



Planning — November 2012

## From Pop-Up to Permanent

Small, nimble projects are adding value to public spaces.

*By JoAnn Greco*

It's a balmy Wednesday evening in Buffalo and a couple of hundred people — from grandmothers to toddlers — have come out for "Live At Larkin," a summertime concert series held in what was once a weed-strewn lot about a mile east of downtown.

The newly verdant square sits at the center of Larkinville, a neighborhood where the Larkin Company, a soap manufacturer-turned-mail order business, once employed thousands. Its central administration building, designed in 1906 by Frank Lloyd Wright, was demolished in 1950, several years after the company ceased operations; its disappearance put the final nail in the coffin of a once-thriving neighborhood.

Lately, though, local developer Howard Zemsky has tried to reverse that course. He's buying, renovating, and leasing derelict buildings to companies like First Niagara Financial Group, which recently set up headquarters here, and he's beginning the conversion of warehouses to apartments.

A few years ago, he got First Niagara to kick in to repair busted sidewalks and adorn them with plantings bursting with sweet potato vines and purple petunias. This spring, spurred by local preservationist and designer Tim Tielman, Zemsky tackled the empty square and its long-vacant 1920s gas station.

In just a few weeks, a verdant grass lawn appeared, dotted with canary yellow and flamingo pink Adirondack chairs. Designers laid decking and overhead lattices. Gleaming silver Airstreams began dispensing espresso and sandwiches. Down came the filling station's tattered siding and up went its garage doors; a cafe began operation. Craftspeople started selling wares out of shipping containers. At lunchtime, neighbors and workers came out to enjoy the sun; on Wednesday evenings, so did the rest of Buffalo.

Meet the "temporary city," and greet "tactical urbanism." It's even been called the "pop-up city," borrowing a term from the retail world. The idea has its roots in urban tactics from the World's Fairs of yesteryear to Christo's public art installations to of-the-moment interventions such as yarn bombing, guerilla gardening, and turning abandoned pay phones into mini-libraries.



### Here to stay

Wherever it's come from, many believe the idea is here to stay. "There's a new understanding that planning for public spaces doesn't always have to revolve around capital-intensive projects," says Ethan Kent, vice president of the New York-based nonprofit Projects for Public Spaces. "Small changes, sometimes built around minimum design and extensive programming, can spur momentum for larger, more permanent ones."

As with America's most famous examples — New York City's heavily publicized pedestrianization of Broadway and San Francisco's experiments with parklets — the movement emphasizes what PPS calls "lighter, quicker, cheaper" solutions.

In New York, what started as some cheesy chairs and a few painted zones designed to exclude cars around Times Square and Herald Square has mushroomed into an effort that will eventually run about three miles, from Central Park down to Greenwich Village. The zones now include tables, umbrellas, planters, and benches. They're packed, even in wintertime.

And what began in 2005 as Park(ing) Day, an ingenious effort by an activist design group called Rebar to reclaim parking spaces and cede them to pedestrians, has spurred San Francisco to grant the idea a municipal stamp of approval. It now administers a program called Pavement to Parks that brings a dozen or so parklets online each year, most of them designed and built by private entities who apply to the city.

"We have some basic parameters about their size, their ability to be removable, and their accessibility," says David Alumbaugh, director of city design for the San Francisco Planning Department, "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."

Borrowing from the New York playbook, the City by the Bay has in recent years also closed off several streets to create pedestrian plazas. The first one, 2009's Jane Warner Plaza in the Castro neighborhood, was initially delineated with planted-up concrete forms but has since become institutionalized with more permanent materials.

"We put in concrete planters, upgraded the street furniture, installed a better quality surface," says Alumbaugh. "It's still not a final design. In a year or two, we'll make it even more formalized — we're gradually sliding into making it a park. That's the beauty of starting with the idea of a temporary fix."

Many other cities are pursuing the strategy in an assortment of ways. The Chicago Department of Transportation recently announced a plan to create its own parklets — it's calling them "people spots" — as part of its Make Way for People program. This summer, some 20,000 Bristol, Connecticut, residents turned out to listen to music and nosh on tacos at a pop-up piazza on a vacant lot that was once the site of a downtown shopping mall.

And in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society selected a prominent vacant parcel in otherwise thriving Center City and transformed it into an abundantly planted space that is open to the public. Last year, 6,000 visitors checked out the debut PHS Pops Up effort, and the installation was chosen as part of the U.S. presentation in the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale.

Why is this all happening now? "There's been a perfect storm of factors that have contributed to these ideas," observes Peter Bishop, formerly director of design for the city of London and coauthor of *The Temporary City* (Routledge, 2012). "It's a confluence of tough economic times, the emergence of a new kind of creative culture, and a preponderance of stalled development and vacant properties."



### Filling a void

Vacant lots are certainly a driving impetus. "Unfortunately, there are many opportunities to do creative things with vacant land resources," says Chris Hawley, a planner in Buffalo's Office of Strategic Planning.

