

Chapter 2

‘School Streets’ and the Adaptation of London’s State-Led Tactical Urbanism During Covid-19



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Abstract During the Covid-19 pandemic, London rapidly expanded its scheme of temporary School Streets closures. This represented an acceleration of pre-existing tendencies in the city towards using the methods of ‘Tactical Urbanism.’ Through a document review and a series of interviews with practitioners, this case study explores the varied ways in which different levels of government acted ‘tactically’ in the implementation London’s Covid-19 School Streets. It also considers the way this example of a state-led scheme intersects with debates around the concept of Tactical Urbanism and its increasing adoption by local and municipal governments.

Keywords School Streets · Active travel · Tactical Urbanism · Local government · Covid-19

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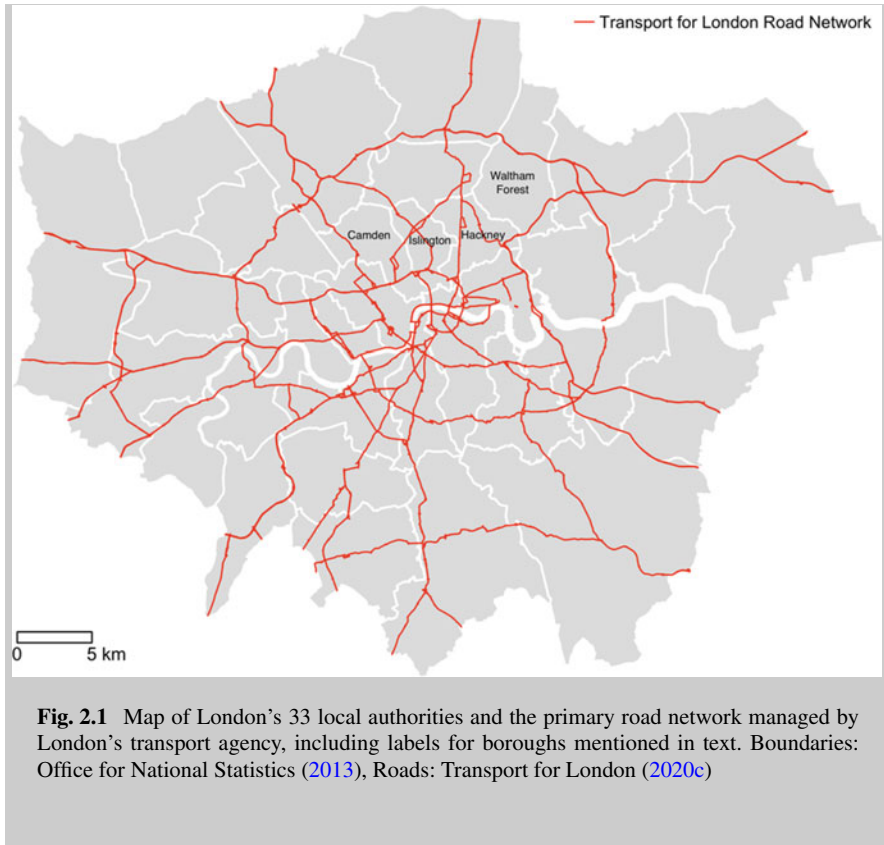
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2.1 Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, it became clear that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were not likely to subside with any speed. In London, as with many other cities, the problems presented by maintaining necessary urban mobility in the context of radically limited public transport capacities became an urgent focus of policymakers and planners. Part of this response was to reallocate road space to active modes of travel with new temporary cycle lanes and widened pavements on key strategic roads. However, and in contrast to many other urban authorities, the city's most extensive transformation was arguably on smaller urban residential streets. Across London, many [but not all (Aldred et al. 2021)] of the city's local borough authorities utilised a combination of large wooden planters, concrete blocks, bollards, temporary barriers, and traffic cameras to prevent through-traffic on many smaller streets, creating 'Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.' This policy approach of 'filtered permeability' (Savaria et al. 2021), where motor vehicles are blocked but pedestrians and cyclists retain through-access, was also extended to the streets surrounding schools.

Box 2.1: Transportation Policy in London and the UK

The governance of transportation policy in the UK is multi-level and somewhat polar, with policy and funding set at national level by the Department for Transport and power over planning remaining at the relatively small geographical level of local authority (Marsden and Rye 2010). In London there are 33 separate local authorities (all of which, aside from the city of London, are also called boroughs), and unlike much of the rest of the country, there is an additional regional level of government for the city which includes a separate transport agency called Transport for London (TfL). TfL oversees London's public transportation and the primary road network (the TLRN which consists of about 5% of London's total road length, see Fig. 2.1) as well as serving as a strategic body for transport policy. Control over local streets in London, however, remains at the local level, and thus much of the Covid-19 street response has been conducted by the borough authorities, with any strategic and financial support from the central government's Department for Transport being mediated by TfL. Despite these additional layers of government, both in London and the UK more widely control over the planning of most urban streets remains highly localised.



