

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Gordon C. C. Douglas

August, 2014

Help-Yourself City: Market-Driven Planning and D.I.Y. Responses in Making the “Neoliberal” Streetscape

Gordon C. C. Douglas, *University of Chicago*

Help-Yourself City: Market-Driven Planning and D.I.Y. Responses in Making the Neoliberal Streetscape

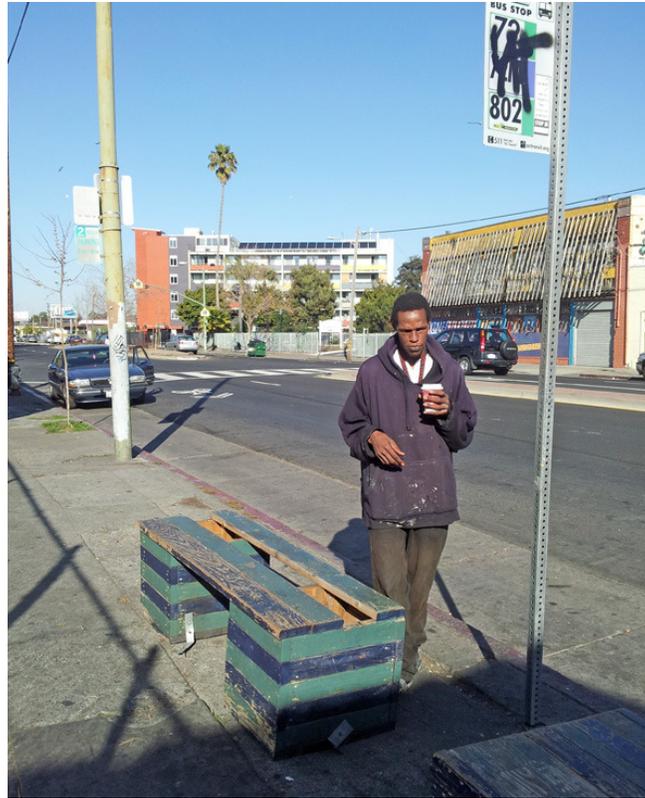
Gordon C. C. Douglas

University of Chicago, Department of Sociology
New York University, Institute for Public Knowledge

Abstract

Since the 1970s, the consequences of global economic restructuring and the rise of free-market “neoliberal” ideologies in governance have been visible in most every arena of social life, but perhaps nowhere more than in urban space. The humble bus stop, a basic element of local transit service, is today in many cities turned over largely to private advertising interests. In the process it has become both an indicator of neglect and a symbol of the commodification of public space. This paper examines such physical manifestations of neoliberal planning policy in the urban streetscape – neglect and decay in some places where state services recede, overdevelopment and hypercommodification in others where private investment reigns – through a novel and revealing lens: unauthorized “do-it-yourself urban design” contributions that seek to respond to them. Drawing from my larger research project on these functional yet unsanctioned local improvement efforts and their relationship to the official planning process, I focus here on DIY efforts to improve bus stop seating and other streetscape conveniences. Some “do-it-yourselfers” attempt to aid communities and transit agencies by installing benches, others work to remove corporate advertising that they see as part of the problem, and others simply act in their own self-interest. Through these cases, I present not only a street-level perspective on how uneven development is experienced and responded to in everyday life, but a critical analysis of DIY urban design as itself potentially undemocratic and quintessentially neoliberal in nature.

Help-Yourself City: Market-Driven Planning and D.I.Y. Responses in Making the Neoliberal Streetscape



A homemade bench installed at a bus stop in Oakland, California, by Larry Davis and the group Hood Builders in 2012. Photo by the author.

The bus shelter is a kind of prism through which we can read the uneven modernization of everyday life and the changing priorities of society. It is no longer primarily a functional piece of architecture; it is a marketing opportunity.

Joe Moran (2005: 7)

While unauthorized alteration has helped define urban spaces since ancient times, in recent decades a trend of unsanctioned but distinctively functional and civic-minded “do-it-yourself urban design” contributions has become increasingly visible in American cities, and beyond (Douglas 2011, 2014; Finn 2012, 2014). From homemade traffic signs installed under cover of night to crowd-sourced redevelopment ideas written by

community members on the walls of shuttered shops, these grassroots “improvements” are less vandalism, art, or protest, but rather simple and ostensibly benevolent efforts by citizens to respond in-kind to perceived inadequacies of the official planning and development process in their communities (Douglas 2014). I argue that DIY urban design has largely (re)emerged since the 1960s and ‘70s in the company of the broad shifts of economic restructuring and deregulatory policy that have come to define the so-called “neoliberal” era and resulted in the concession of many city services and planning priorities to private interests, or their abandonment altogether.

Among the most common DIY urban design interventions is the installation of unauthorized “street furniture” for sitting and being in public places. Even at bus stops, where large numbers of people are rightly expected to gather and wait, many cities today lack for this seating. Benches, bus stop shelters, and other such streetscape elements are often managed by private interests and designed with their public use values as secondary considerations to functions such as security or advertising that in reality justify their expense; some are even designed to make them *less* inviting (see Davis 1990: 232-35; Main & Hannah 2009).¹ This noticeable absence of street amenities reflects at once the retreat of cash-strapped city governments from traditional service provision and the reallocation of these responsibilities to private interests that have become increasingly common in American urban policy over the past half century. It is also a prime example of the types of inadequacies in public space that DIY urban design responds to.

¹ In some cases, street furniture is actively avoided and even removed in order to discourage use, and the use of the larger area, by unwanted interlopers (Davis 1990; Molotch & McClain 2003). While this is frequently a tactic of private interests (see *Ibid.*), some cities and transit agencies have been known to remove existing bus stop benches as well – often at the behest of local merchants – to discourage “antisocial or illegal behavior” (Gans 2011; see also Martens 2012, Perl 2010, Vance 2013).



