



# TACTICAL URBANISM AS PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Lessons in city-led demonstration projects from Jersey City, New Jersey

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## ABSTRACT

Municipalities and public agencies in Canada, the US, and beyond have developed tactical urbanism strategies to promote and manage increasing demand for grassroots-led place-making and transportation initiatives (City of Fayetteville, n.d.; Herman & Rodgers, 2020; Urban Systems, 2020). Tactical urbanism is a powerful tool for testing changes to public spaces before a city makes significant investment. However, there are tensions between the quick implementation of these temporary projects and the ability of authorities to fully understand what a community needs from its public spaces.

Can city-sanctioned tactical urbanism complement existing public consultation processes around changes to urban public spaces? Should tactical urbanism be used to provoke public discussion or to respond to it?

We will explore the use of tactical urbanism strategies for pedestrian planning consultation in Jersey City, NJ, and ask whether the lessons learned from this case can inform the use of city-led tactical urbanism projects for public engagement and consultation in Winnipeg.



# 1.0 | BACKGROUND

Tactical urbanism is the use of affordable materials and simple designs to quickly change how people interact with the public realm. Using paint, pylons, planters, and other inexpensive and readily available materials, tactical urbanists can overnight redefine where and how people move through or dwell in urban spaces (see **fig. 1**). Goals differ between projects but range from protest and advocacy to experimentation and iterative design leading to more permanent changes. The ability of



**FIGURE 1** | Tactical urbanism materials need to be affordable and expendable. Here milk crates, plastic pumpkins and flowers mark a bike lane.

tactical urbanism to quickly alter the public realm, even on an impermanent basis, offers immediate benefits for people using the street, such as through traffic calming or safer, more prominent crosswalks (Principles of Tactical Urbanism, 2018). A common tactical urbanism project is to extend curbs at intersections to make these spaces safer for pedestrians to navigate (see **fig. 2**).

Tactical urbanism provides a way to explore the gap between the design of a public space or a piece of infrastructure and the way people use it. The iterative nature of this process allows prototyping that can reveal and respond to discrepancies between expected and actual user behaviours (Hilland et al., n.d.). A tactical urbanism demonstration project can ensure that an eventual investment in permanent infrastructure performs its intended function.

**“Listen first, and then design around what people need, instead of the other way around.”**

— Tony Garcia, Principal, Street Plans



**FIGURE 2** | A few strategically placed potted plants and some colourful paint can make cars slow down and shorten crossing distances for pedestrians.

# 2.0 | THEORY

Tactical urbanism first emerged as citizen activism. Unsanctioned by authorities, guerrilla urbanists made changes to the public realm to either protest government inaction, to improve community safety and accessibility, or both. More recent interpretations of tactical urbanism separate the placemaking strategy from its guerrilla roots. Under this new understanding, tactical urbanism describes a method of trialing and implementing changes to urban form and is not necessarily tied to the kinds of actors involved in the process. Tactical urbanism can therefore be a way to pursue official city planning objectives and policies (Principles of Tactical Urbanism, 2018).

## 2.1 CHALLENGES

While tactical urbanism can boost accessible public involvement in placemaking and urban design, not all voices are valued equally in public dialogue. The same systems of sexism, classism, and racism that regularly shape the use of the public realm also apply to tactical urbanism projects (Walter & Earl, 2017). City-led



projects will need to find a way to balance the loudest (and best resourced) voices with those who have the greatest need.

There are also concerns that cash-strapped city governments may use tactical urbanism as a way to offload responsibilities for planning, safety, or maintenance onto residents (Webb, 2018).

A confrontational relationship between citizen city-builders and authorities can make long-term positive change difficult (Cohen, 2017). City-sanctioned tactical urbanism may remove some more radical projects from consideration. However, having authorities

about other events, such as major conferences or festivals, to demonstrate the impacts of small changes (Marshall et al., 2016). Because of the flexibility and affordability of tactical urbanism projects, they can be planned to coincide with summer festivals to maximize exposure and tap into heightened excitement around urban environments.

