

Do-It-Yourself Urban Design

‘Improving’ the City through Unauthorized, Creative Contributions

Gordon C. C. Douglas

University of Chicago, Dept. of Sociology

Abstract:

There are numerous ways in which people make illegal or unauthorized alterations to urban space, its uses, or meanings. This paper presents a particular type of unauthorized intervention, which I distinguish from other “traditional” forms of illegal spatial intervention (graffiti, political occupation, etc.), and which has not been described in previous research: creative, highly localized, and largely anonymous practices that are aimed explicitly at “improving” the built environment of local communities – in other words, “do-it-yourself” urban design. In painting their own crosswalks and bicycle lanes, building and installing benches and other street furniture, or creating faux-official signage to promote desired civic improvements or commemorate unheralded events, people are responding to perceived inadequacies in their communities and taking design responsibilities into their own hands; even small-scale acts of aesthetic alteration assert a vision of the city as open to individual “beautification.” Building from qualitative fieldwork and interviews with individuals in London, Los Angeles, New York, Pittsburgh, Toronto, and Vancouver, I discuss the implications of these practices for understanding the contemporary city and contentious politics and raise questions of rights, responsibilities and perhaps unintended consequences.

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Do-it-Yourself Urban Design

Making Local ‘Improvements’ Through Unauthorized Alterations of Urban Space

All manner of unauthorized alterations and appropriations of the built environment can be seen in the city, from juvenile bathroom graffiti to organized political demonstrations. Indeed, practices such as these are relatively common features of urban life, with some newer forms emerging in recent decades and growing in popularity. We all have our assumptions about the meanings of these types of things, who makes them, and where, and they raise questions of agency, responsibility, power, etc., especially in the contexts of changing communities and urban policy and planning. But of course the various actions are not of a single form, content, function, or impact.

My research looks at a particular type of unauthorized alteration: creative, largely anonymous, and highly localized practices that are best described as *unauthorized urban design “contributions.”* These types of actions do not fit with common assumptions and have received little attention from social scientists or urban policy and planning professionals, yet are increasingly visible in American cities. Intended toward the functional “improvement” of lived urban spaces through *guerrilla gardening* (planting and landscaping vacant lots, tree wells, newspaper boxes, etc.) or *DIY streetscaping* (painting traffic markings on pavement or installing material elements such as signage, seating or ornamentation on streets or infrastructure), I refer to these phenomena collectively as instances of “do-it-yourself (DIY) urban design.”

Existing Assumptions

Existing social science research on illegal alterations of urban space is limited. It has tended to lump these practices into one of a few basic categories: as either tactics of

radical political struggle and even acts of “resistance,” as criminal vandalism and signs of neighborhood disorder, or as perhaps aesthetically or psychologically notable but otherwise insignificant forms of self-expression (and self-promotion).

The first category of accounts frames these activities in terms quite similar to traditional political protest, sometimes with explicitly-stated wider political goals. This seems to be the most commonly advanced perspective in the existing literature, at least about any of the more elaborate (than graffiti) forms of spatial intervention. Some sympathetic observers go so far as to suggest that they qualify as instances of outright “resistance” to authority, capitalism, or mainstream culture (e.g. St. John 2004; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Lambert-Beatty 2010). One recent article on skateboarding (Vivoni 2009) presents even that practice as fraught with political potential as “resistance” to spatial regulation.

The second category of accounts considers a variety of practices as essentially “just vandalism” or “just trespassing,” and frequently seems to imply that the acts have little deeper significance beyond serving as an indicator of crime and disorder. The bulk of the criminological and broken windows literature falls here, at best viewing illegal alteration as delinquency or simply a sign that “nobody cares” (e.g. Wilson and Kelling 1982; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Keizer, Lindenberg and Steg 2008).

The third category is similar but more sympathetic again, granting research value to some forms of unauthorized alteration as novel instances of concept art, personal expression and communication, or even popular subcultures (e.g. Kwon 2002; Bartholome and Snyder 2004; Snyder 2009). These approaches analyze the activities for artistic, textual, or psychological meaning, but have not considered wider context or political, economic, and geographical significance.¹

¹ For instance, another popular premise for the study of graffiti has been its analysis for sexual and cultural significance when scrawled on bathroom walls, as has been done by everyone from biologists (Kinsey et al. 1953; Farr and Gordon 1975) to English professors (Bartholome and Snyder 2004).

However, my preliminary study of many different forms of unauthorized alterations across three cities found many cases that do not fit with either perspective. Focused on “individuals and small groups engaged in challenging or trying to change the use of urban space,” I conducted interviews with a range of people from renowned graffiti artists to the principle organizer of London’s ‘Reclaim the Streets’ movement. But I also found a number of guerrilla gardeners and streetscapers whose work seemed different. These practices, I argue, are better described (and thus distinguished) by a fourth logic: intentional but small-scale, largely anonymous, creative, “improvements” or “contributions” to lived urban spaces.

To be clear, the existing perspectives described before are legitimate in their own right, indeed there is plenty of evidence of each accurately describing some forms of illegal spatial intervention.² However, they are insufficient to explain these other contemporary forms that are now the focus of my expanded research project, currently constituting more than 40 interviews across six cities. In the next section I will briefly further define and distinguish the practices that I refer to as “DIY urban design,” before spending the remainder of the available space placing them in a wider sociological context and drawing out some fascinating implications. This research is ongoing; my goal is to present new findings and make connections to the literature that I hope inspire new questions and suggest avenues for further inquiry.

² From graffiti writers to participants in alter-globalization “protestivals,” there *is* evidence that many of these site-specific artists and activists do see their actions in radical political terms well beyond the sites in question. Likewise there seems little doubt that some graffiti absolutely *is* associated with neglect and “disorder” (Keizer, Lindenberg and Steg 2008), not to mention crime and violence (Phillips 1999). And certainly a great deal of street art or guerrilla theater is as much about bucking the gallery or theater scene and “getting up” for selfish reasons as it is about some nobler reclaiming of urban space. Snyder (2009) found in his ethnography of the New York graffiti scene that the primary motivation for tagging among the artists he studied was essentially achieving some minor degree of subcultural fame.

DIY Urban Design

I initially approached my own research on spatial intervention from a standpoint akin to the first perspective outlined above. Site-specific direct actions, such as the “Reclaim the Streets” demonstrations where streets were illegally closed to traffic by raucous impromptu carnivals while jackhammers helped replace asphalt with saplings, seemed empirical actualizations of the sort of popular resistance and clear right to the city claims implied by Henri Lefebvre and other theorists arguing for the transformative potential of ‘critical consciousness’ in everyday urban space. And again, in some instances *like* Reclaim the Streets, there is a case to be made for that. But in many cases I believe the emphasis on “resistance” misses out on the subtler and often more local and individual motivations that many have for altering the built environment, and the more limited intended impacts of the actions themselves.

In dropping those assumptions, I began to see many cases of illegal alteration that were about something else entirely. While more active and goal oriented than what might plausibly be dismissed as “just art” or “just crime” and generally more functional as well, these actions are far more personal, limited, and place-based in focus than the tactics of a broader social movement protest. Rather than broad “resistance,” these actions represent a simple willingness to reshape the built environment on one’s own terms through unauthorized, creative, and highly local alterations to the urban built environment. In other words, DIY urban design.³

³ The term “DIY” has a great deal of meaning in Western subculture and counterculture, emerging especially in tandem with punk and hip hop ideologies and aesthetics in the late 1960s (Leland 2004). Of course it refers most simply to any creating, repairing, or modifying done by oneself (rather than by professionals), but from these subcultures it has come to represent an ethic of non-mainstream self-reliance connected to everything from self-publishing, home-brewing, and arts and crafts to illegal parties and radical spatial protests like those mentioned above. Currently, the culture and the term are experiencing a boom in popularity, especially in the gentrifying, youthful urban neighborhoods that we associate with trendsetting and the creative class (e.g. Ryzick 2007; Harcourt 2010; Kimmelman 2010; Stern 2010). The term “DIY” also fits here as it is already well connected with many unauthorized spatial intervention practices, especially graffiti (Ferrell 1995; Rahn 2002) but also guerrilla gardening, street performance, and

I am aware of a single other academic study that also conceives of some forms of spatial intervention in this way, if still not explicitly. In a recent article, Visconti *et al.* (2010) acknowledge that forms of “place marking” range from “pure resistance and contestation” to “public place beautification” and note the diversity of forms of illegal alterations of urban space (including dichotomies of individual versus collective action, self-affirmative versus altruistic aims, and protesting versus aesthetic language). Though ultimately focused “solely on those street marking practices imbued with multiple ideologies of reclamation of public place” (p. 514), among six ideal-types of marking that the authors distinguish is finally urban design, “an aesthetic practice applied in favor of the beautification of public architecture and urban style” where the ideologies behind the actions themselves (again, the broader political views of the artists notwithstanding) are simply about the right to alter that space and the goals are “enchanted” the city for city dwellers.

I divide the phenomena into two broad types: *guerrilla gardening* (planting and landscaping vacant lots, tree wells, newspaper boxes, etc.) and *DIY streetscaping* (painting traffic markings on pavement or installing material elements such as signage, seating, or ornamentation on streets or infrastructure). Examples of these design contributions include: turning neglected road medians into flourishing gardens, creating historical markers commemorating unheralded events, replacing corporate advertisements with anonymous art, closing an urban street with a community dinner, amending a freeway sign with improvements so good they go unnoticed, converting a parking space into an impromptu park, installing faux-civic signage to “enact” hoped-for policy changes, painting bike lanes and crosswalks without city approval, and building and placing public street furniture in neighborhoods that lack it.

other illegal “improvements.” When placed in front of the words for the quite formal practice of “urban design,” the term suggests just the unique, unlikely combination of methods and motivations embodied in the act of illegally altering the built environment in order to make creative, personal improvements to it.



Figure 1. Various examples of DIY Urban Design

It is a stretch to call this organized protest or outright resistance. While project-oriented, the actions remain informally organized and narrow in scope. Though some of the individuals I have interviewed do see their projects as campaigns of sorts (i.e. a series of similar interventions in multiple locations, even multiple cities), and may even connect the actions with loftier political beliefs (environmentalism for instance, or opinions on particular urban policy issues), they largely reject activist and even artist labels and expressed no great interest in promoting themselves or their work, nor in making any broader radical or ‘revolutionary’ political statements or changes. The interventions themselves are improvements only of particular spaces or types of places, with impacts that are much more incidental than those of an organized protest.

All of my interviewees could fairly clearly explain why they do what they do in an immediate sense, but tend to be less confident when asked about long-term objectives

or wider impacts. Goals they mentioned range from the most place-specific (improve this street, brighten up that space) to more ambiguously changing the way others see and think about the urban landscape, but not upending even local authorities, let alone “the system.” Their motivation for doing what they do appears to be simply making a small part of the city a little better. In fact, while I have certainly found some difference on this measure, many of my interviewees actually expressed a clear disinterest in stirring things up and were resistant to the idea of themselves as radicals. What the creators of these various projects have in common is the effort to positively contribute – from the ground up, individually even, and without permission – to the value, use, or meaning of a particular space. This differs substantially from common assumptions about illegal spatial alterations and suggests very different implications for urban communities.

Analysis: DIY Urbanism in Context

Of course, the definition is only the beginning. DIY urban design practices are not only interesting for the novelty of their distinction from previous assumptions. They suggest a number of important lines of sociological and policy inquiry and potentially substantial contributions to the literature that have been poorly addressed by previous research. The fact that people are taking it upon themselves to make these unauthorized “contributions” to the city provokes questions about the actors, their inspirations, and the contexts of their actions, and presents a unique window into larger sociological issues. The interventions themselves also have daily and long-term practical implications. We should seek to understand them better before (quite literally in some cases!) brushing them off. In this section I contextualize DIY urban design in sociological discourse, first in historical and socio-economic terms, suggesting the connection to contemporary urban conditions and processes such as gentrification, then more theoretically, as a critical contribution to the literature on social movements and contentious politics.

From the most innocuous yarn-adorned lamppost or seed-bombing effort to the installation of functional signage and streetscaping, DIY urban design actions do not occur in vacuums. In fact they predominantly occur on private or civic property, potentially costing property owners or tax payers money and impacting anyone in the community. How should local governments or property owners respond? Whose control, authority, or claims are challenged by the assertion of previously unclaimed rights or responsibilities such as these? Who benefits? Who is harmed? Is this, on measure, a public good, a net benefit to the community or the city? A symbol of disorder or of vibrant culture, creativity, and community life? A cost to taxpayers and property owners, or an urban economic boon?

An important first step is recognizing the larger social, spatial, and economic conditions of the contemporary city, in which DIY urban design actions are embedded. They are byproducts of these conditions, but also reactions to them, and in many cases probably also contributors to them. We might begin by placing *all* unauthorized alterations of urban space in basic historical context. While such practices each have their historical antecedents, going back at least to ancient Rome in some cases, we should note that they have been a part of urban life in their contemporary forms for less than half a century. Indeed many of them began within a remarkably short amount of time of one another and, while it has not been quantified, it seems clear that their prominence and diversity have seen remarkable growth over the past few decades: site-specific counter-cultural interventions as we know them were pioneered by the Situationists in the 1960s and related pranking practices such as flashmobs and anti-consumerist “culture jamming” actions have since flourished in art and activism (with a particular high point around turn of the millennium alter-globalization politics); graffiti writing started in Philadelphia and New York around 1968, and – although crack-downs caused some decline in places like subway cars by the late-1980s – had diversified greatly in the form of global urban “street

art” by the mid-1990s, and continues to grow. As for the forms of DIY urban design themselves, the general DIY trend as we know it today emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s (Leland 2004), with guerrilla gardening (as such) first appearing in 1973 in the company of squatting and other place-based protest against gentrification on New York’s Lower East Side and has flourished ever since, with the term reinvigorated in London in 2004 and now visible in cities around the world; the knit street beautification known as yarn-bombing was begun by a Dallas woman in 2004 and spread incredibly rapidly; most creators of DIY signage and street improvements who I have interviewed point to Toronto’s Urban Repair Squad as the seminal example, beginning in 2006, or the improved freeway sign created by a Los Angeles artist in 2001. (All of these practices have also undoubtedly become more “popular” in recent years in terms of books, magazine articles, websites, and museum and gallery exhibitions on the subject.)

I do not think it is a stretch, therefore, to argue that to understand the importance of these seemingly insignificant acts we ought to consider them in the context of the several decades of urban processes with which they have coincided – and from which I believe they can be seen to have emerged. Among the many macro-process buzzwords that have defined American cities throughout the arguably ongoing period of local and global economic restructuring beginning in the early 1970s (some favorites include suburbanization, stagnation, deindustrialization, and more recently post-Fordism, urban renewal, and the creative economy), *neoliberalism* has seen particular purchase in recent years.⁴ With its accordant features of commodification, gentrification, and a general

⁴ Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010: 330) define “neoliberalization” as a variegated and path-dependent regulatory process, dominant since the 1970s, which “prioritizes market-based, market-oriented or market-disciplinary responses to regulatory problems; it strives to intensify commodification in all realms of social life; and it often mobilizes speculative financial instruments to open up new arenas for capitalist profit-making.” Although the phrase is now being thrown around on a scale to match that of “globalization” a decade ago, neoliberalism has powerful descriptive value for framing many of the most urgent issues cities – or, rather, citizens – are dealing with today. While the argument has been made (e.g. Stiglitz 2008; Wallerstein 2008; Altvater 2009) that the era of unregulated free market capitalism came to an end, at least

intensification of uneven development (see also Smith 2008 [1984]; Harvey 2006), the concept of the neoliberal city offers a valuable framework for assessing the conditions in which DIY urban design occurs.⁵ Indeed, my interviews suggest that DIY urban design alterations can be understood as reactions to or interactions with these very features of the neoliberal city. For example, guerrilla gardening, beautification, and street improvements are direct reactions to the abandonment or neglect of some spaces, while billboard “liberation” or critical faux-civic signage are reactions to the hyper-commodification of others. In all cases the acts represent a willingness to reimagine or repurpose urban space that has lost its human scale or sensitivities (often with a fairly clear contention of use-value versus exchange-value).

At precisely the same time, however, these actions are clearly the *products* of those who have to be considered members of the so-called creative class (Florida, 2002). DIY urban design activities are at least as common in recently-hip urban neighborhoods as in the impoverished inner-city “ghettos” or abandoned industrial districts one expects of “vandalism.” And, put bluntly, many of the individuals I have interviewed match in at least a superficial sense the young urban middle class “neo-bohemians” (or simply “gentrifiers”) that have seen some interest in recent urban studies (Lloyd 2006; Zukin 2010). More to the point, it is quite possible people who make creative improvements to the built environment through unauthorized actions are not only acting in the context of neoliberal processes, but are inherently *part* of these processes through both their direct actions and their longer term impact. In other words, their ostensibly counter-cultural

ideologically and politically, with the economic crisis beginning in 2008 (see also Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010), this perspective seems shortsighted. Whatever the case, it has far from proven true in the reality of America’s cities, where the inequality, commoditization, gentrification and uneven development show no signs of disappearing.

⁵ Interestingly, Leland (2004: 297) also connects the rise of the DIY subculture directly with the period of economic restructuring of the early 1970s.

efforts may, just like *official* urban design improvements, in fact help increase property values, and thus precipitate or even encourage the gentrification process.

For example, the two most notable studies of guerrilla gardening (Schmelzkopf 1995; Von Hassell 2002) are analyses of the community garden movement on New York's Lower East Side during the 1970s and '80s. Both discuss the rise of vacant lot gardening there led by local activists as part of the larger anti-gentrification struggle of the area's residents. They were attempting to preserve and improve vacant land by converting it into gardens. Yet not only was this only partly effective in its direct goals (many planted lots were still developed) but it certainly did little if anything to prevent the overall gentrification of the area; indeed the surviving gardens today, now largely preserved by the city, are undoubtedly a boon to neighboring property values. Though connecting individual guerrilla gardening efforts (e.g. seeding a few neglected tree pits on a single city block) to changes in property values, median monthly rents, or displacement of particular groups is problem for a different study, it is hardly a stretch to suggest that they do more good than harm to a neighborhood's aesthetic appeal.

Indeed, the simple fact that some sorts of DIY urban design activities are happening in general may increase the attractiveness or trendiness of some urban neighborhoods. Although studies continue to suggest that graffiti can have a significant negative impact on property value (e.g. Gibbons, 2004), in other areas the aesthetics and culture of graffiti and street art have clearly become associated with "grit as glamour" gentrification (Lloyd, 2006; Douglas, 2009) and have a substantial degree of corporate cooptation to show for it (Young, 1997; Alvelos, 2004). Edwards (2009) has actually suggested that the aesthetic qualities and potential popular appeal of some street art demand a reappraisal of the applicability of criminal damage and vandalism laws to these acts in certain contexts. More broadly, even the most authentic actualizations of "creative city" place-making walk a thin line with regard to displacement and other impacts on the

“non-creative” classes (Catungal, Leslie, and Hii 2009). As Rubin (1979: 361) noted more than 30 years ago, “Typically, the costs of aesthetic programs... have been borne most heavily by those who benefit from them the least.” One person’s “right” to improve her surroundings may present a potential infringement upon others’ “right to stay put” (Hartman, 1984).

Still, this needn’t lessen the *potential* inherent in the fact that people are making these sorts of contributions, and are often doing so where state or other powers that be appear to have slouched. On the more theoretical level, that individuals are taking it upon themselves to make “improvements” on their own and without permission does seem to assert a sort of critical “right to the city” claim, with symbolic implications for power and agency in the otherwise highly proscribed and controlled urban environment. Such a trend, if it is one, has inherent to it a fairly explicit challenge to basic assumptions about who owns, controls, designs, pays for, and makes particular spaces or types of spaces. It also contains an implicit questioning of wider norms, identities, politics, and economic processes, and seems to question their efficiency. Put simply, we do not normally think of the urban built environment as something we can reshape at our whim; its uses and meanings are normatively – and often legally – defined and regulated, and essentially altered only by professionals. Yet for better or worse the subjects of my research treat the built environment as malleable, and see the uses and meanings of private property and public spaces as open to popular reinterpretation.

On this level, the phenomena of DIY urban design also represent a significant challenge to established assumptions about the nature of contentious politics. They are by definition both more individual and more limited in scope and impact than what we would typically think of connecting as a social movement. They do not take the state or other formal powers as particular objects of contention or resistance (one defining feature of contentious politics; see Tarrow, 2001), nor do they qualify as “collective action” or

make any declared, unified moral claims (two others; see Jasper, 1997; Tilly, 2009) beyond their immediate consequences of altering a particular space in a vaguely constructive way. Yet they are nonetheless undeniably contentious in a basic sense and constitute implicit statements of personal values about the uses and meanings of urban space and the “right to the city.” The qualification for inclusion as contentious politics can hardly be based on impact – the other criterion on which DIY urban design is so different – since measuring the impact of social movement actions is so famously problematic anyway (see Giugni, 1999; Tarrow, 1999). In all of these ways, DIY urban design also has much in common with modest, scarcely organized, and extremely low-impact political actions such as Hobsbawm’s (1959) “social banditry,” Scott’s (1985) “everyday resistance,” and Fiske’s (1993) “localizing power” – even de Certeau’s (1984 [1980]) popular tactics and “making do.”

More to the point, however, Tilly (1978) tells us that forms of collective action are socially and historically contingent. He advanced the idea of “repertoires” of contentious politics in 1977 as a metaphor for understanding the way that activists draw on available, standardized scripts in their claim-making tactics – a limited number of repertoires developed and proven over time (see also Tilly, 2009). In the current era of uneven development and neoliberalization in the city, it is reasonable to suggest that reactions to these conditions in the form of DIY urban design alterations qualify as new forms of contentious politics, even making use of new repertoires appropriate to the contemporary context. As Uitermark (2004: 707) suggests straightforwardly, “performing certain types of behavior that conflict with the use assigned to it by authorities simultaneously exposes power relations that are embedded in the (built and social) environment and suggests other ways of appropriating space.” To the degree that DIY urban design interventions do, then, qualify as highly local and informal forms of contention, they provide a critical alternative to at least some of the above assumptions

about how social movement actions are defined. What's more, they suggest the potentially appealing possibility and tangible examples of meaningful critical consciousness enacted even at the most sub-revolutionary and everyday of levels.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested a new way of understanding the unauthorized alteration of the built environment, a subject of study that has heretofore been largely confined to viewing such activities as either meaningless vandalism or self promotion or politicized tactics of larger political demonstration or radical “resistance.” The first result is thus a more complete understanding of spatial intervention through the distinction of this novel category of actions that I call DIY urban design. This in turn reveals many implications for our thinking about sociological issues such as individuals’ relationships to the contemporary city, formal and informal responses to uneven development and investment in urban communities, and the meanings and motivations of contentious politics at quite anonymous, individual, and localized levels.

More practically, I hope to have shed light on some of these new ways that people can and do seek to “improve” their communities without permission. In doing so I have suggested that while the act of unauthorized improvement may be a reaction to perceived neglect and disinvestment in an area and a symbol of organic, positive creative action, we must remember that in many cities today, development capital is quite happy to take advantage of *any* “sign of life” and run with it. In this regard the bottom line is that cultural practices cannot be separated from political-economic processes and contexts.

The research also suggests that interviews with a greater number of individuals in more locations may well yield an even wider diversity of motivations. I should note that even less explicitly transgressive actions, such as sanctioned community gardens and public art, or organized protests and demonstrations with a spatial element, are worthy of

attention as well, as is the simple act of putting pride and effort into reimagining one's own property. We might also study the reception of these activities among members of the communities in which they occur. I follow Gamson (1998: 227) in believing that "in order to get a strong grasp of a cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to simultaneously study its production (the activities through which it is created), its thematic, narrative, visual, or textual content (what is being said in and through it), and its reception (how those encountering it use and interpret it)." Further research should do just this.

Finally, the continued analysis of the motivations of DIY urban design practices is necessary to get at the mechanisms behind these phenomena and, ultimately, their cultural, spatial, and socio-economic relevance. My own continuing dissertation research, already including over forty interviews in six cities of widely differing characters and histories, aims to do just this. The rise of DIY urban design may represent a fundamental shift in how people relate to the physical and policy environment of the city, a willingness to make would-be improvements to the uses and meanings of a space itself without permission, people taking their ideals for cityspace into their own hands, in a sense doing urban designers' work for them. This shift implies changes to how we conceive of the boundaries between personal, public and private property, of who is entitled to alter urban space (and potentially the contested turf of who is entitled to do this work), of local government (it's authority and its responsibility), of urban use value, and yes, of creative, critical, personal agency. What's more, to the degree that these actions are an indication of what some people actually want out of their urban surroundings, we could learn a great deal about how to better design our urban spaces in the first place.

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