effects on revitalizations of cities, and Quartyard is a successful implementation of tactical urbanism. Quartyard was able to answer all the guidelines laid down by Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia in *Tactical Urbanism: Short Term Action Long Term Change*. First, the team behind Quartyard had a deliberate approach and followed all the required channels to get their project approved legally and with the emphatic support from the City of San Diego. Second, Quartyard had answers for three of Downtown San Diego's needs: a place for people to socialize, get food and drinks, and a place safe place to bring their dogs. Third, the site initially only had a two year lease with a one year extension and although it was a difficult and strict timeline the project still had financial potential for success. Fourth, the use of recycled materials and semi-permanent building materials dramatically lowered construction costs, allowing for a low-risk and high-reward situation. Fifth, Quartyard developed a social capital between residents and private institutions within the area by revitalizing and reinvigorating the vacant area.

Having successfully answered the specific criteria Quartyard was able to become a model for tactical urbanism. Due to the success, the City of San Diego created a new Conditional Use Permit for the city using Quartyard as a case study for the permits foundation. The ultimate goal of Quartyard was to bring life into an otherwise vacant and decrepit space, but the project was able to accomplish much more than the team's original goal. This case study is important to the goal of tactical urbanism as a whole because not only was the project successful, but it was successful in a city that is usually very conservative. San Diego has a history of being very unlikely to embrace change and in the beginning did not think Quartyard would have any realization because it is the definition of change. Quartyard was not only a pioneer for change, but the project is now completely embraced by the City of San Diego and all the people who use the facilities. Quartyard is a model of sustainable design and creative thinking for

a problem many large urban areas face.

Some questions do remain unanswered regarding the Quartyard. The research was unable to find any real negative effects associated with the project. No evidence via interviews or public documents pointed to any undesirable outcomes on Downtown San Diego; however, more research could potentially yield some negative influences including a decline in profit, increased maintenance costs for materials that are not commonly used for buildings, and expiration of the conditional use permits. More time would allow for an in-depth review of Quartyard financials and exploration of material cost. This deep dive into records would explain how much revenue the project is able to produce compared to construction costs providing additional potentially positive reasons for utilizing tactical urbanism.

Further study on tactical urbanism could compare the successful case of Quartyard to other successful implementations of tactical urbanism across the United States and in other countries. Another research project on a different site could be then compared to this research on Quartyard. The comparison could uncover a valuable trend between these projects and would allow for a more effective roadmap when creating these great spaces.

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Nicklaus McGuire

Urban Studies and Planning

Nicklaus McGuire graduated in 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning. He heard about The Equilibrium when he was writing his senior research project -- which is the paper that is published here!

What has been your greatest challenge in research?

I think it would be trying to write the research paper so that everyone can understand it. That was my ultimate goal. If my girlfriend, a biology major could understand it, then it was good.

What excites you about grad school?

Well, since I'm going to grad school, I'm really excited about having a different perspective. I think my major was been really wide city based and architecture is going to be more finite based. So what I'm really excited about is carrying over this information that I learned here to architecture. My diverse background will be a good leg up in grad school.

What advice would you give to your first-year self?

That's hard. So I dropped out of college the first and then joined the military. Then, I came back. So I guess it would just be, do your homework and don't go to the beach all the time. Once I came back here, I went to Miracosta and then transferred here without even knowing what was here. It worked out really well though.

If you were a PI, what research would your lab focus on?

I've haven't done much research and so this research paper that I submitted was the hardest thing I've written.

However, I guess I would like to study what's the best way to redesign pre-existing buildings -- retrofit them-- and make them much more sustainable.

What do you remember from Warren Writing?

So I had to take the transfer Warren Writing. It was the Warren College Writing Transfer Class. I was taking it concurrently as I was writing this paper, so I got to ask the teacher on advice. That was beneficial. The writing class itself, it wasn't really anything new because I'd taken three writing classes before. Having the teacher's perspective was really helpful though. That's another reason that I was able to make the wording easier to understand and not super technical.

How do you keep your life in balance?

Being in the military, is probably the reason I'm able to do so much stuff. Having that background and that training really makes me able to focus on a bunch of this at the same time without getting overwhelmed by anything.

Is there anything you wish you could change or do differently from the time you entered college?

Honestly, not really. Anything I've done has led me to where I am right now. All the experiences I've had have shaped into who I am.