

PREFACE

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

—PAUL ROMER

We started our firm, The Street Plans Collaborative, in the middle of the worst economy either of us—and our parents—had ever known. As a result, we treated our nascent company with frugal conservatism but one that was generous with our respective communities, with our time. So it's no wonder that we discovered the Tactical Urbanism ethos in the work of those around us, because we were using its core philosophy to incrementally grow our business.

Our ambition was, and remains, to combine planning and design consulting with what our firm now calls research-advocacy projects. To this last point, when we started our careers there was no YouTube, blogs and Facebook were just becoming a thing, and no one had heard of Twitter. Well, that's all changed, and quickly. We've never been so connected online yet so far away in our communities. But our current technology and the ethos of overlapping open source movements have played a pivotal role in our ability to learn from others and in the dissemination of Tactical Urbanism. We'll explore this key point further in chapter 3, but we want to make clear that although this book comes with a price tag, much of the information contained herein does not. And for that we're grateful.

When you have finished reading this book, we hope you feel empowered. We're writing this book because so many others have inspired and empowered us, as you will read in the discovery stories that follow. We are now more excited than ever by the endless number of creative projects that are emerging daily, and we believe strongly that Tactical Urbanism enables people to not only envision change but to help create it. This is powerful stuff. Thanks for reading.

Mike's Story

Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company.

—LORD BYRON

With a planning degree fresh in hand, I left graduate school in Ann Arbor, Michigan for Miami, Florida in 2007 to return to Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company, where I had interned. I had worked primarily on Miami 21, an effort that entailed replacing the city's convoluted and archaic zoning code with one that streamlined the development process and aimed for results more in line with twenty-first-century planning ideals: transit-oriented development, green buildings, and more sensitive transitions between existing single-family neighborhoods and fast-changing commercial corridors. The project—the largest application of a form-based code at the time and maybe still—was innovative and complex, a dream assignment for a young and idealistic planner like me.

Yet in the first few months I began discovering the limitation of the planner's toolbox, especially in conveying the technical aspect of the Miami 21 effort to the public. I was still passionate about making a change and looked for additional opportunities to influence my newly adopted city.

My lonely 8-mile bicycle commute from Miami Beach to Miami's Little Havana neighborhood seemed like a good place to start. At work I voiced concerns to my colleagues that more could be done to make Miami a safe, inviting place for cyclists, and I was dedicating my free time to local bicycle advocacy. My boss at the time, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, heard me discussing this at the office and advised that I send an op-ed to the *Miami Herald* explaining why—and how—the city should improve conditions for bicyclists. "Make Miami a Bicycle-Friendly City" was the title of my December 2007 op-ed in the *Miami Herald*. In it I claimed that Miami was choosing not to compete with other leading American cities in attracting and retaining talent, ensuring low-cost transportation options, and, ultimately, fulfilling the long-term promises of Miami 21.

Among other ideas, I suggested that the city hire a bicycle coordinator,

undertake a comprehensive bicycle master plan, and shift policy to “complete its streets.” I also suggested that Miami could adapt Bogotá, Colombia’s *Ciclovía*, a weekly livability initiative that transforms approximately 70 miles (112 km) of interconnected streets into linear parks that are free of motor vehicles.

During this time I also started blogging on the popular Transit Miami blog, where I met Tony, and worked closely with the newly formed Green Mobility Network advocacy organization and Emerge Miami, a dedicated but loosely organized group of young professionals looking to make a positive impact.

Together our groups helped form the city’s first Bicycle Action Committee and created an action plan that could be adopted and implemented. To our amazement, our ideas for making Miami easier to navigate on bicycle were supported by Mayor Manny Diaz and his staff, who vowed to make Miami a much more bicycle-friendly city. Highlights of the plan included obtaining a League of American Bicyclists Bicycle-Friendly Community rating by 2012, priority infrastructure projects in line with upcoming capital budget expenditures, and the implementation of Bike Miami Days, the city’s first *Ciclovía*-like event. Whereas the first two took several years of policy and physical planning advances (the city received its bronze designation in 2012), the *Ciclovía*-like event—or what is now popularly referred to in North America as “open streets”—rose to the top of the priority list because it was quick and relatively inexpensive. Plus, could there be a more visible initiative than closing off downtown Miami streets for social and physical activity?