People waiting at a bus stop in San Francisco, 2013. Photo by the author.

Drawing from my larger research project on DIY urban design and its relationship to the official planning process,² this paper presents an analysis of DIY improvement efforts focused on bus stops, street seating, and other human-oriented streetscape conveniences as a lens through which to consider the street level impacts and perceptions of various conditions of spatially uneven neglect/investment. An overwhelming majority of all DIY urban design projects that I learned about respond to symptoms of neglect and spatial inequality or overdevelopment and privatization; I focus here on a subset of examples that explicitly concern bus stops and outdoor advertising, and for the sake of balancing depth and brevity provide detailed “cases” for only a few of these (please see the Appendix for a table showing all 75 projects included in the larger study).

² Findings reported here are drawn from more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork, including in-depth interviews with 69 individuals engaged in DIY urban design activities, representing 75 different projects in sixteen cities, as well as 30 supporting interviews with street artists, professional planners, and others involved in the official and unofficial shaping of urban space (please see Douglas 2014 for a detailed discussion of the overall research methodology).

Though I leave a comprehensive review of the literature on urban governance and the “neoliberal city” to another forum, some basic background is worth describing here in brief. As many critical scholars have noted, so-called neoliberal processes – more precisely, the combined effects of global economic restructuring and rising dominance of free-market ideologies in policymaking – have had especially visible impacts on urban space and society. Indeed, every stage of the drama has played out in metropolitan areas, from the austerity and privatization imposed upon New York City in the 1970s (and being imposed upon Detroit today) to the corporate bailouts, municipal bankruptcies, and vast inequality of investment in public infrastructure seen in cities throughout the United States. With an increase in inter-urban competition for capital investment, “Economic growth has become the dominant imperative for urban policy and planning” (Purcell 2008: 2), the niceties of social services and democratic decision-making often taking a back seat. Of course the reality of any particular circumstance is more complex, and indeed many prominent American cities have in the past decade begun to demonstrate a more socially- and environmentally-conscious (however selectively and still unflinchingly development-driven) approach to government intervention. Regardless, as Peck (2009: 3) notes, “neoliberalization derives its dynamism as much from instances of failure as it does by its targeted ‘successes’.”

It is in both extremes of neoliberalized spaces – and those in between – that DIY urban designers so often appear to find their calling. In what follows I present several cases illustrating symptoms of market-driven policy and planning and different informal reactions to them. Interrogating the complex meanings and impacts of DIY urban design in

this context, I argue that it should be understood not only as a response to neoliberal conditions but in other ways potentially a contributor to them.

1. Don't Let the Market Drive the Bus?

In Los Angeles, as in many cities, things like seating and shelter at public bus stops are provided through contracts with outdoor advertising firms.³ The firm – the largest in L.A.'s case actually being a partnership called CBS/Decaux – has a contract with the city to place and maintain particular numbers of benches, shelters and other street furniture in exchange for the right to use them as platforms for advertisements (see Orlov 2012; Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services 2013). The city pays nothing for the infrastructure and, in addition, receives a share of revenues generated by the advertisements, an appealing arrangement for a cash-strapped transit agency. In Los Angeles, while each installation must be approved, there is no contractual stipulation of how they should be distributed in general; the responsibility for determining their particular locations is divided roughly among the Bureau of Street Services, fifteen local City Council offices, and the advertising partnership. The latter entity controls placement of 35 percent of the shelters, and they have a clear interest in placing their advertising in certain types of places: in CBS/Decaux's own words, "the best locations," "main upscale neighborhoods," and major entertainment venues and universities (JCDecaux 2010). Due to a combination of the city's cumbersome permitting process, slow-moving council offices, and the firm's prioritization of revenue-generating locations, not only have relatively few shelters been permitted and

³ Beginning in the 1960s and '70s in France and the United Kingdom, this practice has become increasingly common throughout Europe and North America since the 1980s (France 2002; JCDecaux 2013; Moran 2005). Other cities in the U.S. include Annapolis, Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, San Francisco, Seattle, and Tampa, to name a diverse handful, though the degree to which the specific placement of benches and shelters is determined by the advertising company or the municipality varies.

installed anywhere in L.A., but in areas where there is less advertising revenue to be made there may be no seating or shelter at bus stops at all (Orlov 2012; Sulaiman 2012).

This absence of street furniture is notable throughout much of predominantly low-income and transit dependent South Los Angeles, including the area around St. Michael's Catholic Church, some seven miles southwest of Downtown L.A. There, in 2008, parishioners and other community members who saw the problem worked together to create their own series of wooden benches, chairs, and planters at major intersections and bus stops. The multi-site project, aided by a local environmental group and under the guidance of the landscape architect Steve Rasmussen Cancian, aimed to build benches and planters in the style of Cancian's "urban living rooms" concept (first developed with a comparable community up north in Oakland) to respond to what they framed as the lack of public seating.

When I met the Rev. Msgr. David O'Connell, parish priest of St. Michael's, at his church, he spent a long time describing the various symptoms of crime, disinvestment, and civic buck-passing that he views as widespread there in the heart of what is colloquially still widely referred to as "South Central." He told me it had long been a goal to "get some kind of improvements – small things you know, but to get some improvements in this neighborhood, so it has a lived-in feel." And so, as was the case with other informal "urban living rooms" I visited in East L.A. and Oakland, longtime community members organized events in which dozens of people of all ages came together to build and paint the new seats and planters. The results have not been perfect. In one location the benches proved problematic, attracting vandals and drunken loiterers, Father David said, and had to be removed. (This is, interestingly, a frequent concern faced by officially sanctioned street

seating as well). But others became small symbols of community initiative and pride. After half a decade, many of the installations are still in place and get frequent use from people waiting for buses. “They make it a bit pleasanter, you know?” Father David said.