### 3.0 | THE CASE

Jersey City, NJ used tactical urbanism principles to engage the public as part of the consultation for its pedestrian plan, released in 2018. The city hired New York- and Miami-based planning firm Street Plans to implement six demonstration projects around the city. These projects used tactical urbanism strategies – cheap materials and quick implementation – to trial designs that improved pedestrian safety. The demonstration projects were preceded by consultation to determine the best locations for tactical urbanism interventions and to learn about the pedestrian-related concerns of residents in each of the city's six districts. The projects themselves were an extension of the public engagement process. They included opportunities for public feedback alongside data collection to determine both the quantitative and qualitative effects of the projects (City of Jersey City et al., 2018; JC Walks, n.d.; Wilson, 2020; see **fig. 3**).

The six demonstration projects each addressed one intersection along a corridor identified as needing attention to pedestrian spaces (see **fig. 4**). Each of the projects added paint, planters, and traffic cones to extend curbs and reduce the crossing distances for pedestrians. Consultants attended each site during



**FIGURE 3 |** Tactical urbanism allows organizers to observe how the public interacts with a project, but can also include direct forms of feedback

supporting the process is ultimately necessary to make any of the changes realized during a tactical urbanism project permanent. It may be helpful for communities and city authorities to learn to work together on tactical urbanism projects to maximize their long-term positive outcomes.

## 2.2 OPPORTUNITIES

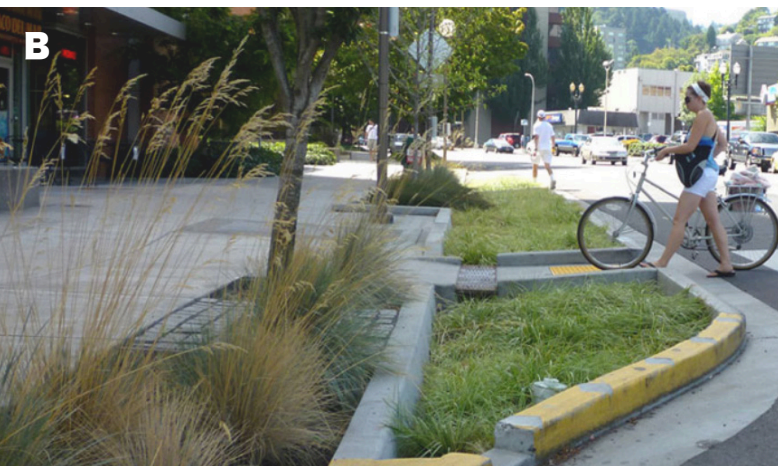
One of the major benefits of tactical urbanism over traditional infrastructure delivery is the ability to establish or strengthen relationships with and within a community. While an individual tactical urbanism project may achieve improved safety or another objective, the cumulative effect of a tactical urbanist approach to placemaking and safety can be greater ownership of public space by grassroots stakeholders (Marshall et al., 2016; Webb, 2018). Part of city-led tactical urbanism is giving a neighbourhood or residents' group both the resources and the permission to be involved in shaping their own public spaces (Finn, 2014). This kind of investment in communities and relationship-building can allow a city to harness the passion of its residents to make positive change.

Tactical urbanism can also leverage existing enthusiasm



**FIGURE 4 |** One of the intersections addressed through a tactical urbanism demonstration project, including wayfinding signage, in Jersey City, NJ.





**FIGURE 5 |** The Jersey City PEP provides examples of the type of projects (B) that can emerge from the demonstration projects (A).

pedestrian planning workshops and observed how pedestrians' and motorists' behaviour changed following the new designs. Workshop participants and passersby were also invited to leave comments on boards and to complete surveys about the demonstration projects.

The JC Pedestrian Enhancement Plan (PEP) Final Report translates the demonstration projects and the feedback they elicited into eventual permanent changes. For each of the corridors addressed in the plan, photos of the workshops and the temporarily altered intersections share pages with examples of completed curb extensions that would make the desired effects of the tactical urbanism interventions permanent (see **fig. 5**). The plan does not expand on whether the feedback to the demonstration projects revealed any weaknesses of the first round of designs or whether the city would undertake any further tactical urbanism exercises prior to finalizing pedestrian project designs at other locations in the city.

## 4.0 | ANALYSIS & LESSONS LEARNED

Jersey City's use of tactical urbanism for pedestrian planning offers five main lessons for a future tactical urbanism toolkit or strategy in Winnipeg:

### 4.1 BE PROACTIVE

Instead of waiting for residents or community groups to implement tactical urbanism projects and then responding to each case separately, cities should initiate the process. Jersey City hired a specialized planning firm to manage their tactical urbanism project, giving the city and its residents access to both expertise and to an established and tested programme.

