

# Designing the Village Tapestry: New Architectural Agency(ies) of Community Building and Design

Tactical urbanisms, including pop-up, DIY, and guerilla urbanism, have emerged as examples of design strategies of the informal, creating significant public spaces. “Everyday space,” as described by Margaret Crawford, is “the physical domain of everyday public activity that exists... As the physical domain of everyday public activity, it is the connective tissue that binds daily life together (which) makes it a kind of public space.”<sup>1</sup> The tactical shaping of these spaces, in opposition to top-down formal planning design strategies has created, arguably, more significant and democratic spaces.

SHANNON BASSETT

University of South Florida

## NEW ARCHITECTURAL AGENCY(IES) OF COMMUNITY BUILDING AND DESIGN

How can tactical urbanism of the informal be transformed into the operational strategies of the formal planning and design process? How can these strategies engage planning and architectural design through new forms of architectural agency(ies) and expanded fields of operation? In this essay, I examine these questions through the lens of a design research project that I led in 2013, the Village Tapestry.

Tactical urbanism has been characterized, in part, by the reclamation of interstitial and marginal space. Parking lots and vacant lots transformed into temporary and ephemeral urban spaces, the shutting down of roads for festivals or farmer’s markets...This public space has been largely activated and shaped by citizen participation, lying in contrast with the prevailing and increasingly privatized public spaces experienced in North American cities. These “public spaces” have either been created by top down planning practices, or are privately owned public spaces or “POPS”, which are inherently problematic as described by Jerold Kayden in his seminal study of New York’s privately owned public spaces.<sup>2</sup>

Working within the context of public and community space design in the contemporary American city milieu, one is often faced with a prevailing “terrain vague” condition, as coined by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, referring to the form of absence in the contemporary metropolis, in its abandoned areas and obsolete and unproductive spaces. Here the strategy of “bricolage”, working from the diverse range of things that happen to be available, becomes critical in the designing of meaningful public and community space.<sup>3</sup> As described by Alex Wall in *Programming the Urban Surface*, “the extensive and inclusive ground-plane of the city, to the “field” that accommodates buildings, roads, utilities, open spaces, neighborhoods, and natural habitats. This is the ground structure that organizes and supports a broad range of fixed and changing activities in the city. As such, the urban

## PLAN TO ACT - 14TH STREET CRA ~ VILLAGE OF THE ARTS PROJECT

	SHORT TERM 1-2 YEARS	MID TERM 2-4 YEARS	LONG TERM 4+ YEARS
WATER-NATURE: GREEN STREETS	Seminars Explore Green Solutions Pilot Rain Gardens Find Funding: Short & Long-Term	Ongoing Sessions Test Skinny Streets & Bumpouts Expand Based on Results Flooding Problem Solved	Continue to Pilot, Test, and Execute Projects that "Work" and Create National Models
CONNECTIVITY	Promote Circulator Loop Start Parking Planning Connect Transportation Options	Institute Transportation Solutions Institute Parking System	Greater Connectivity to VOTA via Transportation and Park Systems
DESIGN	Look at Overlay District Gateway Signage Prototype Consider a Pattern Book Back Alley Prototype	Village Distinctiveness Amplified Implement Gateways Expand Based on Results	More Traffic into VOTA Visibility Attracts New Business and Visitors
ACTIVATE SPACES	Workshops Define/Coordinate Events Do Pop-Up Urbanism Pilots Identify Properties to Use/Purchase	Ongoing Sessions Ongoing Events Ongoing Pop-ups Activate Properties Positively	More Vitality to Increase Economic Growth
CORRIDORS: 9TH & 14TH	Interface with Existing Efforts Look at Overlay District Define Options for Catalytic Project on 14th St.	Change Overlay District as Appropriate Start BIG Project with public-private partnerships	Transformations Resulting in Greater Vitality for 14th Street CRA and VOTA
COORDINATE	Task Force Collaboration: County, CVB, EDC, others Funding Research Developer Incentive Research	Continue if Needed On-going Collaboration Secure Funding Activate Incentives	BIG Results from Public-Private - Non-profit Partnerships
INVESTIGATE	Scope/Cost of Lighting Bike Swipes (Share) Options Foreclosures Inventory Options 2.6 Acre Lot South Village Opportunities	Implement Improved Lighting Decrease Problem Properties Connect North and South Village Implement Solutions	Projects Thriving Based on Research and Funding