People waiting at a bus stop make use of two of the many benches and other sidewalk furniture installations placed around South Los Angeles by community members in collaboration with Steve Rasmussen Cancian, 2010. Photo by the author.

Seven miles northwest, in a middle class part of West Los Angeles, a local couple responded to the lack of seating in their neighborhood by designing several pieces of street furniture that integrate with the existing infrastructure. Being professional industrial designers and product developers, Ken Mori and Jenny Lang designed their “SignChair” to affix to standard perforated street sign posts; the “SignBench” screws in between the existing supports of something larger, like a freeway on-ramp sign, blending in inconspicuously. Though theirs is a considerably more affluent part of the city than South L.A., Ken and Jenny too were attuned to symptoms of civic disinterest in the streets there, describing piles of trash, unkempt sidewalks, and unanswered emails seeking fixes and

improvements from the city. As Jenny put it, “the city keeps things in order more in some places than in others.” Especially in terms of the pedestrian experience, she notes the differences between “the nice part of the city” (she referred to the wealthy urban beach town of Santa Monica, where, she said, “it’s awesome to be a pedestrian”) and “poorer” places where “there’s a lot of bus stops, a lot of people using it [... and] a lot of people walking” but “trash everywhere,” few receptacles, and unmaintained pavement that looks like a “crummy mess.” And, again, no place for people to sit. This sort of explicit recognition of uneven investment and development across different parts of the city was quite common in my interviews with DIY urban designers.⁴



The “SignBench,” created by Ken Mori and Jenny Lang, in Culver City, California, 2009.
Photos courtesy of Ken Mori.

⁴ Another creator of DIY bus stop seating, this one in Oakland, explained: “If you go downtown you’ll see all bus stops. If you go to [affluent] Rockridge you’ll see more bus stops than you will out here [in his predominantly low-income West Oakland neighborhood]. [...] You don’t want your kids sitting on the concrete – I know I don’t want my kids sitting on the concrete – as dirty as this stuff is, but if you go downtown and look at the sidewalks there, the sidewalks are a lot cleaner because they actually have resources to clean them. But they won’t bring any of that stuff down here.”

Ken and Jenny's interventions came out of their mutual interest in doing projects together and taking responsibility for often-neglected pedestrian spaces in Los Angeles, recognizing what they view as a real need for seating. As Ken put it:

[The place where we built] SignBench is just down the street from us, we'd walked by it many times. And on weekends there's a little fruit cart vendor, and one time we bought some fruit and we wanted to just eat it right away, but had no where to sit. And so we thought, wouldn't it be great if there was just a bench right here so we could sit and enjoy it? So it kind of comes out of just a necessity of things.

The relative "necessity" of needing to sit and eat something "right away" notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is that there is actually far more street seating in this part of West Los Angeles than near St. Michael's (despite the latter area being far more transit-dependent). That said, it is nonetheless true that there are still long stretches, including bus stops, without any seating along this eight-lane, high-speed thoroughfare (to say nothing of the side-streets and cross-streets, some of which are also fairly large and host bus lines, but have even fewer benches). As for the crumbling pavement, another community member stepped up to address this as well. Ken explained: "The sidewalk didn't get maintained, so somebody poured their own concrete. It looked totally like an amateur just poured concrete, like they wanted to make this thing not this crummy mess or a dirt patch, so they made their own little sidewalk for one little section." Jenny contextualized the actions:

I mean this project, it really is about helping people through making the street more comfortable. [...] Because the city [government] is not walking around on our corner, you know? And even if they did know, and even if we could ask them, it took them three weeks to get the trash can! We're gonna be placing responsibility with the city?

Ken and Jenny, like Father David and his parishioners, and dozens of other DIY urban designers I spoke to, perceived clear and simple needs in the physical environments of their communities. Conscious of the history and ongoing economic realities that make top-down remedies to these problems unlikely, they acted on their own to address them. Jenny, one of the many do-it-yourselfers with not only professional design training but also considerable understanding of urban policy and planning at a systemic level (see Douglas, forthcoming), framed the situation quite explicitly in terms of neoliberal urban governance influenced by market-driven economic concerns:

There's not a big business reason to invest in the pedestrians in this neighborhood. I just think it would be a huge battle to do it. And kind of a small battle, considering like, seriously they're talking about defunding their school system and all these people got laid off. To be like, 'We want a chair so people can be more comfortable on the street' – you know, 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.

Several preliminary conclusions present themselves here. First, even though theirs is a considerably more middle class part of the city than South L.A., Jenny knows that it is still unlikely to receive attention in terms of urban planning for pedestrians. Planning in Los Angeles – especially West L.A. – has long been oriented toward cars. Places like Santa Monica, which Jenny rightly pointed out for its pedestrian promenade and generally walkable, human-scale downtown streets, remain the exception and tend to be driven as often by commercial interests and private developers as by progressive planning policies (Loukaitou-Sideris 1993; Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee 1993; Pojani 2008; Schmidt 2010; see also Hoyt 2005). Jenny also placed this local deficiency in the context of the wider

economic challenges that the city faces in its ability to fund other public services, suggesting that seating may well be a comparatively low priority.

This raises a question of whether streetscape improvements in general can be thought of as needs or simply amenities. Sociologically, we can already see how the answer is highly site-specific and context-dependent. Where a larger number of people depend on public transportation and their numbers include the elderly or the disabled, street seating, especially at bus stops, seems as necessary as transit itself; in other circumstances it may be less so. This distinction, however relative, is important to our assessment of the potential physical and cultural consequences of DIY urban design in general.