By proposing and leading tactical urbanism projects, Winnipeg's planners and engineers can play a role in shaping those projects instead of just responding to other's ideas.



**FIGURE 6 |** The six demonstration projects in Jersey City took similar forms, but included small changes to the design to reflect the specific needs identified for each intersection.



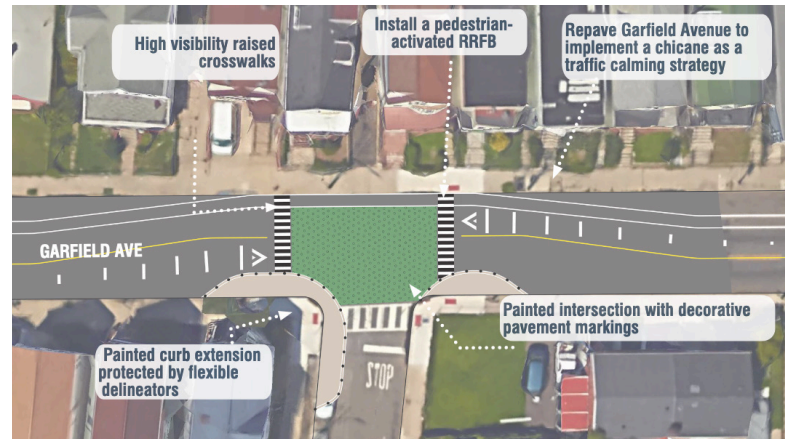


**FIGURE 7 |** The Jersey City demonstration projects included explanatory signage, comment boards and movable seating.

engaging with advocacy groups and marginalized communities prior to tactical urbanism exercises. Winnipeg’s existing maps of high-needs neighbourhoods could help guide tactical urbanism outreach projects to streets and neighbourhoods that need them (City of Winnipeg, 2020).

“It’s getting communities more tools and resources and knowledge about the possibilities to create more dignified places.”

— Jason Roberts, in Wilson (2020)



**FIGURE 8 |** This image from the Jersey City PEP shows how the tactical urbanism demonstration projects informed final street designs.

## 4.2 BE OPEN (TO FEEDBACK)

The Jersey City pedestrian plan shows only one round of demonstration projects, and therefore does not showcase the strength of tactical urbanism for iterative design. Street Plans’ founders explain that iterative design allows feedback to be applied and tested before any permanent infrastructure is installed (Wilson, 2020). Rather than being a static demonstration, tactical urbanism projects as part of public outreach or consultation should be open to trialing ideas suggested by participants in real-time to test how they work. Any additional costs resulting from a longer process or extra materials will save time and money by identifying design issues prior to major investment.

## 4.3 BE DELIBERATE (IN OUTREACH)

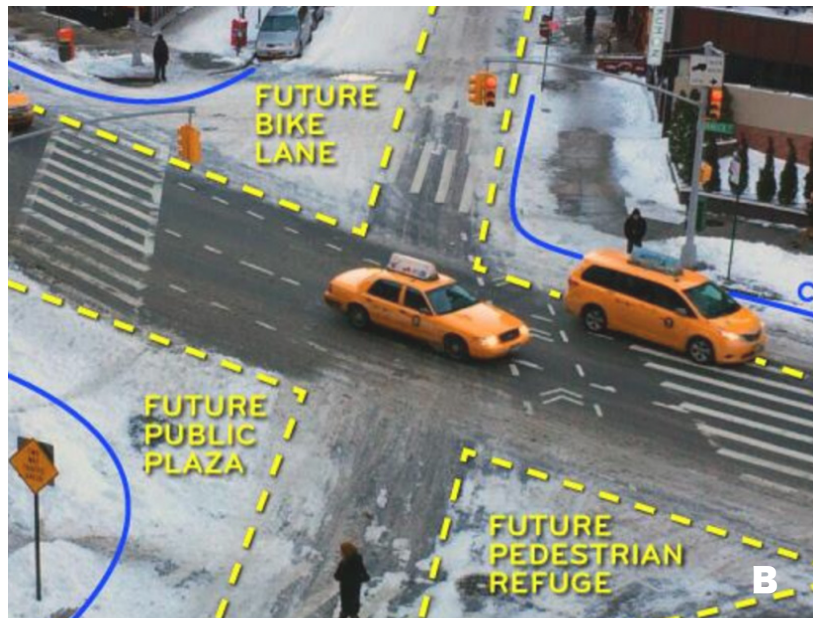
Because not all groups enjoy the same freedom to navigate public space or have the same ability to make their voices heard, city-sanctioned tactical urbanism needs to be engineered to welcome as many different voices and perspectives as possible. Jersey City began to address this issue by distributing the six tactical urbanism demonstration projects throughout the city’s different wards (City of Jersey City et al, 2018). Winnipeg could go further by actively

