



ABSTRACT

This article explores the integration of grassroots movements into formal urban planning to create more participatory, equitable, and sustainable urban environments. Grassroots movements, like DIY urbanism, involve community-driven activities that directly address unmet needs in urban spaces. However, the ad-hoc nature of DIY urbanism often conflicts with the structured, regulated processes of top-down urban planning.

Despite these tensions, there is significant potential in combining the strengths of these movements with formal urban planning. Such collaboration can lead to urban areas that are not only well-planned and regulated but also dynamic and reflective of the diverse communities they serve.

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INTEGRATING GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS INTO URBAN PLANNING: DIY URBANISM

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From using toilet plungers to protect bike lanes (Fig. 1a), to reclaiming parking spaces through pop-up parks (Fig. 1b), what is known as Do-It-Yourself (DIY) urbanism exemplifies how community members have taken matters into their own hands to reshape urban spaces.



Figure 1a: Toilet plungers as barriers for bike lanes (Image Source: Ramsey, 2017)



Figure 1b: Participants of Park(ing) Day utilising vehicle parking spaces as actual parks (Image Source: Johnson, 2011)

The bottom-up and ad-hoc nature of DIY urbanism often contradicts the meticulous and long bureaucratic processes of top-down urban planning, resulting in tension between these two place-making approaches. While urban planners are constantly looking for ways to increase public participation in drafting city plans, DIY urbanists are keen to reclaim ownership of the urban spaces they occupy. **This article aims to discuss the potential reconciliation of these two opposing approaches to provide an integrated solution in moving towards the creation of more equitable spaces for urban dwellers.**

What is DIY Urbanism?

DIY urbanism is a nascent concept also referred to as tactical urbanism (Lydon et al., 2012), temporary urbanism (Bragaglia & Rossignolo, 2021), pop-up urbanism (Fredericks et al., 2018), and even guerilla urbanism (Simpson, 2014). This article employs Finn (2014)'s focus on DIY movement as a community-driven movement in which citizens "attempt to emulate or augment formal municipal designs and infrastructure" to solve an urban issue. DIY interventions are often grassroots movements, stemming from the initiatives of a few keen individuals, before gaining traction from other members of the community who then organically come together to also contribute to enhancing the space. However, as they are typically carried out without municipal permission, all DIY interventions, whether locally run or not, carry the risk of being labelled as "vandalism".

DIY urbanism is part of a long history of citizen involvement in shaping urban spaces (Finn, 2014). For example, in Dulwich, London, a community of local skateboarders has built their own skatepark on the site of an abandoned and disused carpark known as "the Grove" (Fig. 2a). Since skateboarders took over the site, the carpark, which was previously known for fly-tipping, has been filled with skateable structures such as ramps, rails, ledges, and a mini-volcano made from found objects and in-situ concrete (Edmonds, 2021). Similarly, local Malaysian skateboarders have also banded together to build their own DIY skatepark on the rooftop of a building in Damansara Damai to address the neighbourhood's lack of skateparks (Fig. 2b).



Figure 2a: A collective of skateboarders building a 'mini-volcano' at The Grove (Image Source: Edmonds, 2021)



Figure 2b: A skateboarder ollieing over a pyramid bank and the DIY rooftop skatepark in Damansara Damai (Image Source: Zaid, 2021)

Theo Hughes, one of the founding members responsible for designing The Grove DIY, emphasises that allowing people to participate in the creation process gives them a sense of ownership (Ramirez, 2022). In this way, when compared to top-down planning, DIY urbanism not only revitalises underutilised spaces, it also fosters a more connected and vibrant community through direct involvement in shaping these spaces.

The Complexities of DIY Urbanism

DIY actions in urban spaces exist primarily in legal 'grey' areas, where grassroots interventions frequently bypass official processes and permits, and are carried out without municipal involvement, funding, or sanction (Finn, 2014). As a result, city authorities' responses towards these actions can vary and are usually determined by the nature of the intervention.

Most cities choose to ignore or remove these interventions, such as painting over graffiti or removing unsanctioned public benches. However, there have been instances where the intervention is well received by the local council, with DIY projects being enhanced or recreated officially. Some sensible projects get permanently adopted by councils, such as Hosier Lane in Naarm (the original name for Melbourne, Australia) (Fig. 3). Originally a countercultural site – where nonconformist groups express themselves through graffiti – it has now become a tourist destination that the local government promote (Smith, 2020).



Figure 3: Hosier Lane in Naarm, Melbourne, Australia. These lanes started to be painted in 2001 (Image Source: Javen, n.d.)

Up to this point, DIY urbanism have mostly been highlighted in a positive light. However, this approach does have its limitations.

Firstly, these interventions are usually short-term and highly localised. This means that DIY solutions are not always sustainable if it lacks institutional or community backing to ensure continuity. As a result, the benefits can only be enjoyed by a small segment of society for a limited time.

Secondly, they may lack the same due diligence that official planning usually requires, such as ensuring public safety, adopting transparent processes, and balancing short-term needs with long-term visions (Finn, 2014). Although DIY actions can often be implemented faster than the traditional top-down urban planning methods, they may raise legitimate health and safety concerns, exposing cities to potential lawsuits borne out of interventions they had not even sanctioned in the first place. As such, in engaging with DIY urbanism, city planners need to balance the flexibility of place-making in cities with protection from liability (Pagano, 2013), and use their professional expertise to ensure that DIY urbanism can be integrated in a way that is truly safe, equitable, effective, and locally appropriate (Finn, 2014).

Furthermore, despite its initial intentions to provide a community-centric solution, it has the potential to undermine a more participatory process. What a few people think is best may not be the best solution for the entire community. In fact, contemporary urban planners have been working hard and increasingly towards more participatory-based planning through systematic methods such as public engagement sessions, visioning exercises, and surveys.

For example, New York City's Plaza Program, developed by the city's Department of Transportation (DOT), collaborated with community groups to reclaim streets by transforming them into vibrant urban plazas. DOT leverages on local knowledge to cultivate vibrant public spaces in under-resourced neighbourhoods, identifying areas showing strong community support and committing to operate, maintain, and manage these spaces, eliminating the need to rely on private actors with commercial interests (Depani, 2022). Similarly, London's Making Places is a borough-wide programme run by Waltham Forest Council in partnership with arts organisation, Create London, which works with local artists, architects, and landscape designers to deliver public improvement works in underutilised spaces identified and suggested by local residents (Create London, n.d.).

Situating DIY Urbanism

While we know that the movement is a grassroots response to unmet needs, to understand why DIY urbanists resort to such direct action – knowing well its extra-legal nature and contested legitimacy – we need to first situate it within its broader social, economic, and political praxis.

DIY urbanism emerges across cities from Europe to Asia, taking various forms. These interventions, varying in scale, purpose, and levels of permission from the relevant authorities (Volont, 2019), emerge almost naturally in rapidly urbanising cities (Lydon, 2015). Each instance of DIY urbanism reflects the locality's social setting. Interestingly, **most interventions are intended to be practical, and DIY urbanists generally do not perceive themselves as radical agents of political change (Douglas, 2014).**

Nonetheless, the more expressive forms of DIY urbanism, such as using graffiti and street art, often serve as a medium to express grievances towards poor social and material conditions. This indicates that the practice can be overtly political. For instance, Spataro (2015) views DIY actions as an effort to reclaim public space from commodification. DIY interventions produce urban commons by altering city spaces for collective rather than exclusive use. It prioritises the creation of urban spaces with 'use-value' rather than 'exchange-value', where citizens' needs precedes over owner's profits (Volont, 2019).

Furthermore, the emergence of DIY urbanism can be a result of democratic deficiencies in local governance and equitable resource distribution. When there are insufficient proper channels for citizens to access local solutions or there is too much red tape, citizens may view pursuing legal means for small-scale solutions as not worthy of the effort. Looking at projects in less developed regions such as urban renewal projects in the Global South, DIY urbanism often emerges as low-cost solutions to the decline of public funding. For example, the Limenos al Bicentenario programme utilised DIY urbanism tactics that required minimal resources and successfully revitalised derelict public spaces in Lima, Peru (C40 Knowledge, 2022).

From a social and political lens, DIY urbanism is most likely to rear its head in reaction to the limited forms of support provided by urban governance which fails to effectively meet the needs of the local community. Citizens who are sceptical of the effectiveness of institutional democratic processes are less likely to participate in political process that they believe excludes them, and instead resort to take matters into their own hands.

Therefore, DIY actions should not be viewed from an apolitical perspective. Either directly or indirectly, they emerge as expressions of both self-help and resistance against the prevailing political and market conditions (Hou, 2020). By challenging the predominant ordering of urban spaces and their associated codes and protocols, DIY urbanism reminds citizens of their agency and ability to enact changes and transform the city (Hou, 2010) without having to rely on or wait for help from local authorities, empowered by strong community values and a sense of responsibility towards bettering the spaces they occupy.

Reconciling DIY Urbanism and Top-Down Planning: CAN IT BE DONE?

Attempts to make urban planning practices more inclusive and collaborative, without co-opting and diluting the social and political context of the DIY movement, can result in a rethinking of urban planning that acknowledge and engage with the heterogeneity of lived experience in contrast to a reductionist institutional approach (Holston, 1998).

There is currently, no clear or comprehensive framework for integrating DIY urbanism into formal urban planning. However, there have been a few case studies in Malaysia where institutions have interacted with DIY solutions, either by learning from them, supporting them, or scaling them up to improve public space.

Case Study 1: Urban Skate Plaza at Ampang Park

Since the 1970s, skateboarders, BMX cyclists, and BASE jumpers adapted landscapes for their own needs by repurposing urban infrastructure (Ferrel, 2001). In Malaysia, the skateboarding scene is the most visible, as skateboarders continue to reclaim urban spaces to meet their demand for skateable areas. The smooth pavement near Ampang Park LRT station, along with its ledges and large open space, has made it a popular street spot not only among local skateboarders but also tourists visiting Kuala Lumpur. In true DIY spirit, these skateboarders bring their own portable skate rails, using traffic cones and street barriers as obstacles to jump over (Fig. 4a & Fig. 4b).



Figure 4a: A skateboarder moving a grind rail near Ampang Park LRT station (Image Source: Roberts, 2016)



Figure 4b: A traffic cone and street barrier used as obstacles by skateboarders (Image Source: Author, 2024)

When the Ampang Park Shopping Centre was demolished to make way for the construction of the Ampang Park MRT station, MRT Corp and skateboarding lifestyle brand VANS saw an opportunity to partner up and build a skatepark in its place, just across the road from the original street location. Officially opened in 2023, the urban space is now a vibrant meeting place for people of all ages to safely skateboard, with plenty of sitting areas nearby to unwind after work and various pop-up cafes (Fig. 5). The proximity to Ampang Park MRT Station makes this urban space in the heart of Kuala Lumpur easily accessible, attracting families, street photographers, and tourists. It is easy to see how these pioneering Ampang Park skateboarders influenced DIY urbanism and how it affected the surrounding area's development.



Figure 5: View of Urban Skate Plaza from the overpass heading towards Inter-mark (Image Source: MRT Corp, 2023)

This urban project demonstrates the organisational capacity that exists between public and private institutions, as well as their ability to learn from local DIY movements, which city authorities should emulate. While admirable, it must also be recognised that too much reliance on the private sector to fund urban development could lead to an abdication of municipal responsibility (Mayer, 2007). Similarly, it could also lead to a form of neoliberal urbanisation where too much reach is given to private sectors, and public spaces are only redeveloped to facilitate forms of private property nearby (Spataro, 2015).

City governments must take a more active role in ensuring public spaces is designed for people first, which includes taking into account the existing local urban culture when developing plans to redevelop urban spaces. The community's needs should take precedence over the potential unlocking of private economic values, which should come as an important, but not the primary consideration.

Case Study 2: Mini Libraries in Taman Wawasan

A retired headmaster's initiative of building mini libraries in a public park recently made headlines (Free Malaysia Today, 2024; New Straits Times, 2024). These mini libraries consist primarily of shelves and boxes filled with books covered in plastic sheets (Fig. 6). Most of the books are also donated or obtained from recycling centres, and many families visit his libraries to borrow from his 30,000-book collection. Lee Kim Siew, the man behind the initiative, started building his mini libraries about three years ago with help of resources and approval from the MPP Zone 16 Subang Jaya Municipal Council (Toh, 2024).



Figure 6: Retired headmaster, Lee Kim Siew, with his mini libraries around Taman Wawasan Recreational Park in Puchong
(Image Source: Marwan, 2024)

Although Lee's intervention can be considered DIY urbanism due to its grassroots nature, he did not undermine the process of obtaining approval from the relevant authorities, which likely ensured that his mini libraries would not be removed and could continue to benefit the surrounding community. However, without sufficient backing from the local council, Lee has been the sole caretaker of these libraries, stationing himself on site from 9am to 12pm every day. Lee will turn 90 next year and may no longer be fit enough to maintain the libraries, highlighting the downsides of this DIY approach in terms of sustaining the interventions.

DIY movements like Lee's play yet another important role of DIY urbanism, serving as an earnest signalling mechanism for a lack of much needed public amenities. In this case, the nearest public library to Taman Wawasan Recreational Park is a 40-minute walk or train ride away, making it inaccessible to those without a vehicle. Local municipalities should take heed of and respond to these identified needs, either by supporting these DIY interventions or by replacing them with better solutions that can be better implemented through proper government funding for longer-term utility.

Case Study 3: Safer Streets for Cyclists and Pedestrians

On a larger scale, Bike Commute Malaysia's (BCMY) recent Street Pop-Up project in collaboration with Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) and Global Designing Cities Initiatives (GDCI) near SK Danau Kota 2 in Setapak (Fig. 7) is one of the more successful integrations of DIY intervention and top-down planning approaches to improving urban spaces.

BCMY is a grassroots organisation that actively advocates for safer street designs across Malaysia. The project's goal was to make the streets safer by narrowing lanes, creating designated bike lanes, and implementing traffic calming measures to reduce vehicle speeds. This was done 'pop-up' style, using simple items like paint, traffic barriers, and planters to show that it does not take much to make streets safer.



Figure 7: A group of 30 volunteers finish painting walking paths and installing traffic barriers at SK Danau Kota 2 (Image Source: BCMY, 2024)

In the initial stages of the project, BCMY and GDCI held design consultations with Sekolah Kebangsaan Danau Kota, the community, and City Hall (The Star, 2024). The street was previously full of parked cars, which reduced visibility and made crossing the road difficult. Now, it is significantly more pedestrian and cyclist friendly (Fig. 8), demonstrating the success of urban intervention when as many stakeholders as possible are directly involved in the place-making process (BCMY, 2024).



Figure 8: Observations of street users making use of the street transformations (Image Source: BCMY, 2024)

Additionally, BCMY has been working closely with the MP of Petaling Jaya, Lee Chean Chung to improve pedestrian facilities near MRT Phileo Damansara (Fig. 9) – implying that other institutional structures, such as local parliamentary representatives, provide a form of advocacy model for DIY urbanists as alternatives to local councils and municipalities. The team created illustrations of the proposed enhancements, and after a year of advocating for its implementation, the RM150,000-project was eventually approved earlier in 2024. The project is expected to improve First and Last Mile connectivity issues, and the Mayor of Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya was seen surveying the site in February.

BCMY, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), has had significant success advocating for better urban environments through safer streets. Their advantage lies in having the grassroots expertise in understanding the local context and can adapt quickly to residents' changing needs compared to government bureaucracies. It is important to note, however, that the fight for equitable urban spaces should not be limited to government bodies, advocacy groups or term politicians. Their relative lack of ongoing funding and institutional infrastructure may limit the scale and scope of these projects, resulting in inconsistent measures and the absence of long-term maintenance.



Figure 9: An illustration of the proposed enhancements to Phileo Damansara MRT station (Image Source: Bike Commute Malaysia, 2024)

The case studies cited above demonstrate that it is indeed possible to positively incorporate elements of grassroots movements such as DIY urbanism into city planning to move towards a more participatory form of planning and decision making. Malaysia has shown encouraging prospects on this front through its many government initiatives. The Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040, for example, has held numerous engagement sessions to ensure the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the implementation of urban development policies, including government agencies, the private sector, NGOs, and the general public. Similarly, Think City, a subsidiary of government-linked investment fund Khazanah Nasional Berhad, has carried out a number of urban rejuvenation projects, the most recent of which focused on improving public housing through a community-driven grant initiative supported by the Ministry of Finance.

Conclusion

DIY urbanism has highlighted the desire for urban residents to be active participants in the development of the spaces that they occupy. Being a new concept, particularly in this part of the world, there is still a lack of a clear integration framework. However, recent collaborations on urban development projects between community-driven organisations and government institutions have signalled a promising path forward.

The Urban Skate Plaza demonstrates how incorporating local urban culture can result in vibrant spaces that are fully utilised by residents. The community response towards Lee's mini libraries indicates how DIY interventions can signal the needs of a community, which local councils and city planning authorities can try to fulfil. Finally, BCMY, GDCI, and DBKL's pilot project at SK Danau Kota best exemplifies how grassroots movements can be supported by both executive and legislative institutions, to create safer and more vibrant urban spaces.

Institutionalising grassroots movements is often viewed with scepticism, but this author argues that it can be accomplished effectively through collaborations with bottom-up organisational expertise that maintain the civic-centric spirit of the movement. Getting the citizens involved in urban space development not only empowers them by giving them a sense of ownership over the spaces they occupy, but also strengthens social cohesion towards more equitable, sustainable, and resilient cities.

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