To our delight, thousands of people showed up to the first event in November 2008, and not just the spandex-clad MAMILs (Middle-Aged Men in Lycra) but entire families, women of all ages, and a lot of young adults. People were not just bicycling but also walking, jogging, skating, and dancing along normally car-choked streets. The novelty of the event created an almost palpable, intoxicating energy on the street, and the impact was immediate and very visible. Furthermore, the thousands of smiling faces, banner sales for some business owners, and the noticeable absence of “car-mageddon” put a lot of people at ease, including the mayor, who gave the welcoming address before leading a ceremonial bike ride along Flagler Street.

As an event, Bike Miami Days was a success. And it served a much greater purpose: It allowed a few thousand participants to experience their city in



Bike Miami Days debuted in 2008. (Mike Lydon)

an entirely new and exciting way. It also gave them a chance to imagine a different urban future, one where walking, bicycling, and the provision of more public space could be made easier. We certainly didn't call it Tactical Urbanism at the time, but that's exactly what it was. I was hooked.

The event made me realize that I was frustrated not just with the lack of bicycle planning in Miami but with the field of urban planning. Indeed, after 18 months of working as a consultant, I had not seen any of my work result in meaningful, on-the-ground change. Perhaps I'm impatient—some say that's also a generational trait—but many planning exercises quickly revealed themselves to be just that: expensive ways to discuss the possible, with implementation perpetually on hold until a time when the politics and dollars *might* align.

Like most urban planners, I went into the profession to make a positive and visible difference in the world. To me, the goal was always to do so in the near term, not "maybe later." And although it was just a temporary event, Bike Miami Days seemed more powerful than any public workshop, charrette, or meeting I had attended. I remember thinking then, as I still believe today,

that transformative infrastructure and planning projects have their place; new rail lines, bridges, or the rezoning of an entire city are difficult but certainly necessary and important projects. However, you rarely get the buy-in needed through the conventional planning process alone. To be sure, a city can't respond to its challenges merely through the exercise of planning for the long term; it must also move quickly on many, many smaller projects. Indeed, these are the ones that engage citizenry and often make the big-ticket items possible in the long run. Cities need big plans but also small tactics.

With this in mind, I began to see open streets initiatives as a possible planning tool, another way cities could reach and inspire their citizens, and a way for citizens to in turn inspire their government to embrace change. Bike Miami Days proved to be a critical tactic for building public awareness and interest in the city's incipient bicycling strategy. In many ways, it demonstrated that there, hidden in plain sight, was a diverse constituency of people searching for more opportunities to be physically active in public space. As temporary as it was, the streets became the manifestation of what planners would be lucky to create in years, not weeks.

A few months after the launch of Bike Miami Days, I was asked, alongside Collin Worth, the city's newly hired bicycle coordinator, to carry out Miami's first bicycle master plan. I really enjoyed my current job, but I embraced the opportunity. I set up a home office, had a website built by a friend of a friend for a few hundred dollars, and began doing business as a sole proprietor under the name The Street Plans Collaborative.

After completing that plan, I moved to Brooklyn, New York. I had grown increasingly enamored with the inventive work being undertaken by the New York City Department of Transportation, led by Janette Sadik-Khan: hundreds of miles of new bike lanes, several newly minted "pilot" pedestrian plazas, and Summer Streets, the city's version of Bike Miami Days. Inspired, I began to look around for other activists and communities advancing what I saw as a healthy balance of planning *and* doing, leaders who looked to instigate change. Tony and I had worked together for several years on Transit Miami, so we decided to become partners, and in 2010 we officially incorporated Street Plans as a company.

As the year progressed, I continued researching not only open streets programs but a variety of short-term, often creative projects that were having a big impact on city policy and city streets. That fall I traveled to New Orleans

for a retreat with a group of friends and colleagues who sometimes identify as “NextGen,” a spinoff of the Congress for the New Urbanism. I shared notes on a groundswell of seemingly unrelated low-cost urban interventions occurring across mid-recession America.