In the case of these 'School Streets' schemes, which form the focus of this chapter, more flexible materials and methods of enforcement were employed. Temporary barriers administered by volunteers, removable bollards, or traffic cameras allow for the closures to be timed to coincide with the beginning and end of the school day. These schemes, designated by signs that indicate the closure times, issue fines to or physically prevent parents from driving to the school gates during the limited closure periods, but also permit residents of the street to come and go. Although both Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and 'School Streets' schemes had been pursued by some of London's local authorities sporadically prior to the pandemic, concerns about the negative impacts of a 'car-based recovery,' overcrowding (especially at schools) along with encouragement from central and regional levels of government spurred a significant roll-out of these measures over the course of 2020. Since the beginning of 2020, over 450 School Streets closures have been quickly added to the 70 or so that had been installed in London prior to the pandemic, now covering nearly a third of state-run primary schools (ages 5–11) in the city. Prior to the pandemic, these School Streets had been a small part of Transport for London's wider Healthy Streets policy (Plowden 2020), which set out an ambition to change the emphasis of

the city's streets towards active mobility. This had been done using both significant infrastructural investment as well as a number of "temporary, light touch and low-cost projects" (Transport for London 2017c, p. 4). This use of trial interventions on London's streets adjoins a growing number of similar schemes that have been described as 'Tactical Urbanism.'

This chapter is concerned with how, through the implementation of School Street policies, London's local authorities and higher levels of government drew on 'tactical' approaches to urban change both prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Tactical Urbanism is here primarily understood through the approach popularised by Lydon and Garcia (2015). For these authors Tactical Urbanism is a practical orientation towards urban change where many small actions implemented at the hyper-local level can achieve, in aggregate, the longer-term goals of a liveable, walkable, sustainable, broadly 'New Urbanist' (p. 67) city. Inverting Michel de Certeau's (1984) distinction between the strategies of the state and the oppositional tactics of citizens, Lydon and Garcia implore citizens to think more strategically about long-term change and for governments to adopt tactics to implement changes immediately (2015, p. 10). Here Tactical Urbanism is both a set of temporary and flexible *material* approaches to urban change as well as a wider methodology that can be drawn on by citizens and enterprising governments alike. This chapter considers this hybrid aspect of Tactical Urbanism in relation to the rise of School Street closures prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through an analysis of interviews with practitioners as well as documents produced during the early stages of the pandemic, this chapter considers the extent to which practitioners' use of temporary and flexible policy implementation concurred with the practice of 'Tactical Urbanism' as it has been conceived of by the existing writing on the topic. This chapter also considers the applicability of the concept of Tactical Urbanism in a context of a rapid, emergency state-led programme of interventions. Overall, this case study finds a pragmatic and action-centric outlook among practitioners and policymakers, with an emphasis on the process of implementation over and above more abstract conceptualisations of policy mechanisms. This pragmatism has 'tactical' characteristics and has perhaps been essential during the rapid implementation of these schemes under Covid-19. However, in this context the participatory elements of Tactical Urbanism are severely curtailed, reflecting tensions in the critical literature on the use of these methods by governments and private actors in contemporary urban planning. This also points to a weakness in using Tactical Urbanism to fully describe the dynamics of London's Covid-19 urban response.

This chapter begins with a short review of pertinent debates surrounding the use of Tactical Urbanism by local governments before outlining the research methods used to conduct the case study. The case study itself first considers the general context of Tactical Urbanism in London both prior to and during the pandemic before going on to examine the implementation of School Streets through the findings of the practitioner interviews.

2.1.1 Literature Review: Current Debates in Tactical Urbanism

The term Tactical Urbanism prompts different connotations, depending in part on the audience in question. Intuitively for some it is characterised by a bottom-up, perhaps clandestine, and often whimsical citizen intervention in urban space. This is a vision expressed through several well-mediated paradigmatic examples like DIY benches or ad hoc citizen repairs to neglected infrastructure. Increasingly, however, it has also come to refer to a wider aesthetic vernacular of temporary construction, relying on cheap materials to 'activate' under loved spaces, often instigated or supported by official bodies. This emphasis on state activity is present in Lydon and Garcia's book/manifesto *Tactical Urbanism* (Lydon and Garcia 2015), arguably the most extensive theorisation of the concept. It is also present in Bishop and Williams' early essays on the topic in *The Temporary City* (2012) and Kelvin Campbell's later text *Making Massive Small Change* (Campbell 2018) which both avoid an inherently bottom-up directionality in conceptualising Tactical Urbanism's method of change. For Lydon and Garcia in particular, Tactical Urbanism is understood to instigate change through what might be termed a creative friction generated by the interaction between citizen and (usually municipal) government—with possible interventions varying on a spectrum from unsanctioned to fully state-initiated. This is particularly relevant in this context as both in London and internationally much of the 'Tactical Urbanist' activity undertaken in response to Covid-19 has been conducted by local governments as opposed to being solely the output of creative and enterprising citizens.¹

Lydon and Garcia, whose text outlines the most detailed framework for the concept, envision governments and citizens taking on different, and perhaps uncomfortable roles. Citizens must learn to act more strategically, in part taking on the role of the state in envisioning the long-term goals for their neighbourhood and even collecting data on projects to demonstrate their worth and long-term viability. On the other hand, the state—or more specifically those who work within it—are encouraged to move away from the creation of well-meaning strategies and focus instead on techniques for quick implementation. For Lydon and Garcia, strategies and tactics lie in dialectical tension, with both having equal value in their vision of change. However, in practice, these are contested roles and categories. Implying as it does a focus on the short term and the small scale, acting tactically is arguably a simpler proposition for states than acting strategically is for citizens. For example, in many state-led projects, governments often define the scope of citizen participation through community engagement activities. In the UK there are formal requirements to consult on projects. However, these activities can vary widely in their depth of engagement, often falling short of providing an opportunity for Lydon and Garcia's conception of citizen strategy.