2. The Other Side of the Coin: Commodification of Urban Space

Many parts of New York City also lack public street seating. Until the last few years, when a culture-shift in the Department of Transportation led to some new efforts at public seating, nearly every bench in the city that wasn't in a park was either private property, a thinly disguised security fixture, or, again, part of a bus shelter run by an advertising company (in this case, Cemusa and CBS Outdoor) for the primary purpose of making money. Do-it-yourselfers have responded to this with things like a “chair-bombing” effort by the Brooklyn-based collective DoTank, creating seating that they say is simply for sitting. At the same time, the actions of another New Yorker address a different concern related the privatization of bus stops and other infrastructure: the use of public streets for advertising.

Jordan Seiler began his personal campaign against outdoor advertising in 2000, when he began to consider how much of the visible space of New York City is taken up by commercial messages. Having received a summons from the city for putting up illegal street art that he feels had more “right” to be there than paid advertisements, Jordan views the dominance of advertising as a misuse of public property that limits people’s ability to engage with their surroundings and “in direct conflict with properties of public space.” He noted that:

It commoditizes and monopolizes outdoor advertising and media space, and by doing so competes with all the other sorts of non-authorized uses of public space – graffiti, street art, random scrawl, posters for your lost cat, band posters, all those things. [...] Wiping out all other forms of communication is what their M.O. is because, straight up you know, the only message should be ‘the message’ with advertising, and all other forms of communication should be squashed and immediately removed.

Almost sounding sorry for the city, Jordan went on to note “one of the more fucked up things” (and one of the more revealing) about this whole situation:

The city sells it all for so cheap! You know, CBS Outdoor is a huge, *huge* advertising company, making millions of dollars off of just straight up platform advertising in the New York City subway system, and yet the MTA is under immense pressure to find money from anywhere, laying off station agents, ruining lives, all sorts of problems. And you would think that the city, interested in serving the people, would say, ‘Alright, you know CBS it’s been a good run, but I think we can make more money on our own, and we’re just gonna take this back.’ You know, but that’s not how the model of how we run governments and how we run cities works. [...]

CBS is making *oodles* of money, and our transit system is in like total disrepair, we’re millions of dollars in debt. Why are we firing station agents, cutting services, and not going to the people who are making all the money off the services that the MTA could

be offering themselves?! I mean, I don't know what it cost in the recent cuts to cut all that service back, the toll wages and stuff, but it was probably in the line of 30 million dollars, 20 million dollars, something like that. I guarantee you CBS is making way more than that a *month* off of the hundreds of thousands of advertisements they're associated with in the New York City public transportation system.⁵



Jordan Seiler holding a corporate advertisement he has just removed from a bus shelter (and replaced with a piece of anonymous art), 2010. Photo courtesy of Julia Nevarez.

It is also the case that while the city has sold these advertising contracts to some companies, they are at the same time, in Jordan's view, failing to crack down on the *illegal*

⁵ Detailed breakdowns are difficult to extract for both MTA operating costs or CBS advertising revenues, but, for instance, in 2010 (the year of substantial subway service cuts and station agent layoffs to which Jordan was referring) the transit agency was attempting to close a nearly \$800 million budget shortfall for the year (Grossman 2010; Namako 2010); meanwhile, financial analysts valued CBS Outdoor at greater than \$4 billion in late 2012, and reported profits averaging over \$150 million a month in the first three quarters of that year (see Steel & York 2013). Then again, these specifics are largely irrelevant to Jordan's point and his motivation.

advertising that pervades the city as well. This includes everything from large billboards without permits to the nearly ubiquitous posters, bills, fliers, and stickers known as “wild posting” that are placed by small companies on walls, fences, and other surfaces throughout the city. “We went out and painted them all white in about an hour and a half, took over 20,000 square feet of advertising in one fell swoop,” Jordan says. He has even tried to get workers that he has caught in the act arrested, and their employers fined. Jordan is confident he is doing the right thing in painting over the ads, “really doing good and really doing the city’s job for it.”

This sort of vigilantism differs in many ways from the largely uncontroversial unauthorized placement of street furniture and other instances of DIY improvement in which there is ostensibly “no victim” (although as we saw even one of the seating areas built by Father David’s South Los Angeles parishioners had an unintended negative impact on the community and had to be removed). But the ideological and motivational common ground for these examples and many more is premise that the city should be providing a certain thing (infrastructure, service, or aesthetic experience), but is not, and that this failing is a symptom of the very way that the city operates. Do-it-yourselfers understand the planning and development process and say they see that things like vacant lots and defunct phone booths are likely to remain as such, with no one in particular to hold accountable. They expect the city to neglect the basic maintenance of infrastructure in poorer neighborhoods more than in wealthier ones. They know their Departments of Transportation, strapped for cash and seeking an expedient opportunity to unload some of their maintenance costs, have sold advertising rights to the highest bidder. Jordan laid out what he sees as the bigger picture:

The problem might not be advertising so much as the last 20 years of kind of neo-liberal tactics of like basically incorporating public authorities and private corporations, [...] the fact that companies now are providing cities with infrastructure for the exclusive rights to advertising, and therefore cities now have an invested interest in getting rid of all other forms of communication as a way to further monetize the spaces that they're offering these people. [...]

So you have a commodity here. And why would the city provide bus stops when they could sell those rights to somebody else and then they'll build the bus stops? And the problem associated with that is that the city has a responsibility to serve the public, where the advertising company that they've now sold that space to doesn't. And so as citizens we can argue with the city and say, well, if the city controls that bus stop then why are there not PSAs there? And why are there not, you know, forums for artistic communication? And why are there not just general blank boards for all sorts of other like, really kind of small public communications? And the city would sort of have to listen to those things. But once they've sold it off, it's not their problem. [...] And in doing so they cloud the line between what is commercial and what is public.