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surface is dynamic and responsive; like a catalytic emulsion, the surface literally unfolds events in time.”<sup>4</sup>

“Tapestry is the visual metaphor for the Village of the Arts (VOTA) Plan to Act Project. The strength and beauty of tapestry fabric is derived from interlaced threads, the warp and the weft; the successful sustainability of this project is dependent on an intricate combination of actions over time by a diverse group of stakeholders and partners.”<sup>5</sup>

### DESIGNING THE VILLAGE TAPESTRY-WEAVING COMMUNITY-THE WARP AND THE WEFT

The process of meaningful community building and physical design also must engage in an active weaving between social connections and relations which are constantly shaping and negotiating the design of public space and reclamation of the city tissue. New representations and methods of working become crucial within this context. The tapestry as an overarching diagram and metaphor for community design, is a powerful tool with the ability to create layered and juxtaposed spaces and social interactions for the urban project. It is through this layered structure that it has the agency to redefine the forms, functions and structure referred to by Lefebvre in “The Right to the City”.<sup>6</sup> These layered and juxtaposed spaces and social interactions give

Figure 1: A “kit of parts” of “plug ‘n’play-pop-up urbanism” designs—a pattern book which can be deployed in tactical event spaces., “Plug ‘n’play.”

Figure 2: In the weave, two distinctive yarns are woven, interlacing physical space and social connections—the warp running longitudinally and the weft that crosses it. The weave creates new relationships, as well as juxtapositions and layering of programs over time. *Diagram of the Weave Concept.*

agency to the social production of (public) space. The concept of a tapestry serves as the conceptual driver for the design project, emerging from a community design process informed by the weave. This was adopted by the agency of a collaborative process that, in turn, is generative for the conceptual framework for the physical planning for the Village of the Arts (VOTA) masterplan. The diagram of this tactic served both as the basis of the design and planning framework, in addition to serving as an illustrative graphic for the community. It enabled a participatory design process and multi-layered framework for the envisioning and realization of urban strategies, overlaid and woven by a connective social tissue for the project. The project moves beyond simple form making to place form within Lefebvre's idea of the social production of space.<sup>7</sup>



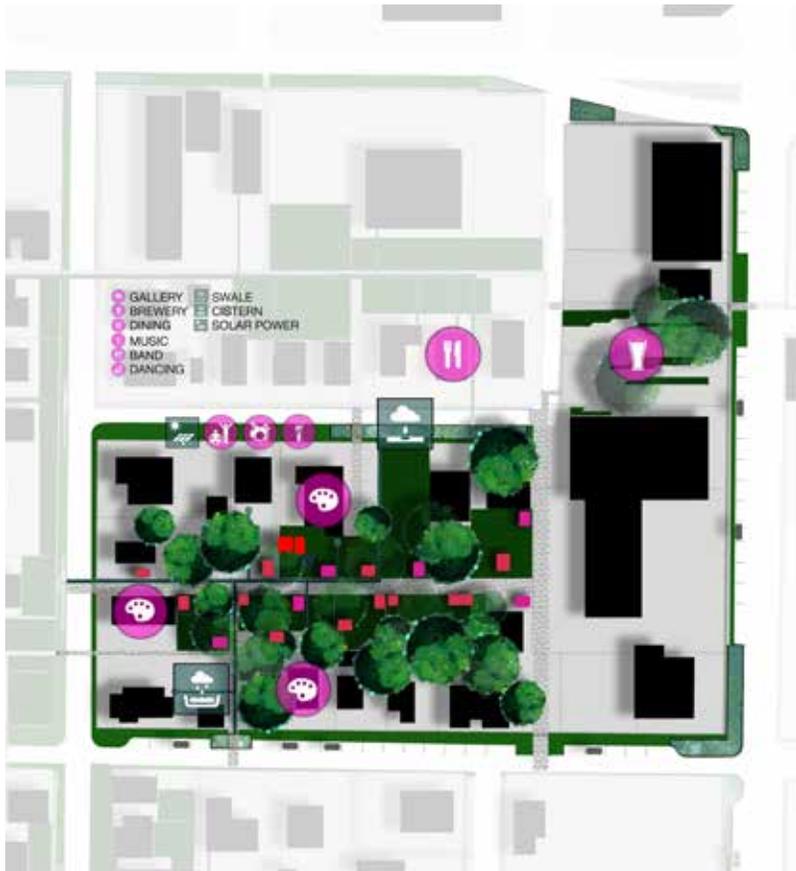
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Figure 3: Event space within the Village Tapestry. These acquired vacant lots and interstitial spaces are transformed into a tactical design space(s) which is/are flexible and indeterminate and able to change over time and accommodate a range of layered and juxtaposed programs and activities. Tactical *Flexible Event Space*.