Even though Larkin Square was already zoned for industry and didn't require any variances, Buffalo's forthcoming new zoning code includes language that encourages creative uses, such as temporary urban gardens, movie screenings, and bocce courts, for vacant parcels. "Given the current development climate, we see these as the highest and best use for now," Hawley adds. "The benefits have been much more dramatic than chasing after some corporate retailer. Sometimes the temporary can add much more than those kinds of so-called permanent efforts."

In Washington, D.C., a drab retail climate and the resulting empty storefronts compelled the Office of Planning to institute a temporary urbanism initiative two years ago, targeted at neighborhoods outside of downtown. With the aid of a \$250,000 grant from ArtPlace — a national program to foster economic revitalization through the arts — planners, business owners, and residents came together one recent Saturday evening to sand, paint, and assemble bright blue hippo-shaped planters and a purple and red porch swing along the upper 14th Street NW retail corridor.

The whimsical street furniture is a "way to activate the street and to help retailers in a transitioning neighborhood," says Kimberly Driggins, associate director for citywide planning.

### **Talking walking**

For cities such as San Francisco and New York City that have better weathered the economic downturn and that have always enjoyed lively streets, encouraging pedestrians remains a primary focus behind temporary urbanism initiatives. "Even though we have the great bones of an active public realm, we can always do more," observes Alumbaugh of San Francisco. "We're very interested in continuing a discussion about what streets can become. It's sometimes hard for people to imagine them as useful for anything other than cars."

That's been the case in Philadelphia, where "there's a huge unmet demand for all sorts of pedestrian amenities," says Prema Katari Gupta, director of planning and economic development at the University City District, a Philadelphia neighborhood revitalization effort spearheaded by anchor institutions, small businesses, and residents. "Philadelphia is a very walkable city," Gupta says, "so easing the way for pedestrians has been behind everything we do, whether it's parklets, pedestrian plazas, or The Porch."

The Porch, UCD's biggest and most visible effort, opened last fall. It's a new public space — a heavily programmed plaza adorned with colorful patio chairs and artist-designed planters — fashioned from an awkward parking strip set next to the city's Amtrak station.

"We were heavily influenced by the ideas of William H. Whyte," says Gupta, "to just put stuff out there and observe how it's being used. So, since The Porch opened, we've had someone who walks the site every day and takes down demographic information, and maps out where people are sitting and what they're doing."

Located outside of the third busiest Amtrak station in the country, and within walking distance of thousands of workers, The Porch is visited by about 400 people a day; they stay for an average of 30 minutes, reports Gupta.

Armed with the data it's collected, the UCD is about to start a redesign process that will likely include more public art, an information kiosk that offers information on arriving and departing trains, more greenery, and a "more formal and, frankly, more civilized buffer between the street and the space," says Gupta. "That's the beauty of lighter, quicker, cheaper," she adds. "It's flexible and allows for layering and a gradual transition to permanence."

Gupta uses the term "iterative" planning and Bishop, the London planner, says the notion is critical. "Too often, developers focus only on the end state and then if economic forces get in the way, they drop the project," he says. "If instead you view a project as a series of phases over, say, a 15-year period, each smaller phase will work a little harder toward achieving the larger goal."



### **Talking money**

Partnerships and community participation, Bishop adds, often play a role where money is tight. In Memphis, for example, the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team is planning a series of brief pop-up

events this winter, including a holiday crafts market in a historic building that is currently being redeveloped. Mainly, though, says Thomas Pacello, a team member, the city wants citizens to come up with their own ideas, to "take ownership of their neighborhoods."

"As a professional planner," he continues, "I appreciate the partnership aspects. We'd like to set up a web portal that identifies opportunities within the three neighborhoods we've targeted and then provide a list of the types of activities that don't require special permits. Then, people can just click and claim a match. We could just say, 'go, make it happen,' whether it's a pop-up shop or an idea to repurpose an empty lot into a sculpture garden."

Pacello, like others, emphasizes that "lighter, quicker, cheaper" is just another tool in the planner's toolbox. "It's not a silver bullet," he says, "but one more way to get things accomplished, especially in this new economy."

Megaprojects are not going to be as frequent, Pacello adds. "Let's not do a \$50 million project that we don't even know will work. Let's do more of these \$25,000 projects, preferably as part of a cohesive, well-thought-out and deliberate plan."

*JoAnn Greco is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer.*

### **Resources**

**Images:** Top — Larkin Square, once a weed-strewn lot near a derelict gas station, now bustles with people shopping, eating, and just hanging out. Photo by JoAnn Greco. Middle — Traffic once clogged the area around Times Square in New York City, left. These days, things move a lot slower, as visitors pause to take in the city scene, right. Photos courtesy New York Department of Transportation. Bottom — The success of Park(ing) Day, organized by the design group Rebar, spurred the city of San Francisco to adopt a more formal and widespread program, called Pavement to Parks. Photo courtesy Rebar Art Design Studio [www.rebargroup.org](http://www.rebargroup.org).

Project for Public Spaces: [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org).

*The Temporary City*, Peter Bishop, Routledge. An overview of the trend, primarily as practiced in London.

Tactical Urbanism Salon: A roving workshop devoted to encouraging temporary solutions in various cities. Also available is *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action, Long-Term Change*, two volumes of case studies, downloadable for free at <http://tacticalurbanismsalon.com>.