Jordan's command of these policy issues (and some critical geography literature as well) again reflects the familiarity with professional and scholarly urbanism that I found common to many do-it-yourselfers. And whether or not one agrees with his politics or his tactics, the connections he made between the problems he observes and broader structural and policy conditions are logical, and his concluding sentiment rings true. The vigilante nature of his efforts reveals how subjective the value of DIY urbanism can be. Seating, especially at bus stops, is widely recognized as an important element of an urban street (Whyte 1980, Henderson 2011, Fenton 2012, Yen & Anderson 2012; even historically, Elet 2002). Yet Jordan's "improvements" are motivated in part by an aesthetic ideal shaped by personality and ideology. The "victims" here are illegal advertisers (and also perhaps

the often under-privileged individuals they employ to install their ads), but “vigilante” is a term that could be applied to many do-it-yourself urban designers who feel morally justified in acting outside the formal process to right a perceived wrong. DIY urban design interventions are, just like official improvements to the streetscape, Janus-faced in their impacts and justifications.

3. Going Too Far? Bus Stop Removal and Other Cases of ‘Anti-Social’ DIY Planning

There are dozens more examples of DIY urban design to accompany the cases described here: planting and landscaping work on neglected tree wells and traffic medians, homemade repairs made to swing sets and benches in underfunded parks, magazine racks converted into free book exchanges, advertizing posters converted into public herb gardens, faux-official signs and alternative development proposals, unauthorized shelters constructed by benevolent architects, even guerrilla crosswalks and other community street-calming efforts which have become fairly common in a number of cities in the American West – all are attempts at bringing care, investment, and human-centered planning to streetscapes where landowners or city departments are perceived to be failing or where a market-driven growth agenda has overlooked local use values.

As the efforts described above have begun to suggest, however, identifying valid needs or concerns, much less the parties actually responsible for addressing them, can be murky. Indeed, for every truly socially- and civic-minded DIY improvement, there are “anti-social” unauthorized interventions impacting the built environment all the time as well, from everyday vandalism to individuals painting red curbs white, removing Handicapped or No Parking signs, or enclosing public spaces with disingenuous signs or

barriers. In Malibu, California, for example, although state law requires property owners to provide for public beach access, one interviewee described homeowners closing public easements or making them difficult to find, hiring security guards, and even “putting signage up saying ‘private beach’!”

These sorts of negative or selfish impacts on urban design also begin to make clear that many help-yourself actions are in essence rather neoliberal themselves, complicating the value of DIY urban design. However well-meaning, they are personal and often individualistic undertakings. Even the most seemingly beneficial (or at least harmless) alterations may well have their detractors in the community that they aim to “step up” and improve (see Douglas 2014). To interrogate these nuances, we might consider a final example involving a bus stop that takes a step further into the murky waters of informal improvement efforts that, while no less a response to the perceived inadequacies of the formal system, can hurt as much as they help. This is the curious example of a Seattle resident, who I’ll call Dirk, who removed the bus stop from outside his home.

The problem, Dirk would explain, was not the bus stop itself, but the garbage it attracted. There was no garbage can at the stop, and so with its proximity to a major grocery store and shopping center a huge amount of rubbish piled up regularly. “Like at first I would clean it up and put it in a garbage bag,” he explained. “But after a while I got so mad at it that I would just put it in a pile at the bus stop, so that people would have to stand in the garbage.” Then, after the city ignored his pleas to place a trash can there, he undertook what he called a “DIY urban planning” effort and simply removed the stop altogether: “I just went out there with a socket wrench one night. It was probably one or two in the morning. And I just unscrewed it, it was so easy to unscrew! And I just lifted it up and I put it in the bushes.”



A 'before and after' look at the Seattle bus stop removed by a nearby resident, 2012.
Photo courtesy of the creator.

Dirk's removal of a public bus stop was patently anti-social in impact (the bus soon began passing up the corner without stopping). Yet he still framed his actions as explicitly in response to the city's failure to provide another basic public service, the trash can:

We petitioned the city and the Department of Transportation for months to put a garbage can at that bus stop, because what happens is people get food, or they're waiting for the bus after a grocery store trip, and [...] they just leave the garbage in the bushes or on the ground there. [...] I sent a series of emails and made a series of calls. I was always told that someone would get back to me. [...] And they would never. They're never going to respond to me.

Dirk admitted that removing that bus stop was a selfish choice, even if one he felt was forced on him by the city's failure to respond to his requests. "I can see a lot of people, um, being like dismayed by what I did," he says. "Public transportation is pretty important." He says he never asked the city to remove the bus stop – "the bus stop is fine" – just to put in a trash can. Then again, he also feels justified: "I was punishing the people

who littered there. And the other people were gonna have to face that punishment as well unfortunately.” When I asked him if he had ever considered putting in a trash can himself, rather than removing the sign, Dirk told me that he had briefly toyed with the idea of installing a simple chicken-wire basket around the signpost, but then realized it would be futile, because the city would never come and pick it up – “it would just overflow.” And, feeling he had made his point in removing the stop (along with several temporary fixes brought in by the city in the weeks thereafter), once the city finally reinstalled the sign a couple of months later he decided he would not remove it again.

Discussion

So where does this all leave us? The instances of “DIY urban design” described above (and dozens more excluded here for brevity, though again see Appendix 1) have a number of implications. First and foremost, they demonstrate ways that a handful of everyday individuals have taken it upon themselves to “fix” what they view as shortcomings in their local streetscapes, infrastructure, and services. In so doing, they draw our attention to these perceived inadequacies – results of complex urban planning and development policies, themselves symptoms of otherwise abstract political-economic conditions – providing a “street level” view of the everyday impacts of structural processes. We can see how these conditions are actually experienced, interpreted, and even responded to in daily life. The actions are evidence that personal and cultural practices in urban space cannot be separated from wider processes and structural contexts. In these ways, the findings continue the project advocated by Fairbanks and Lloyd (2011: 5), among others, to bring ethnographic analysis to the study of “actually existing

neoliberalism.” Some interventionists clearly do not expect or “trust” state actors or private interests to provide needed infrastructure or amenities. But in creating their own improvements, are they effectively doing jobs and providing services that somebody else used to?

As such, some DIY urban design interventions can be viewed as aiding overwhelmed and underfunded public agencies; some have even received tacit approval. “If I could put a bench in every shadow area or something, I would, if I had the money. We don’t have it,” explained Ramon Arevalo, chief of Parks and Beaches for the City of Long Beach, California. But, he continued, “In certain different parks, I’ve seen people bring their own benches and put them in there. [...] If it’s not unsafe, more power to them.” Indeed, in my observations DIY benches and other street furniture have remained in place for years even at well-trafficked locations like bus stops; they seem more likely to be stolen as curiosities than removed by authorities. “Better Block,” a grassroots neighborhood streetscape design initiative, has grown beyond its DIY roots in one part of Dallas to become a local development model implemented in more than 50 communities.

On the other hand, Jordan’s advertizing removal efforts – even those directed at removing illegal wild-posting – remain clandestine and have been met with arrests. Streetscape alterations like unauthorized crosswalks and bike lanes are undeniably illegal and, despite the personal admiration they won from some transportation planners I spoke to (one literally whispered “good for them” before hastily retracting the statement), these city workers said there was simply no way their agencies could do anything other than remove them as quickly as possible. Surely no planner would condone Dirk’s removal of the bus stop outside his home (even if they acknowledged, perhaps, that the city’s criteria for locating trash cans should have included placing one there).

Indeed, it is important to remember that – considerable evidence of uneven investment and insensitive development notwithstanding – democratic input and equitable community benefits are at least ideally fundamental considerations in official planning policy. As Purcell (2008: 174) notes, “even as they operate under the dominant logic of privatization, [planners] retain an explicit and deep commitment to *public* solutions to urban problems.” This is something I found in my own interviews with planners and designers who emphasized that talking to communities and mediating between pro-development politics and the true “highest and best use” was why they joined the field.

These are democratic principles that unauthorized interventions in public space can either embody and expand or conflict with and undermine. “I am highly supportive of these kinds of grassroots interventions,” one New York City planner told me, “but many times they’re not representative of the community as a whole.” From Dirk’s bus stop removal even more explicitly selfish interventions like painting a red curb grey or removing a Handicapped Parking sign, unauthorized alterations can work directly against the designs of professional planners, public safety, or the best interests of the community. It is here that we can see most clearly how many DIY urban design actions can be rather quintessentially neoliberal in character themselves – a reaction to the failings of privatization and hamstrung local governments, sure, but what a perfect instance of the complete redistribution of social and civic concerns that they are now being done by “anyone.” Is this so different from a self-interested developer pushing through an unpopular project? We might consider whether, in this sense (excepting of course the obvious distinction of scale), the most meaningful difference between “typical” neoliberal urban development schemes and DIY urban design activities is that the state has *officially*

ceded decision-making power to private developers and corporations, but not to individual citizens.

A conclusion then is that the “neoliberalization” of planning and development policies provides not only the conditions to which many DIY urban design interventions respond, but an ideological context that they ostensibly oppose yet in many ways embody and embolden. The creators of these “improvements” may be not only acting in the context of neoliberal processes, but inherently (if unintentionally) part of them. Of course we can see local contextual variables at play in the character of every intervention, including geographic and socio-economic dimensions. Citywide efforts by informed policy critics like Jordan tend to be more explicitly about challenging the status quo. The relative “privilege” of an interventionist to make these claims and risk legal consequences in middle class or wealthy areas may become an important element. When the actor is altering a public space or service in ways that actually limit access or use, class is an obvious concern (if still not, as in Dirk’s case, necessarily the defining one). In lower income areas, it is easy to interpret DIY urban design as being explicitly focused on making neglected spaces usable, adding investment that cities and private capital are unable or unwilling to provide. In such a context, where the established system has failed to provide something as basic as a bus stop bench, the socio-economic class of the interventionist may seem less important to qualifying the benefit provided. Yet even here the often personal and inherently unplanned and “undemocratic” nature of DIY urban design persists.

The question remains whether something like DIY urban design might *nonetheless* constitute a step toward the sort of “genuinely humanizing urbanism” that Harvey (1976:

314) wished for in an alternative to neoliberalism. Can these simple instances of unauthorized improvement constitute part of the broad-based effort to, in the words of Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer (2009: 177) “roll back the contemporary hypercommodification of urban life, and on this basis, to promote alternative, radically democratic, socially just and sustainable forms of urbanism”? Harvey puts the burden of his hoped for change on “revolutionary theory,” and leaves the work required to accomplish it to “revolutionary practice.” That organized revolutionary praxis is required to affect anything of critical transformative value is a recurring assumption of critical theory from Marx and Gramsci to Harvey and Purcell; they may well be right, and certainly DIY urban design is not this. But Harvey (2005: 205) emphasizes that “it is the profoundly anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism” that must be the main focus of struggle. In this light, perhaps *some* DIY urbanism has *some* potential. The project then is embracing those cases in which it is a mechanism by which everyday citizens respond to the inadequacies of neoliberal planning and development by building local benefits that their communities need, while maintaining a critical eye on those in which personal ideas of “improvement” can too easily slip into causing harm.

References

- Brenner, Neil. 2005. *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brenner, Neil and Nik Theodore (eds). 2002. *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in Western Europe and North America*. Oxford and Boston: Blackwell.

- Brenner, Neil, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore. 2010. "After Neoliberalization?" *Globalizations*, vol. 7, no. 3. 327-345.
- Davis, Mike. 1990. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Photog. by Robert Morrow. London & New York: Verso.
- Douglas, Gordon C. C. 2014. "Do-it-Yourself Urban Design: The Social Practice of Informal 'Improvement' Through Unauthorized Alteration," *City and Community*, vol. 13, no. 1. Published online 16 Sept. 2013.
- Douglas, Gordon C. C. *forthcoming*. "The Formalities of Informal Improvement: Technical and Scholarly Knowledge at Work in Do-it-Yourself Urban Design." Article forthcoming in the *Journal of Urbanism*.
- France, Julie. "Glass War." *The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2002. Accessed 19 Mar. 2013 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/nov/18/mondaymediasection5>
- Gans, Lydia. 2011. "Who Has the Right to Remove Benches at Bus Stops?" *The Berkeley Daily Planet*. 3 Oct. 2011. Accessed 30 Dec. 2012 from <http://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2011-10-03/article/38508?headline=Who-has-the-Right-to-Remove-Benches-At-Bus-Stops-A-Bus-Stop-Bench-Story--By-Lydia-Gans>
- Grossman, Andrew. "MTA to Lay Off 250 Subway-Station Agents." *Wall Street Journal* 8 May 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoyt, Lorlene. 2005. "Planning Through Compulsory Commercial Clubs: Business Improvement Districts." *Economic Affairs*, 25(4): 24-27.
- JCDecaux. 2010. "Advertising in Los Angeles." *JCDecaux North America, Outdoor Advertising* website. Accessed 28 Jan. 2013 from <http://www.jcdecauxna.com/street-furniture/los-angeles/advertising-los-angeles>
- JCDecaux. 2013. "Street Furniture Advertising." *JCDecaux North America, Outdoor Advertising* website. Accessed 19 March 2013 from <http://www.jcdecauxna.com/street-furniture/street-furniture-advertising>
- Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services. 2013. "Los Angeles Coordinated Street Furniture Program." *City of Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services* website. Accessed 27 Jan. 2013 from <http://bss.lacity.org/Engineering/pdfs/background.pdf>
- Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia. 1993. "Privatization of Public Open Space: The Los Angeles Experience." *Town Planning Review*, 64(2): 139-67.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia & Trinib Banerjee. 1993. "The Negotiated Plaza: Design and Development of Corporate Open Space in Downtown Los Angeles and San Francisco." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 13(1): 11-12.
- Main, Bill, & Gail G. Hannah. 2009. *Site Furnishings: A Complete Guide to the Planning, Selection and Use of Landscape Furniture and Amenities*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

- Martens, China. 2012. Hampdens Bus Benches, Removed Because of Loiterers, Missed by Riders, *Baltimore Brew* weblog, 3 March 2012. Accessed 30 Dec. 2013 from <http://www.baltimorebrew.com/2012/03/03/hampdens-bus-benches-removed-because-of-loiterers-missed-by-riders/>
- Molotch, Harvey, & Noah McClain. "Dealing with Urban Terror: Heritages of Control, Varieties of Intervention, Strategies of Research." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 3 (2003): 679–698. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.00474.
- Moran, Joe. 2005. *Reading The Everyday*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Namako, Tom. "MTA Approves Massive Service Cuts." *New York Post*, 24 Mar. 2010. Accessed 19 Mar. 2013 from http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/mta_approves_massive_service_cuts_ld0ihDzwNAygo2Hw9S0zIM
- Orlov, Steve. 2012. "City Controller Says L.A. Lost 23.1M on Bus Stop Ads." *Los Angeles Daily News* website, 12 Jan. Accessed 27 Jan. 2013 from http://www.dailynews.com/breakingnews/ci_19732563
- Perl, Larry. 2010. "Loitering a 'Royal' Pain on the Avenue in Hampden." *Baltimore Messenger* online, 25 March. Accessed 30 Dec. 2013 from <http://archives.explorebaltimorecounty.com/news/105268/loitering-royal-pain-hampden/>
- Pojani, Dorina. 2008. "Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade: the failure and resurgence of a downtown pedestrian mall." *Urban Design International*, 13: 141-155.
- Purcell, Mark. 2008. *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures*. Florence, KY: Routledge.
- Schmidt, Jessica. 2010. "Revisiting Pedestrian Malls." Institute of Transportation Engineers 2010 Technical Conference, Compendium of Technical Papers. Accessed 30 April 2010 at: http://nacto.org/docs/usdg/revisiting_pedestrian_malls_schmidt.pdf.
- Steel, Emily, and Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson in New York. "CBS Shake-up to Create Outdoor Ads Reit." *Financial Times* 17 Jan. 2013. *Financial Times*. Accessed 19 Mar. 2013 from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/080c3a42-6035-11e2-b657-00144feab49a.html#axzz2O1CxxmQR>
- Sulaiman, Sahra. 2012. "Desperately Seeking Shade: How South L.A. Bus Riders Weather the Elements." *Streetsblog Los Angeles* website, 12 July. Accessed 29 Jan. 2013 from <http://la.streetsblog.org/2012/07/12/desperately-seeking-shade-how-south-l-a-bus-riders-weather-the-elements/>

Appendix. List of DIY urban design projects in the study, incl. subjective categorization of types of “neoliberal” conditions responded to. (*Ital.*) indicates condition is secondary motivation.

<i>Project Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Conditions Responding To</i>	<i>Interview</i>
110 Fwy Guerrilla Public Service	LA	2002	Poor signage	Richard
4th St. Bicycle Blvd.	LA	2007+	Lack of infrastructure	Anon.
Astoria Scum River Bridge	NYC	2009	Lack of infrastructure	Jason
Baltimore Devel. Cooperative Participation Park	Baltimore	2007+	Lack of investment - community	Scott
BedStuy Meadow	NYC	2009	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Deborah
Better Block	Dallas	2010	Lack of infrastructure, Lack of invst. - development	Jason
Bunchy Carter Park for the People	LA	2009	Overdevelopment	Anon.
Bus stop removal 'DIY urban planning'	Seattle	2012	Lack of services	Anon.
CampBaltimore mobile community center	Baltimore	2006	Lack of investment - community	Scott
Community Book Exchanges	Chicago	2006	Commodification, Lack of services	Ryan
ER Granville Island performance space	Vancouver	2007+	(<i>Law</i>)	Ryan
Dept. of DIY Fletcher Bridge	LA	2008+	Lack of infrastructure	Anon.
Digital Community Message Board	NYC	2011	(<i>Lack of investment – community, Other</i>)	DoTank
DIY DPW traffic sign	Pittsburgh	2010	Poor signage	Anon.
DIY Maintenance	Reno	2011	Lack of investment - parks	Clint
DIY Maintenance	Vancouver	2012	Lack of investment - parks	Clint
DoTank Chairbombing	NYC	2011	Lack of infrastructure	DoTank
DoTank community dinner	NYC	2011	Lack of investment - community	DoTank
EcoVillage Intersection Repair	LA	2009	Lack of infrastructure	Joe
Fallen Fruit Project	LA	2006+	(<i>Surplus and poverty, Other</i>)	David
For Squat signs	Chicago	2010	Lack of investment - development	EdMar
Gentrification the Game	Toronto	2010+	Overdevelopment	Kate and David
Guerrilla Garden Memorial Signs	Chicago	2008	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Andy
Guerrilla gardening	Chicago	2007+	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Anon.
Guerrilla gardening	LA	1994+	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Scott
Guerrilla gardening	LA	2008+	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Anon.
Guerrilla gardening	London	2004+	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Richard
Guerrilla park bench	Pittsburgh	2012	Lack of investment - parks	Elijah and Doug
Guerrilla Preservation	NYC	2008+	Lack of investment - preservation, Other	Anon.
Guerrilla Sharrows	LA	2010	Lack of infrastructure, Poor signage	Anon.
Haz Ciudad bike lane	DF	2011+	Lack of infrastructure	Haz Ciudad
Haz Ciudad bridge walkway	DF	2011	Lack of infrastructure	Haz Ciudad
Haz Ciudad crosswalk	DF	2011	Lack of infrastructure	Haz Ciudad
Highland Park Book Booth	LA	2010	Lack of investment - community, Lack of services	Amy and Stuart
Holly Whyte Way / Sixth 1/2 Ave.	NYC	2011	(<i>Overdevelopment, Commodification</i>)	Graham
Howling Mob 10 Historical Markers	Pittsburgh	2007	Commodification	Anon.
Hoyt St. Block	NYC	2008+	Lack of investment - aesthetic,	Hendricks
Hypothetical Development Org.	NOLA	2010	Lack of investment - development	Carey
I Wish This Was	NOLA	2010	Lack of investment - development	Candy
Islands of LA National Park	LA	2007+	(<i>Overdevelopment</i>)	Ari
LA Urban Rangers	LA	2004+	Overdevelopment, Enclosure	Sara
Mad Housers shelters	Atlanta	1987+	Lack of services	Nick
New Public Sites	Baltimore	2007+	Lack of investment - development	Graham
New York Street Advertising Takeover (NYSAT)	NYC	2009	Commodification, Law	Jordan
Park(ing) Day LA	LA	2006+	Lack of investment - parks	Stephen
Park(ing) Day NYC	NYC	2006+	Lack of investment - parks	Ian
Park(ing) Day PHX, vacant lot parties	Phoenix	2011	Lack of investment - parks, community	Stacey
Pass with Care signs	LA	2010	Poor signage, Lack of infrastructure	Roadblock
Phoenix Chalkboard	Phoenix	2011	Lack of investment - development	Stacey
Planter Boxes	Toronto	2011	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Sean
Pop-Up Lunch	NYC	2009	Lack of infrastructure	Ali
Poster Pocket Plants	Toronto	2009	Commodification	Sean
Public Ad Campaign	NYC	2000+	Commodification, Enclosure	Jordan
Seed Bombs	LA	2010+	Lack of investment - aesthetic	Daniel and Kim
SignChair, SignBench	LA	2009	Lack of infrastructure	Ken and Jenny
Silverlake bike ramp	LA	2009	Lack of infrastructure	Anon.
Smiling Hogshead Ranch	NYC	2011	Lack of investment - development, food	Gil
Street Opening	LA	2010	Overdevelopment, Enclosure	Stephen
Take a Seat	NYC	2007+	Lack of infrastructure	Jason
TENT Life-like Living shelters	Toronto	2009	Lack of services	Sean
Toronto Street Advertising Takeover (TOSAT)	Toronto	2010	Commodification, Law	Jordan
Tourist Lane	NYC	2010	(<i>Overdevelopment, Commodification</i>)	Jason
Urban Living Rooms (East LA)	LA	2010	Lack of infrastructure, Overdevelopment	Steve
Urban Living Rooms (Oakland)	Oakland	2002	Lack of infrastructure, Overdevelopment	Steve and Larry
Urban Living Rooms (South LA)	LA	2008	Lack of Infrastructure	Father David
Urban Repair Squad bike lanes	Toronto	2006	Lack of infrastructure	Martin
Urban Repair Squad Metro stickers	Toronto	2010+	Law	Martin
Urban Repair Squad Pothole Onomotopeia	Toronto	2009	Lack of investment - streets	Martin
Walk Raleigh signs	Raleigh	2012	Lack of infrastructure, Poor signage	Matt
Yarn bombing	LA	2010	(<i>Lack of investment - aesthetic, Other</i>)	Anon.
Yarn bombing	Vancouver	2009+	(<i>Lack of investment - aesthetic, Other</i>)	Anon.