The weave serves both as a diagrammatic and generative design tool, with the agency to redefine the forms, functions and structures of the city (ecological, political and cultural), as well enabling the production of social space, in this case focused within an urban village. It provides an alternative planning model agency within the production of (public) space. The weave has the agency to take the dispersed urban fragments of Lefebvre's city, one which he describes as dispersed and alienated.<sup>8</sup> The weave diagram shown in Figure 2 is a matrix. Traditional plans are not suffice, but instead layered diagrams of the different systems, including that of social relations and connections grounded within the physical reality of working within the context of the dispersed and fragmented contemporary city. The analogy of the weave becomes instructive in its diagramming, where two distinctive yarns are woven, and interlaced, creating new relationships, as well as both juxtapositions, as well as the layering of programs.

#### THE SITE-LANDSCAPE CONTEXTS INFORMING THE DESIGN PROCESS

The Village of the Arts (VOTA) is an artist's colony, which was created in 2000. At that time, the city redevelopment agency issued a national call for artists interested in re-locating to Bradenton and homesteading in the newly re-zoned district.



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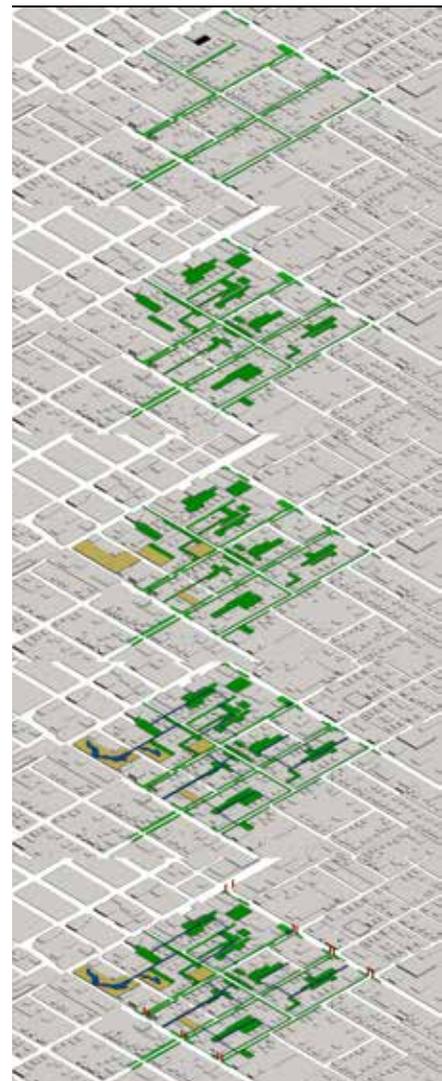
It comprises of a 42-acre site lying south of Bradenton’s downtown core. The city’s urban fabric has been fragmented by urban blight and suburban flight, its urban morphology imprinted by racially charged urban policies. This has left a patchwork city<sup>9</sup> and “terrain vague”<sup>10</sup> of vacant lots, blighted urban stock, foreclosures, as well as edges and boundaries created by racially charged physical demarcations.<sup>11</sup>

The Florida natural landscape is a fragile ecology. It lies largely in tension with the man-made Florida landscape grafted over it, including theme parks, as well as planned and gated communities whose “public spaces” are controlled and regulated by deed restrictions and homeowner’s associations. Perhaps the best example of this is the “The Villages” planned community. Its downtown squares are themed and imbued with fabricated imaginary histories and narratives that are posted in its public spaces.<sup>12</sup>

**DESIGN PROCESS AS TACTICAL URBANISM**

**ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DESIGN**

In his seminal article, “Advocacy and pluralism in planning”, Paul Davidoff discusses the concept of “advocacy planning” where architecture and urban planning is an “engaged and participatory process of positive social change.”<sup>13</sup> He also describes community design as an opportunity for advocacy and activism as engaged by the architect working with communities who have traditionally had no voice in the design process.<sup>14</sup>



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Figure 4: Alleyways are reclaimed, which in turn become an interconnected green infrastructural system, creating an off-road pedestrian system through the Village of the Arts. Secondary gallery structures at the rear of primary galleries become a series of layered alleyway architecture. *Back Alleyway Urbanism.*

Figure 5: This Phasing Diagram-over time shows the tactical strategy of acquiring of vacant and foreclosed lots, as well as interstitial spaces and their translation into a public space system for the Village of the Arts., *The Right to The City-Phased over time.*

In the shaping of the public space, the project engaged a participatory planning theory and methodology and one of advocacy for the public realm through design and tactical urbanism. The initial research for the project began from work carried out by Dr. David Brain, an urban sociologist and a group of 17 students from New College in the Spring 2012 working in collaboration with Realize Bradenton, the Artist's Guild and the Bradenton Downtown Development Authority.<sup>15</sup> One of the main conclusions that emerged from the student's work, was that if the Village of the Arts was to move into its next stage of its development as an economically sustainable and socially diverse arts community, it would need to be understood as part of a broader strategy of neighborhood transformation, place making and community building and focusing on the techniques of Asset Based Community Development.<sup>16</sup> This provided the foundation for the collaborative charrette. The class conducted asset based community mapping. This is based on asset-based community development, "building a community from the inside-out... considering local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development... building on the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, and the supportive functions of local institutions."<sup>17</sup> Further, asset-based community development draws upon existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future. The design team, led by myself, began in January 2013 with Dr. Brain leading the first community charrette, comprising of the residents, constituents, and elected officials, in addition to community and cultural leaders of the Village of the Arts Guild and Connectors. The final phase consisted of responding to the issues raised by the community through a pin up of the design proposal, in addition to suggesting opportunities, and precedents.

The public participation process was critical for several reasons. Foremost, the process identified and collaboratively defined design issues and opportunities. Additionally, in order to implement several parts of the strategy, which included un-vacating previously vacated alleyways running behind and beside the Village houses, operating between public and private spaces and maintenance. Elected officials present also needed to be convinced of their constituent's support of the project. The design research began in January 2013. It included my directing two graduate architecture students in the design implementation, which was presented at several community meetings. It has since moved into the first phase of actual implementation. The asset based mappings created by Dr. Brain and his students, in addition to the community charrette asset based sketches, were layered with the design teams inventory and mapping of perceived opportunities on the site. The interdisciplinary team consisted of the Executive Directors for both the Bradenton Redevelopment Authority for the City of Bradenton as well as Realize Bradenton, David Brain-Professor of Sociology from New College, Sarasota, the Community Coordinator and the Design team, which was led by myself leading two masters of architecture students.

The Village Tapestry design was shaped by the community, constituents and the stakeholders through an engaged planning process. Initial community asset mapping identified the urbanism of the everyday which was generative in the ensuing more formalized operational strategies that evolved, in opposition to the more top-down planning practices. Through a series of community charettes facilitated by the design team and urban sociologist,<sup>18</sup> the community identified a core set of issues and community assets based primarily on their empirical and experiential observations. This continually informed and held "in check" the design process in an iterative "design feedback loop", fed and then presented back to

the community through recommendations for programming and designs by the architectural design team. The informal temporary urban spaces of Crawford's "physical domain of everyday public activity and programs"<sup>19</sup> were transformed into the more formal design and planning frameworks, which could then be implemented across a spectrum of design scales within the project's area's, "terrain vague" condition. Through the design process, there emerged a collective invested in the initial design, implementation and maintenance of these new public spaces.

The design's operational strategy is one of landscape infrastructure, acting as both a physical, as well as a social connective tissue, echoing Crawford's "physical domain of everyday public activity, (which) is the connective tissue that binds daily life together (which) makes it a kind of public space."<sup>20</sup> Landscape as a design driver becomes a physical entity around which emerged a sense of agency. As an operational strategy, it is able to address the immediate infrastructural concerns of the community, including urban flooding and lack of cohesive connectivity and lack of identity or path. A phasing diagram-over time in Figure 5, shows the acquiring of vacant and foreclosed lots, as well as interstitial spaces and their translation into a public space system for the Village of the Arts.

### **URBAN STRATEGIES-LEVERAGING TACTICS**

The key elements of the Tapestry include: Water-Nature Green Streets; Connectivity: Public Transportation; Waterways and Bike Paths; Design; Activating Spaces: existing and New Corridors; Coordinate; Investigate; and Translation into a public space system for the Village of the Arts.

During the community outreach and charrettes for the Village of the Arts masterplanning process, some of the issues identified by VOTA business owners and residents were those of suffering from a lack of visibility from the major corridors at its edges. One of the main issues that the residents also articulated was the urban fragmentation suffered by the Village, in addition to urban flooding. One of the major urban design strategies from the Water Nature section included bumpouts at most of the street intersections, a tactical reclamation of the public right of way through operational landscape strategies. These bumpouts, in addition to providing space for rain gardens are also proposed as locations for VOTA gateway signage. These were to be located at each street intersection entering into the Village of the Arts from its boundaries and edges. In the design proposal, Landscape Infrastructure acts as an operational strategy, which addresses layered issues through the creation of an interconnected public open-space systems, linking the assets (social and cultural) of the village, at the same time as providing valuable eco-system services through the mitigation of storm-water runoff and urban flooding.

The Village of the Arts has been designated as an overlay district. A proposed design pattern book will support this overlay district through establishing consistent design guidelines and strategies implemented as part of the urban design proposal. The proposed design pattern book includes designs for street furniture, iconic gateway signage, lighting and landscaping, in addition to paving patterns and sewer covers.

The objective is to have the Village of the Arts be identified by both its patrons and visitors as a distinguishable district from its physical edges and boundaries, in addition to complementing their actual experience walking within the VOTA. These design strategies will also act as way-finding devices.

The VOTA currently suffers from a lack of center, which makes it a challenge for patrons navigating and frequenting the galleries and businesses within it. These infrastructural improvements and design interventions within the public realm of the VOTA, can serve to orient those visiting it. Additionally, an ambient environment of pedestrianism and walkability through complete streets is created. This will act as a catalyst for visitors to want to experience a larger area of the Village of the Arts, subsequently spending more time patronizing the galleries and businesses within the Village. This will also create higher visibility from the VOTA's edges and boundaries, attracting more visitors to come to experience the VOTA.

Operational tactics translated from the informal, in addition to those from other disciplines such as landscape and urban sociology, create alternative processes which when hybridized with architecture, have the ability to create more meaningful public spaces shaped by civic participation with the potential to be political.

#### Water-Nature Green Streets Proposal (Figure 5)]

The proposed master plan illustrated as a phasing diagram in this image, describes the design's concept of reclaiming some parts of the Village's existing streetscape (gray infrastructure), and transforming it into green infrastructure. By decreasing the amount of existing street space through the skinning of streets in the Village, there will be more space made available for green infrastructure, including pedestrian sidewalks. The width of the existing east-west running streets through the North Village is not enough to allow for two-directional traffic occurring at the same time along them with the parallel parking also occurring there. Our scheme proposed to overlay a one-way traffic circulation system along these east-west running streets in the Village, which alternates direction. This will allow the sidewalks to become wider, as well permitting rain gardens and swales to run alongside them.

This creates spaces for social interaction, at the same time as acting as a filtration device and mitigating storm water run-off, in order to alleviate the issue of urban flooding currently experienced by the North Village. The main north-south running spine through the North Village, is proposed to remain two-directional. Bumpouts are created at all of the major street intersections within the Village, which then become locations for rain gardens, places for way-finding signage, as well as outdoor street furniture and lighting. It is proposed the this same green infrastructure streetscape to be implemented along the east side of the 14th Street corridor, as well as the west side of the 9th Street corridor, both bordering the Village of the Arts.

#### Overlaid Green Open-Space System (Figure 5)

##### *The Village Tapestry*

This image illustrates the green streets design, overlaid with proposed urban spaces which are identified as vacant lots or parcels of opportunity that are changed into interconnected urban park spaces. When combined together, these become an "off-road" interconnected pedestrian system of green walkways and park spaces with complete urban programming and events and higher visibility from the VOTA's edges and boundaries, attracting more visitors to come to experience the VOTA.

#### Proposed Phased Block + Garden Development (Figures 4 and 5)

##### *The Village Tapestry-Green Alleyways and Backyard Secondary Galleries*

These diagrams illustrate one of the green urban strategies, which proposed

the creation of an interconnected system of backyard gardens, as well as side and rear alleyways. These diagrams demonstrate how this green system can be achieved by phasing, over time. The concept is shown here at the scale of one block, although it can be implemented incrementally over time to occupy many blocks. This agglomeration of a green block system can ultimately then be connected to each other, creating a larger and more expansive “off-road green Village pedestrian system.” The strategy is flexible and is able to work interconnectively within the parameters of the existing conditions and does not need full neighborhood or block participation in order to be successful. Upon analysis of old maps of the area, a number of back alleyways were shown. One can surmise that these have either been vacated over time, or that they do no longer exist. The informal activities of VOTA garden tours and artist’s allowing the public into their back gardens, and even secondary artist’s galleries in the back, support the possibility of a more formalized design strategy which would re-create or “unvacate” these previously vacated alleyways or public rights of ways, in addition to the implementation of new ones. These green systems can also be overlaid with blue water systems, which can filter and mitigate storm water run-off, while at the same time as creating place making.

#### *The Village Tapestry-Proposed Water Management System*

This image illustrates the green streets design proposal, overlaid with a proposed water channel system in the VOTA. This “blue system” would be part of a neighborhood-wide rain garden project initiative occurring at the scale of the lot, block and neighborhood, which would collect water from the lawns of residences and galleries (there already exist numerous water features in back lawns) and have it become part of “green and blue system” solution. This will serve as a landscape infrastructure solution for both filtering and mitigating storm water runoff, as the same time as place-making and creating space for social interaction.

#### **DESIGN PROCESS AS TACTICS**

##### **Tactical Event Spaces (Figure 1)**

This design strategy identifies a series of locations across the VOTA, which can serve as venues for “pop-up” urbanism events. These events might include festivals, farmers’ markets, outdoor galleries, film events, presentations, projections, theater, etc. These spaces can be identified as possible properties to use for pop-up urbanism. They might already exist as community gathering spaces, or other sites might be purchased and then transformed. These might include: abandoned spaces; derelict spaces; interstitial spaces; foreclosed lots or parking areas with little use which can have different programs overlaid onto them. This can also include designating certain operating streets, which might be closed down for a festival or art event. The coordination of this can be done with city agencies. Realize Bradenton, and VOTA groups currently active in programming events for the city as well as the VOTA.

##### *Activate Spaces*

The positive impact is to operate these sites as major placeholders for programs and community events. Their physical design should also be overlaid and coordinated with the other proposed urban design systems as part of this study. These include the proposed alternative transportation routes (bicycle, pedestrian, pedi-bike, etc.) as well as the bike share/swipe stations, green alleys and water collection systems, etc. The urban design study includes a proposed kit of parts including designs for furniture, lighting and signage specifically for these pop-up urban spaces with possible flexible and movable spatial configurations.

## ENDNOTES

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16. Excerpted from "The Village Tapestry-the 14th St. CRA and Village of the Arts Urban Design Study and Proposal, Bradenton, Florida", Shannon Bassett Principal Author, August 2013, 87p.
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18. *Ibid.*
19. "Everyday Urbanism", Crawford.
20. "Everyday Urbanism", Crawford.

In another urban design project for the city of Bradenton conducted by myself as part of an urban landscapes design workshop with graduate architecture students, a sizable part of the funding of the city's Riverwalk funding construction was leveraged from a grant from the South West Florida Management District (SWFMD) due to the the ecological remediating and resiliency aspect of the project, addressed by the design and engaged through landscape infrastructure. While Davidoff's article was written during the sixties during a period of activism where state funding was available for the Community Design Centers, much of that has since become unavailable. These tactics have become operational strategies which engage different constituents and stakeholders, in this case the water management agency that at once created resilient city design at the same time as resources for implementation. The project engages at once the landscape and on previous design projects the reclamation of vacant land for water. This precedent served as a model for engaging landscape infrastructure in the Village of the Arts project as the underlying connective tissue for its physical planning. In the context of CRA's and City Development agencies struggling with funding the design of the public realm, landscape infrastructure as urbanism as both reclaiming to the right to the city, in addition to being funded due to its ecological system services offer new possibilities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, informal tactical urbanisms can inform and be translated into formal operational strategies within the design process. Within this framework, architectural praxis and pedagogy are transformed by the architect's alternative forms of engagement and agency. Architecture and design present tools for intervention endorsing civic participation in the shaping of space with the ability to be transformative. Operational tactics translated from the informal, in addition to those from other disciplines such as landscape and urban sociology, create alternative processes which when hybridized with architecture, have the ability to create more meaningful public spaces shaped by civic participation with the potential to be political.