¹ Although there are some examples in London where citizens *have* engaged in activities that could be considered Tactical Urbanism during Covid-19. Not, however, usually within the realm of pop-up cycle lanes or road closures. Although in Barcelona there were reports of parents instituting their own 'unofficial' School Street closures.

Furthermore, as Douglas' ethnography of DIY urbanists (2018) shows, it is often citizens with the socio-cultural capital to speak 'strategically' who are able to do so—in some cases built environment professionals acting unofficially. This tension is well articulated in debates over the correct terminology for these variegated activities. Hou (2020) argues for the revival of the notion of Guerrilla Urbanism² to distinguish genuinely counter-hegemonic informal urban incursions from the increasingly professionalised realm of state-sanctioned or state-directed Tactical Urbanism. For Hou, what is now considered as Tactical Urbanism—the vision popularised by Lydon and Garcia among others—fails to represent the full spectrum of informal, unscripted, and perhaps most importantly, unmediated acts of urban intervention (See also Berglund, 2019 on this topic of who gets to do 'Tactical Urbanism'). Thus, from formal consultation processes to the guerrilla urbanist activities Hou highlights many opportunities for state/citizen creative friction are unlikely to meet the bar of a 'citizen strategy'.

The state's use of urban 'tactics' has also been contested. For Mould (2014) Tactical Urbanism's hybrid position between grassroots community action and professional planning practice can serve as cover for embattled government authorities or private actors to co-opt and disarm genuinely transgressive change. Mould argues that Tactical Urbanism as practised by official actors is often aligned with neoliberal processes of urban development, with its efforts serving to art-wash or green-wash exclusionary and gentrifying projects. This critique highlights the assumption within some Tactical Urbanist writing that in acting 'tactically,' official actors are doing so in good faith.

However, Tactical Urbanism is not limited to a theory of state/citizen interaction, and Lydon and Garcia also outline a more general orientation towards urban change—namely emphasising that small is better. Central to Lydon and Garcia's (as well as to some extent Campbell's) theorisation of Tactical Urbanism is a critical engagement with modernist planning orthodoxy, rejecting both the mega-projects and perennially unrealised (although worthy) strategic visions of the municipal state in favour of small-scale immediate action.³ Although Lydon and Garcia are clear that Tactical Urbanists should still have long-term goals, Neil Brenner has questioned the efficacy of what he calls an 'acupuncture' approach to tackling the intractable problems facing urban life (Brenner 2016). For Brenner, the source of these failures lies with neoliberal urbanism more so than the modernist or statist models of urban governance that Lydon and Garcia repudiate. His criticism points to a dissonance within Tactical Urbanism, whereby significant transformative goals are only to be achieved in aggregate and crucially without the resources and remit of the totalising 'modernist' state. For Brenner, in formulations of Tactical Urbanism like Lydon and Garcia's the relative scales of ambition and intervention are not fully reconciled.

² Similarly, Douglas is keen to distinguish DIY urbanism from Tactical Urbanism, seeing it as an entirely citizen-led and mostly unsanctioned set of practices (2018).

³ This situates them with an urbanist tradition connecting to Jane Jacobs, who is cited heavily in this work, as well as the work of a number of planning theorists who have drawn on pragmatist and neo-pragmatist philosophical traditions (Healey 2009; Hoch 2017)—although this later literature is less acknowledged.

However, many 'tactical' approaches are only realisable on a smaller scale. In one conception of Tactical Urbanist change, informal urban incursions by citizens become tolerated, permitted, or even protected, and adopted by city bureaucracies because they provide an undisputed public good, even if their provenance lies outside the officially sanctioned procedures of change.⁴ Here the role of the state might be best described as 'getting out of the way.' In this vein Bishop and Williams (2012), for example, advocate for the state to create zones where the barriers preventing enterprising citizens from experimenting with or in their cities are removed, an approach not without critics (Dovey 2014). However, this more libertarian model is impractical if more specific and large-scale policy goals are to be achieved. In contrast, official actors increasingly understand Tactical Urbanism as something that is within their remit. For example, an often-cited state 'tactic' for change is the use of temporary materials to trial new more pedestrian-friendly street lay outs and iteratively adapt them as needed ("test before you invest"⁵). Janet Sadik-Kahn's account of pedestrianising Time Square while Commissioner for New York City's Department of Transport is perhaps the most high-profile example of this approach and is now a widely cited example of Tactical Urbanism (Sadik-Khan and Solomonow 2016). In this vein more formal thinking has been conducted on the role that Tactical Urbanism can play in bridging the 'implementation gap' between the strategic spatial plans of urban governments and their on-the-ground realisation (Vallance and Edwards 2021). Similarly, the techniques of government developed doing 'Tactical Urbanism' during Covid-19 are being formalised by urban consultancies with an aim to further embed these practices of urban governance in the mainstream (Carmichael et al. 2020).

The main point that can be drawn from these debates is that the role of government sits uncomfortably in conceptual formulations of Tactical Urbanism. For Brenner, expecting substantive change without state action is naïve. For other critics like Hou, Mould, and Douglas, the increasing professionalisation of these activities borrows their material design language (temporary and cheap) while compromising their critical potential. Acknowledging this, Lydon and Garcia's conception of Tactical Urbanism requires its proponents to walk a fine line between state tactics and citizen strategies. Although there is a common sense understanding that the methods and materials of state-led Tactical Urbanism are useful for responding quickly to the emerging issues presented by the pandemic, this context also presents new constraints for conducting urban change that should be considered.

⁴ See Herman and Rogers (2020) for an account of this with regards to the Park(ing) day phenomenon.

⁵ <https://massivesmall.org/part-one-should-moma-tout-tactical-urbanisms-as-A-solution-to-uneven-growth-planetizen-the-independent-resource-for-people-passionate-about-planning-and-related-fields/>

2.2 Case Study Methodology

The 18 practitioner interviews conducted for this project explored the practical processes of implementing School Street closures as well as the wider rationale for these measures. Interviews were primarily conducted during the early summer of 2020. At this time many School Streets projects were either being implemented for the initial reopening of schools or were being planned for September. This provided a unique opportunity to speak to several practitioners as they were working in a new context and conversations naturally focused on the changing pressures and emerging tactics in response to the pandemic.

Table 2.1 shows the breakdown of interviewees and documents used by organisation type. Most interviews were with officers (civil servants) in London's local borough authorities who were directly involved in the implementation of School Street closures. Other interviews were conducted with staff at non-profit organisations who work closely on School Streets, often contracted by local governments to support the implementation of projects. Interviews were conducted remotely, primarily over video conferencing. Interviewees were recruited through informal networks, 'snowballing' (Noy 2008) as participants introduced me to further contacts. No formal sampling process was employed, but I endeavoured to talk to practitioners in several different roles around the promotion, conception, and implementation of School Streets, not only local government-level civil servants.

Transcripts were analysed using a method of thematic analysis called template analysis (King 2012; Brooks and King 2014; Brooks et al. 2015). Template analysis, a method for analysing interview data developed in qualitative psychology, utilises an initial set of codes established in advance which is first tested on a subset of the data. After this stage amendments are made to the code book based on the themes that are developed from the coding of this subset. The new code book is then tested on further subsets of the data and iteratively changed until it reaches a stable form. This final code book is then applied to the entirety of the dataset and used as the basis of

Table 2.1 Breakdown of interviews and documentary sources

| <i>Number of interviewees by organisation type</i> | |
|--|----|
| Local borough authorities | 10 |
| Transport authority | 1 |
| Third sector/charities | 5 |
| Independent experts/practitioners | 2 |
| Total | 18 |
| <i>Number of documents by organisation type</i> | |
| Transport authority | 6 |
| Central government department | 3 |
| Local borough authority | 2 |
| Total | 11 |

the analysis. Clusters of concepts are then analysed and visualised, with connections within and between codes (integrative themes) established and explored.

To provide more context to this case study a review of relevant policy documents has also been included. Although not a formal thematic document analysis, this review of text from both prior to and during Covid-19 outlines relevant, and sometimes contrasting approaches by the regional and central levels of government that are less well represented in the interview sample.

2.3 CASE STUDY: School Street Closures as Part of London's Approach to Tactical Urbanism

2.3.1 Pre-pandemic Tactical Urbanism in London

Prior to Covid-19, London had a significant record of Tactical Urbanist activity. As in other major cities these actions and interventions had taken several forms ranging from creative meanwhile uses on vacated spaces waiting for development, DIY parklets on residential streets (Fig. 2.2), and new community events⁶ (Transport for London 2017c). Several street-based initiatives also gained traction, with temporary materials such as hay bales and paint used to trial new street layouts at an intersection in Lambeth, South London. Another scheme at Narrow Street in East London involved a one-off street party to demonstrate the potential of fully pedestrianizing the street. Short-term temporary closures of residential streets in the form of play streets and school-play streets have also proliferated across the city (Sustrans and Playing Out 2019). Although some of these examples are the direct result of the activities of enterprising citizens, many are also the product varying collaborations between combinations of local borough governments, London's transport agency, community groups, business improvement districts, small architecture/design practices, housing associations, and in some cases property developers or management companies.

These Tactical Urbanist activities were acknowledged in official policy through development of the city's Healthy Streets strategy around 2014. Sitting within the Mayor's broader transport strategy (Mayor of London 2018) and the city-wide London Plan (GLA 2016), the Healthy Streets approach (Transport for London 2017b) seeks to embed walking and cycling into the built environment through the transformation of all street spaces from small residential streets to London's major arteries and intersections. This is done by assessing the streetscape against 10 indicators of amenability to pedestrians and cyclists. The Healthy Streets approach has informed the design and implementation of infrastructural changes including the construction of cycle lanes, the improvement of pedestrian areas on high streets, and

⁶ Bishop and Williams describe several other examples of Tactical Urbanism in London in *The Temporary City* (2012). TfL's *Big Change Small Impact* report similarly provides instructive case studies from the city.



Fig. 2.2 Parklet on a School Street in Hackney, East London. *Source* Asa Thomas

the redesign of major junctions. However, a parallel set of activities drawing on more ‘tactical’ approaches has also been promoted by TfL as part of the Healthy Streets approach (Transport for London 2017a). This has been aimed in part at improving the smaller residential or local streets that sit under the control of London’s 33 local authorities (see Fig. 2.1). In 2017 TfL commissioned the development of a toolkit entitled *Small Change, Big Impact* for implementing “small scale, light touch and temporary projects” (p. 4), to help deliver the wider Healthy Streets strategy on residential streets, smaller local high streets, and under-used urban spaces—areas generally less amenable to larger-scale engineering projects. This explicitly Tactical Urbanist document was aimed at individuals, communities, and private entities and presented an array of different case studies, suggesting possible approaches that could be taken. This included the use of experimental trials to pedestrianise streets in the style of the ‘streets to plazas’ projects advocated for by Lydon and Garcia (2015) and Sadik-Kahn and Solomonow (2016).

In *Small Change, Big Impact* a key example of an inexpensive ‘quick win’ change that could be made was a temporary School Street closure that had been trialled in the London borough of Camden in 2016. One of the first examples of a ‘School Street,’

the project had been funded through TfL's 'Future Streets Incubator Fund' (Camden Borough Council 2018), an initiative explicitly centred on developing flexible trials for new street layouts. Other local borough authorities in London quickly followed suit, having in some cases developed similar plans in parallel. In particular, the London borough of Hackney embraced the initiative. They utilised traffic cameras to automatically issue fines to transgressing drivers during the closure and developed their own document (London Borough of Hackney, no date) to support other local authorities in setting up School Street schemes based on this model. This toolkit actively promoted the use of initial trials using temporary barriers to enforce the closure before a more permanent traffic camera should be installed.

Well before the advent of Covid-19, School Streets (see Fig. 2.3) were becoming part of a wider lexicon of temporary 'tactical' interventions in London's streets. Here innovative local governments have been supported to 'act tactically' by regional levels of government and the transport agency. This has been through both targeted funding under initiatives like the Future Streets Incubator Fund or the High Streets Challenge Fund, as well as wider endorsement of these methods in the Healthy Streets approach. This provides a good example of the operation of what might be characterised as state-led Tactical Urbanism, where local or regional governments provide strategic and financial support for small scale, community initiated, or community-minded schemes. This is an approach that had come to be internalised in some parts of London's policymaking apparatus prior to the pandemic. However, especially in the case of School Streets these interventions remained geographically uneven, concentrating initially in more proactive and 'entrepreneurial' boroughs located mainly in the north and east of inner London (Camden, Islington, and Hackney), while other parts of the city were more hesitant. This hesitancy is particularly the case in the Outer London boroughs which are more car dominated and have less of a history of promoting walking and cycling due in part to a lack of political will and a perception of lower public demand for such policies (with several exceptions including the borough of Waltham Forest, an outer London borough in the north-east of the city). Although this hesitancy remains post-Covid-19, more and more local borough authorities—including many Outer London boroughs—have become involved in the use of temporary closures and urban trials during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Thomas et al. 2022), with School Streets becoming much more widely distributed and most temporary schemes becoming permanent.

2.3.2 Tactical Urbanism During the Pandemic

With the emerging pressures of the pandemic, the need to further implement Healthy Streets schemes in London became a high priority. This covered three primary needs: firstly, for greater pedestrian space to allow for physical distancing at crowded pinch-points in urban spaces; secondly, to facilitate cycling as a mode of travel for essential workers in the context of severely constrained public transport capacity; and thirdly,

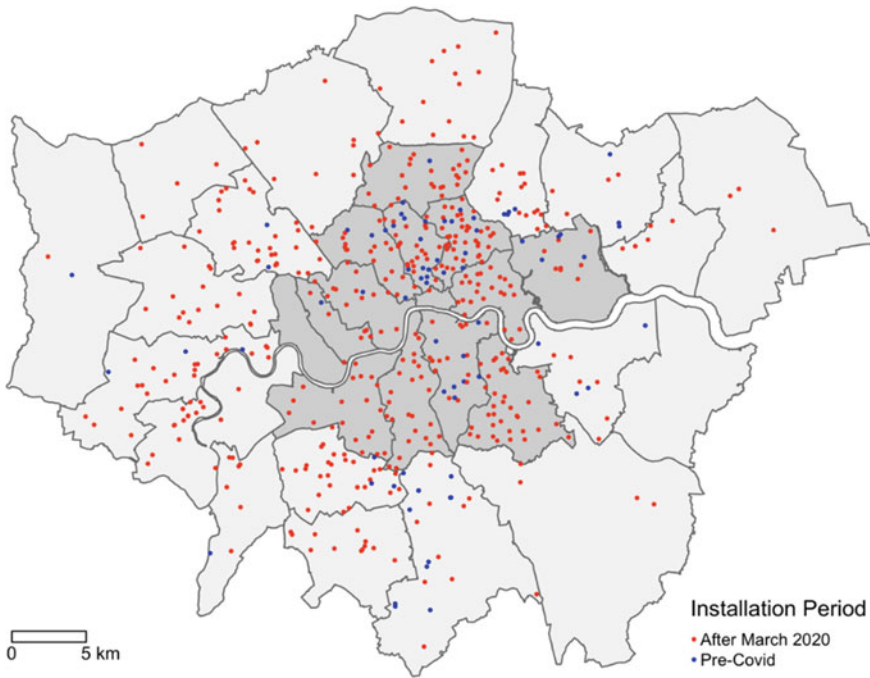


Fig. 2.3 Map of School Street schemes installed before and after March 2020 (up until April 2022), with inner and outer London boroughs highlighted. Boundaries: Office for National Statistics (2013)

to facilitate walking and cycling on a local level as part of daily shopping and exercise. As with many other cities, London quickly developed several schemes utilising temporary materials to extend footways and create new temporary cycle lanes. TfL and London’s local authorities also focused on residential streets, recognising the risk to these spaces by what was referred to as a ‘car-based recovery’ and the need to facilitate local active trips while commute pressures were reduced. The return of children to schools once they reopened was of particular concern due to the narrow streets many of London’s primary-stage schools are located on. The development of filtered permeability schemes to create Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and the rapid expansion of the nascent School Streets programme formed the basis of this aspect of the approach.

Although several local borough governments in London had prior experience implementing temporary street schemes, the constraints of Covid-19 required significant changes in approach. Previous Tactical Urbanist street projects in London had often utilised site-specific designs and community engagement as part of street changes. However, the rapid implementation and the breadth of areas needed to be covered required the use of more generic materials such as plastic barriers, concrete blocks, and basic wooden planters—an approach to some extent prefigured in the pre-Covid-19 trial School Streets. Aside from a shift in materials, this new context

also required significant acceleration of the pace of implementation. This was in part achieved through a combination of new funding, streamlined bureaucratic processes, logistical support/knowledge-sharing, and increased political pressure from central and regional government.

In the spring of 2020, the UK central government’s Department for Transport (DfT) encouraged all urban borough authorities in the UK to adopt temporary and experimental measures to support walking and cycling through the reallocation of road space to active modes of travel (Department for Transport 2020b). Experimental Traffic Orders (ETOs) are a legislative tool enshrined in the 1984 Road Traffic Regulation Act (c. 27 Section 9) that allows local authorities to trial new road layouts for up to 18 months without the requirement for formal consultation prior to implementation. Instead during this period, a consultation process is undertaken while the temporary scheme is in place with it either becoming permanent or removed at the end of the 18 months. Although this legislation has not always been used in ways that benefit walking and cycling, they had been a powerful tool for local governments, giving leeway to officially implement the “test before you invest” principles advocated by Tactical Urbanists. ETOs had already been used sparingly in some of London’s pre-pandemic ‘tactical’ schemes—including School Streets—but in guidance issued by the Department for Transport in May 2020, local government authorities across the country were actively encouraged to use ETOs as a tool to install temporary trial schemes quickly. Speed of implementation was emphasised with the guidance recommending that “measures should be taken as swiftly as possible” (Department for Transport 2020b), and additional funds were rapidly made available to local authorities as part of a national ‘Active Travel Fund’ to facilitate these changes.

Although aimed explicitly at emergency and experimental measures, the Department for Transport was clear, and unintentionally echoed Lydon and Garcia in emphasising that these low-cost flexible interventions should be interpreted as part of a long-term change. The Transport Secretary Grant Shapps wrote that “We recognise this moment for what it is: a once in a generation opportunity to deliver a lasting transformative change in how we make short journeys in our towns and cities” (Department for Transport 2020b). Although his later comments⁷ have contradicted this sentiment somewhat, it was very soon supported by the creation of a national active travel strategy entitled *Gear Change* (Department for Transport 2020a), as well as the announcement of the creation of a new government body, Active Travel England, to oversee active travel issues nationally. The machinations of national government rarely make an appearance in accounts of Tactical Urbanism or experimental approaches to urban space, but in this context both a recognisably ‘tactical’ material vernacular in terms of ‘pop-up’ cycle lanes or temporary road closures *and* a methodology of experimental urban intervention have been advocated for at high levels of government.

⁷ Especially those made after the power of the pro-cycling Prime Minister Boris Johnson waned in 2022.

However, in the short term, the ultimate responsibility for implementation of interventions in response to Covid-19 remained at the level of local and regional governments in the UK. To help bridge strategy and implementation at the level of London's borough authorities, TfL produced several additional guidance documents under the rubric of the London 'Streetspace' plan (Transport for London 2020b), outlining how this change should be interpreted on London's streets. This ranged from more technical elaboration on the use of ETOs, to the way that new schemes should be prioritised by the local borough authorities. With speed again emphasised, this guidance pragmatically recommended that 'shovel-ready' projects with pre-existing plans be prioritised alongside new proposals for schemes in the areas most obviously in need. Here, as with central government's guidance, the long-term viability of schemes was also emphasised, with recommendations that the emergency prerogative should not trump the responsibility to collect data and monitor the operation of schemes. This too echoes calls from Lydon and Garcia that budding Tactical Urbanists should seek to collect data to make the case for the long-term benefit of an intervention or adapt it in situ. Both central government and transport authority echo this sentiment, emphasising a preference for the ongoing development of schemes as opposed to a binary process of approval or rejection.

2.3.3 School Streets as Tactical Urbanism

The experience of the on-the-ground implementation of School Streets (see Fig. 2.4) illustrates how local governments interpreted, navigated, and in some cases capitalised on these wider dynamics in London and nationally. This section explores two dynamics on the local government level that are of interest. Firstly, the way that School Streets have been rationalised by local government policymakers and how this shifted as their policies expanded during the pandemic. Secondly, that processes of scheme prioritisation focused initially on the schools whose leadership and parent cohort were favourable to these schemes, before expanding inclusion criteria as more and more School Streets were installed during Covid-19. Taken together, this points to the centrality of an action-centric and participatory methodology in their conceptualisation of the successful operation of a School Street.

Like many of the paradigmatic examples of Tactical Urbanism, School Streets were generally characterised by interviewees as an intervention that 'works,' with a significant benefit derived from a relatively low initial financial investment. Like the use of parklets or other Tactical Urbanist interventions, the idea of a temporary school street closure was borrowed and adapted from other contexts, with similar schemes in Bolzano and Milan in Northern Italy having existed some years prior. This discrete policy solution to a common urban problem was shared through a European Union network of local government officers working on issues around sustainable transport to school. Adaptations to the UK traffic management policy landscape were needed, but the general principle made obvious sense as a simple and parsimonious solution to several of the 'wicked problems' related to travel to school, namely the



Fig. 2.4 School Street using temporary barriers in London. *Source* Catherine Kenyon

intertwined issues of physical inactivity, air pollution, and road danger created by the use of motor vehicles.

The simplicity of a temporary closure contrasted well with the complexity of the problem faced and the number of interconnected issues that it could be said to be solving. “It’s School Streets, I think more than a lot of the initiatives that we take forwards, [that] ticks a lot of boxes,” as one transport planner for an outer London borough put it. Several interviewees felt that, as a scheme, this low-cost implementation was particularly effective at delivering important benefits and contributing to wider policy goals—especially as compared with other more expensive active mobility infrastructure. However, the issues and potential benefits emphasised by interviewees to justify the schemes varied. This was often based on the available funding and policy priorities of the borough. As one council officer stated, “If you’re trying to hook into a council’s strategy, then air quality and road danger will be in there, [as] there will be funding [available] for road safety and road danger reduction initiatives. If you talk to parents [on the other hand] they will understand about air quality.” Another cited their borough declaring a climate emergency as the genesis for their plans for a School Street scheme. The perception, particularly among borough officers and transport planners was that, due to the different interrelated benefits of School Streets, as a policy they had a certain conceptual flexibility that allowed them to be framed as solutions across the varied priorities and strategic goals of their different local borough authorities.

The rationale used for School Streets shifted dramatically under Covid-19 with the need for physical distancing at the school gates bolstering the existing justifications around active sustainable travel and its downstream benefits. The need to move quickly was also emphasised, with two primary adaptations made to the implementation of School Streets to facilitate this. Firstly, the materiality changed with many boroughs opting for retractable barriers and cones operated by volunteers to enforce the closure (at least initially). This was instead of implementing the more expensive automatic traffic camera enforcement that had been used by several boroughs prior to Covid-19—although these often followed shortly after. When traffic cameras were used during the early stages of Covid-19 they were sometimes movable, with the camera shared between locations. As a local borough authority officer explained “I think in terms of volume and numbers and getting things in quickly, thinking about things in a temporary nature can be helpful, but hopefully that’s just the start and we can develop more permanent schemes.”

The processes by which school’s sites were prioritised also shifted. This is a more significant adaptation and ties into the wider tensions in state-implemented Tactical Urbanism outlined earlier. As mentioned in the previous section on London’s Tactical Urbanism during the pandemic, TfL advised both ‘shovel-ready’ schemes and those areas most in need be prioritised for the Covid-19 response. This was no different for School Streets. Specific guidance issued to borough governments on implementing School Streets (Transport for London 2020a) advised that schemes be prioritised for schools with the narrowest pavement widths—where physical distancing would be most difficult. However, in the interest of expediency lenience was given to implement schemes where initial engagement work had already been conducted prior to the pandemic. Although the interviews were completed at a time when it was too early for policymakers to reflect fully on how schemes were prioritised during Covid-19, their early impressions highlighted different priorities to those recommended by TfL. As an interviewee involved in School Streets across London said, “we’re hearing from boroughs ... that many of them are tending to work with those schools that perhaps they’d wanted to work with before or they were already developing plans and this is their chance to accelerate them.” Although there had been variation between boroughs in how they had selected schools previously, with air quality or the surrounding street layout being the most important indicators for some, the school’s track record of promoting active travel interventions was often repeated as a key metric for deciding which schools would receive School Streets. This could be decided either through TfL’s STARS scheme where schools can achieve different levels (Bronze, Silver, or Gold) indicating their commitment to sustainable travel or more general ad hoc engagement with the local borough authority on active travel-related issues.

This prioritisation of schools where the leadership of the school and/or parents of the student body were already aligned with the goals of the scheme was not only emphasised in terms of expediency but was also born out of a more fundamental understanding of the way School Streets were successful in achieving their goals. The importance of selecting appropriate sites for School Streets was frequently emphasised during the interviews. As one interviewee said, “you have to have ambition to

do the work within the school as well, because a School Street itself is not going to achieve behaviour change.” There was also a sense that it was initially better to allocate resources to schools that had a higher chance of a successful scheme due to either pre-existing engagement with parents about active travel issues or the general characteristics of the road layout. This was a way to reward previous involvement and potentially avoid unnecessary opposition from a less willing partner. Furthermore, it also served to demonstrate proof of concept within the local government with a successful initial case study. As one local government officer said in relation to their schemes “the ones we looked at initially... we looked for the easier sort of ones where we thought there’d be less displaced traffic affecting local residents” and another said “we’re looking for schools where a School Street would have a disproportionate impact because there was a wider network that was quite sympathetic to walking and cycling.”

This sense of ongoing and prior engagement with the school community being key to success was a sentiment repeated by several interviewees. In this framing, the aim of the scheme should be to change parental behaviour away from motor vehicle use before a School Street is installed. In this way the closure acts as a deterrent for returning to old behaviour as opposed to a penalty for ongoing behaviour. As one officer explained “what we did in order to reinforce that modal shift element leading up to the School Street installation was to have a number of assemblies and various other things... it didn’t just happen overnight. We tried to engage with the schools and to a certain extent with the residents and the parents as well to sort of get them to adopt the change in their behaviour before the measures came into place.” Schools with a pre-existing track record for active travel were well placed to deliver schemes that would be successful in terms of achieving the necessary consent from stakeholders, a process deemed essential in realising the goals of the schemes.

This dynamic between the intricacies of scheme implementation and operation can be read intuitively within a Tactical Urbanist framework. The council officers interviewed emphasised an action-centric element to their approach where the methodology of change was as important as the specific content or design of the scheme being implemented. Change is here read to be as much the product of engagement and co-creation with the wider school community as it is a practical outcome of the closure of the street. Although ultimately state-directed, there is a creative friction between local government and school community, with participation in the conception and development of schemes as a central focus of government concern.

This approach, however, was complicated by the pandemic and the need to implement schemes quickly before children returned to school in September. This, along with restrictions on social interaction, limited the chance to work with the school community and engage in the usual process of pre-consultation and community co-design.

...which is not great, it means obviously we don’t have quite as good of an opportunity to speak to as many people [as possible] to help sort of design the scheme. But to get those schemes in in September, that’s what we’re going to have to do. We can obviously... because it’s an experimental traffic order we can tweak things and changes as it goes if need be.

This quote reflects the perspective of the government guidance mentioned earlier whereby local authorities were advised to make use of experimental traffic orders and temporary measures to trial schemes often in lieu of more time-consuming engagement efforts. Although local governments continued, and in some cases augmented, use of the material techniques of Tactical Urbanism through flexible trials, these initial Covid-19 School Streets represent a much more limited engagement with its participatory methodology than their pre-Covid-19 cousins.

2.3.4 The Return of Citizen Strategy

Not all local borough authorities adapted their approaches under Covid-19, with one officer I spoke to largely continuing to introduce their School Streets programme with extensive pre-consultation. They expressed their concern at the rapid approach to temporary schemes across London, “I think we might be creating trouble for ourselves by getting in all these rather hastily, perhaps sometimes ill-conceived schemes that cause a whole lot of other impacts and, you know, undermine our support for these sorts of measures going forward.” This sense has been to some extent borne out in the opposition to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods projects, where in addition to complaints around the effects of the scheme such as displaced traffic, critics have cited the speed of the process and limited (initial) consultation as evidence of cynical use of the emergency context and experimental tactics to advance minoritarian projects without democratic oversight (see LGA 2021 for a detailed exploration of these tensions). On some schemes (including a small number of School Streets) the planters, bollards, and cameras used to prevent through-traffic were vandalised. Several Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, especially in Outer London, have also been removed. Partially in response to this backlash, in the autumn of 2020 the government updated their guidance on the use of temporary and experimental traffic orders discussed earlier. Their emphasis was now on using trials within a wider process of consultation and community involvement, stating “Consultation and community engagement should always be undertaken whenever authorities propose to remove, modify or reduce existing schemes and whenever they propose to introduce new ones” (Department for Transport 2022).

In contrast to the controversy surrounding Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, London’s School Street schemes have been comparatively popular. The reasons for this have been in part attributed to an increasingly widespread understanding of the danger of air pollution to children, as well as a general sense that restrictions on automobility are justifiable when contextualised as being specifically for the purpose of children’s safety. As one interviewee said:

I think they are all warmly received on the whole, by residents, anyway. One of these School Streets, there was very strong resistance from one business. The rest of the business just said, ