

Tactical interventions in libraries

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Abstract: “Tactical urbanism” is a catchphrase describing a wide range of ways in which ordinary people improve their neighborhoods, through interventions ranging from seed-bombing vacant lots to building impromptu parks. Tactical interventions are cheap, quick, and accessible to everyone. Libraries can adopt a tactical approach by consciously leveraging lightweight, experimental, iterative, and small-scale projects in support of larger strategies. This column will outline the characteristics of successful tactical interventions, and describe two real-world library projects that demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach.

Keywords: *tactics, pilot projects, urbanism, innovation*



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Introduction

Anyone who walked much in Queens, New York knew about the Astoria Scum River. It wasn't really a river—it was a puddle created by a leaky Amtrak pipe underneath the Hells Gate viaduct. In the winter months the puddle created a dangerous sidewalk ice rink. In summer, it stank. For decades, local residents had asked Amtrak, the borough, and the city to clean up the water, but nothing ever happened.

Then one day in winter 2009, something changed. Two locals, Jason Eppink and the artist known as Posterchild, salvaged pallet wood from the street and built a small foot bridge for next to no cost. They lugged it to the sidewalk and left it over the puddle, complete with a plaque dubbing it the “Astoria Scum River Bridge” and dedicating it to the “safety and comfort of the pedestrian.” (Eppink). People immediately started using the bridge. They also started photographing it, and sharing their photos on social media. The local news caught the story and shared it. Within less than a month, the bridge received a commendation from a city council member. Shortly after that, workers fixed the leaky pipe and the puddle was gone. The Astoria Scum River Bridge was broken up and returned to the street.

The Astoria Scum River Bridge is an example of a larger movement, sometimes called “tactical urbanism,” and sometimes known by other names such as guerrilla urbanism, DIY urbanism, and city repair. The common thread to them all is the idea that ordinary people have the right and responsibility to improve their neighborhoods through light, quick, cheap interventions—such as installing a footbridge with a cheeky dedication plate over a known nuisance, in order to prod official bureaucracy into action.

Tactical urbanism is a useful descriptor because it emphasizes the often-overlooked importance of tactics. Organizational strategy focuses on the big picture: on long-term goals, multi-year projects, and substantial resources. Tactics, on the other hand, focus on the small-scale, low-cost, and immediate. If strategy tells us why we are doing something, tactics tell us how we're going to get it done. Both are important to any endeavor, but because libraries are charged with big, important jobs like stewarding cultural collections and fostering learning, librarians often tend to focus on strategy. Tactics are just as important, and sometimes even more effective.

Because tactical interventionists can't rely on lots of money or expertise, they consciously cultivate other assets. Many tactical interventions demonstrate qualities of openness, including a willingness to experiment and/or "fail," and using delight and charm to build interest and buy-in. Some tactical interventions are passion projects, driven by their authors' personal interests. Some are intentionally ephemeral, like the Astoria Scum River Bridge. And many find ways to share ownership, build partnerships, and value social outcomes such as improved relationships and increased community awareness. Librarians can take advantage of all of these qualities, as we'll see in the two examples below.

Two Tactical Intervention Examples in Libraries

Tactical interventions in libraries (and cities) don't always have to be grassroots efforts. In 2006, Ginnie Cooper took over leadership of the D.C Public Library system. One of her first priorities was to reboot a stalled renovation of several neighborhood library branches. For bureaucratic reasons, outdated library buildings in underserved neighborhoods had stood empty for months, while patrons drifted away and lost interest in the services. Cooper worked with library staff to create interim library buildings, drafting a standard, reusable floorplan for low-cost library services in rented trailers and

neighborhood storefronts. The interim branches opened quickly and got patrons back into the library while the heavy lifting of creating the permanent branches went on behind the scenes. By the end of the project the interim branches were so successful at regaining the public's trust that the Board decided to make them a fixture. Now, whenever a library in the DC system is closed for renovation or repair, an interim must be opened to serve the neighborhood (Cooper, 2010).

Tactics can work well for organizational leaders, but you don't have to be a leader to use tactics. In 2012, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga systems librarian Jason Griffey got fed up with the limitations of wireless networks in libraries. Too many buildings had problems with dead spots or low connectivity, narrow bandwidth, or in some cases, content filters. Beyond that, if a librarian wanted to take an innovative program to a local park, farmer's market, or another location without wireless coverage, they were out of luck. After seeing a precedent device called a PirateBox, Griffey got to work on what he called a LibraryBox: a combination router, USB drive, and minimal power source that could broadcast preloaded data over a small area. The LibraryBox was perfect for sharing files in classrooms or in the field. Users just browsed their wireless networks for the LibraryBox signal, joined the network, and had quick, easy, unfiltered access to digital files. Griffey shared his prototype with colleagues, then Kickstarted a production run to make LibraryBoxen (the official plural) more available to other librarians and technologists. Today, LibraryBoxen are used around the world to share research data, teach, and circumvent firewalls and censorship.

Conclusion

In both of these examples, librarians borrowed the tools of tactical intervention to improve library services, either at the leadership level or on the front lines. Griffey's handheld Internet device is playful and ingenious, and its charm has drawn together a decentralized user community of thousands

from all around the world. Cooper's pragmatic, temporary solution to the sizeable problem of building renovations demonstrated nimbleness, agility, and an awareness of the importance of community relationships. Both projects were accomplished at (relatively) low cost.

More importantly, both of these projects were intended to fix a defined problem, but have had lasting practical and policy ramifications far beyond that scope. Both Griffey and Cooper used tactics in support of a larger strategy—to restore library services to underserved neighborhoods, and to overcome intermittent problems with wireless connectivity. In an ideal library world, tactics and strategy go hand in hand, with strategy pointing to the horizon and tactics checking the map along the way.

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