With the purpose of giving more shape—and a recognizable name—to the ideas I shared in New Orleans, we assembled *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action, Long-Term Change*, Volume 1, in 2011 and provided the free digital document on SCRIBD. I posted the link on our company’s research web page and then sent the link to my colleagues and left for a needed vacation. I would have been happy if five or six of the twenty or so New Orleans retreat attendees read the twenty-five-page booklet.

In less than 2 months the document was viewed or downloaded more than 10,000 times. Although I was confident Tactical Urbanism was a potentially powerful and discernible trend, the interest exceeded all our expectations.

By the fall of 2011 our company had moved from just documenting Tactical Urbanism to integrating it into our professional practice. My friend and colleague Aurash Khawarзад suggested that we gather people together to share information, ideas, and best practices. It was then that we decided to test the interest in Tactical Urbanism beyond the digital realm. Soon thereafter, the Queens-based arts collective Flux Factory lent us their event space in a converted Long Island City greeting card factory, and we partnered with numerous organizations to produce the first Tactical Urbanism Salon. For nearly 10 hours, 150-plus people from around North America discussed their projects, listened to others, debated, and drank free beer. Further inspired by the interest and blossoming work of so many urbanists, we decided to write and release Volume 2. We doubled the number of case studies, included a brief overview of Tactical Urbanism’s history, and provided a spectrum of unsanctioned to sanctioned tactics; many of the latter moved to the former as we wrote.

Since the Queens event, we’ve co-produced five more salons in Philadelphia, Santiago, Memphis, Louisville, and Boston. And at the time of this writing, the full series of publications have been viewed or downloaded more than 275,000 times by people in more than one hundred countries. This includes the Spanish and Portuguese version of Volume 2; Volume 3, which focuses on Central and South America, co-authored with Ciudad Emergente, a Santiago, Chile-based social enterprise focused on enriching public space;



Mike Lydon spray paints a "sharrow" during a Build a Better Block initiative in Middlesboro, Kentucky. (Isaac Kremer for Discover Downtown Middlesboro)

and Volume 4, researched and written by our partners at Melbourne-based CoDesign Studio, which focuses on examples in Australia and New Zealand. We continue to lead workshops around the world, working with students, professionals, and citizens to teach them how they might use Tactical Urbanism to create a more collaborative approach to city and placemaking.

To my surprise, the simple act of writing an op-ed has led to many great people, opportunities, ideas, and challenges. It also provides proof that big things can happen when you start small.

Tony's Story

It was during a Memorial Day weekend trip to New York with my then 4-year-old son that I first started thinking about Tactical Urbanism. We had planned a special father-son trip to the city, and one of our stops was a mega toy store in Times Square. Directly in front of this location was where Broadway had been converted into a pedestrian plaza with lawn chairs and orange plastic barrels the very morning we were there. It was a startling change.

After making our purchase and leaving the toy store, my son and I settled in the newly formed plaza. As someone who had lived in New York for several years and had been visiting since childhood, I never really sat in Times Square and *enjoyed* it. Not until that day. The conversion was so new that people were still crowding the sidewalk and unsure about how to interact with the space. We were some of the first that morning who confidently stepped off the sidewalk and sat down. Others followed suit, but it was slow. We lingered there for a while, playing with his new toy and simply enjoying the city—something that you couldn't really do before.

The immediacy of it struck a chord in me, not only because of my advocacy experience in Miami with megaprojects such as Miami 21 and the half-cent transit tax, but also because of my professional work and the feeling that it was near impossible to get anything done. Here was a street retrofitted into a public space that didn't take millions of dollars and a decade to complete. It *felt* quick and easy and was totally effective.

This approach to planning resonated with me. I had been trying to live in an urban context in Miami since my return from college at NYU, and I found the experience lacking. I realized that many of the things I had come to love about living in a city were gone, namely great transit and abundant public space options. Returning to the suburban campus of the University of Miami, I went through a major period of urbanism withdrawal and sought to educate myself about the city I loved and try to make it into more of the city I expected.

I started to attend public meetings, city commission meetings, and planning board meetings and to write letters to the editor and go to any event that had to do with infrastructure or the functioning of the city. I immersed myself in the civic life of the city. I yearned for a better way to interact with my city government and make a substantial contribution to the development of the city, yet I found few options other than being a municipal employee or hired consultant.

As a way of channeling this civic energy, I started writing for, and would later be the editor of, a local blog called Transit Miami that focused on transportation and urban planning in Miami. Blogs were relatively new then, another reflection of how technology was affecting the city. Through my writing I became heavily involved in the aforementioned Miami 21 approval process, the implementation of the 2002 half-cent transit tax, and the rise

of bike culture in Miami. These experiences crystalized in my mind several ideas presented in this book.

The first was how dysfunctional the public planning process had become. I was excited about the prospect of my hometown having a new, forward-thinking zoning code. What I was not prepared for was how onerous the approval process would be for a code so large and complex. The project had gone through hundreds of public meetings and was significantly better than its predecessor yet was still attacked for being drafted behind closed doors. Although the resulting form-based code was ultimately approved, it was the process that had the greatest impact on me. No matter how progressive it was, a large percentage of people were against the code (to say nothing of the percentage who didn't even understand it), leading to delays and changes. Taken together with the dozens of land use attorneys, developers, and lobbyists, the approval meetings were a dizzying circus of opposition. I kept wondering, how can we ensure a sincere and thorough public process, and reform large-scale zoning systems, without having it turn into this?

Around the same time, Miami-Dade County approved a half-cent sales tax that was intended to fund a greatly expanded Metrorail network. I was proud to have voted for the item, yet several years passed and no major expansion was realized. Although there was full public support for the building of 80 new miles of transit, there was little municipal appetite for implementation of the costly system. A decade later, very little has been built, and the region needs transit more than ever. The failure of the half-cent tax offered another lesson: Megaprojects are not going to solve our problems, and we need to find a workaround to the challenge of building and retrofitting our cities to align more closely with the vision of plans such as Miami 21 if they are to be successful. I began to see small-scale changes as part of the answer to the stalled momentum of large projects.

It was in the growth of bicycle culture and infrastructure in Miami that I first witnessed how small-scale changes can lead to longer-term results. From Bike Miami Days and Critical Mass to the growth of bike infrastructure, there were a string of low-cost projects that individually were not so important but together convinced me that small, often short-term, easy-to-implement projects could have just as powerful an impact on the culture of a city as the megaprojects.

After grad school I worked at Chael Cooper & Associates Architecture, taking on both large-scale mixed-use development projects and small-scale residential projects. The same focus on large projects that I witnessed in my advocacy work was also present in my professional work; some of the projects we worked on promised to transform neighborhoods. Yet it turned out to be the smaller projects that were the most rewarding because they were tangible and measurable in a very short time, whereas little at the larger scale was actually built.

It was at this time that I took my son to New York and experienced what we would later call Tactical Urbanism firsthand. After that trip I traveled for a urban design charrette and became aware of the ways that inexpensive, short-term solutions were being implemented (because of either government inaction, the economy, or a lack of consensus). Back at home, fewer building projects came into the office, and I found myself more excited about civic involvement and street design than buildings.

After a time I had a flourishing start-up that resulted from my volunteer work in the community, and I became closer friends with Mike Lydon, having worked with him on Transit Miami for several years. We had a shared passion for remaking our cities, and we both knew that the key to that transformation was the street. Soon after we embarked on our solo careers, we decided to become partners and formally incorporated Street Plans.

Hundreds of projects, salons, workshops, and lectures later, we continue to evolve and refine our thinking on city making in the twenty-first century. And although we know that tactical projects alone are not a panacea for our cities, the underlying low-cost and iterative approach can be applied in a variety of ways to address the challenges of the coming decades. Of course, we know that every city is not New York or Miami, and what we've learned from the many projects we've worked on together is that the challenges affecting our cities are just as numerous in the dense urban core as they are in our metropolitan suburbs. The challenge for urbanists everywhere will be how to find low-cost, iterative responses for each.