## 4.4 BE MINDFUL (OF PROCESS)

Cities should view tactical urbanism as one part of their planning processes. Whereas other examples of tactical urbanism consist of community groups or individuals taking action to shape the street outside of official authority structures, Jersey City used tactical urbanism to support an official city planning project. The firms conducting the public consultation worked with residents across the city to identify community priorities prior to implementing any changes to the streetscape. After locating problem intersections, they used tactical urbanism to address concerns that had been raised. The exercise still allowed for quick implementation at a low cost and provided opportunities for stakeholders to experience the physical realities of proposed permanent designs before huge investments were made (see fig. 7).

In Winnipeg, public participation in tactical urbanism projects should support existing planning visions, like those in OurWinnipeg, and help to shape visions for specific districts, neighbourhoods, and streets. Tactical urbanism could also be tied to the city’s five-year budget process. This would help direct tactical urbanism efforts and public energy towards testing and shaping infrastructure projects that are already funded. This





**FIGURE 9 |** A: Snow in Winnipeg's Exchange District reveals pedestrian and vehicle movements. B: An example of a snow neckdown, or sneckdown, where travel patterns revealed following fresh snowfall are analyzed to reveal opportunities for changes to the public realm.

would allow participants to know that their input will have a concrete impact within a reasonable timeframe.

## 4.5 BE REALISTIC

While tactical urbanism can provide immediate positive outcomes during demonstration projects, as it did in Jersey City, temporary interventions should correspond to eventual permanent solutions that the city is willing to implement.

Jersey City's plan highlights that each of the tactical urbanism demonstration projects undertaken during the planning & consultation process can be implemented as a permanent solution, even if that change may not take place immediately (see **fig. 8**). If a given permanent change is not on the table, the tactical urbanism exercise should reflect that limitation so that community energy is not engaged towards unrealistic expectations.

Part of establishing realistic expectations for tactical urbanism projects in Winnipeg is acknowledging the impacts of surrounding land uses and of the roles of different streets in the city's transportation system. Major arterial streets may not be suitable sites for tactical urbanism projects, for example, while a quieter street with a commercial land use component might be ideal.

Lastly, while winter should not be a deterrent to tactical urbanism in Winnipeg, projects should assess the impact of winter weather. Snow may even provide opportunities to plan future projects, using sneckdowns to identify places where current use and design do not align (see **fig. 9**).

## 5.0 | CONCLUSION

The Jersey City PEP case shows that city-led tactical urbanism can help connect residents to their city's planning process. By rendering possible or proposed changes to the public realm at full scale, communities can imagine their streets as safer, more humane spaces. By inviting residents to help shape those changes, cities can leverage their creativity and enthusiasm to find infrastructure solutions with broad support.

Jersey City's experience with its tactical urbanism consultation process showcases some best practices for Winnipeg to follow and a few places for improvement. By being proactive on policy, open to feedback, deliberate about reaching diverse stakeholders, mindful of how tactical urbanism fits into the process, and realistic about expected outcomes, Winnipeg can maximize the benefits of a tactical urbanism approach to public consultation.

### 5.1 NEXT STEPS

The next step for Winnipeg is to find or develop a tactical urbanism policy that works with the city's existing planning processes. This will allow the city to begin to proactively engage with communities interested in tactical urbanism projects without requiring a time-consuming overhaul of the policies in place.

Depending on the success of a tactical urbanism approach to planning consultation in Winnipeg, future policy reviews can give tactical urbanism a more prominent role in the process.

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## Image Resources

**Cover image:** Street Plans - JC Walks Pedestrian Enhancement Plan. Retrieved from <http://www.street-plans.com/jc-walks-pedestrian-enhancement-plan-jersey-city-nj/nggallery/thumbnails>.

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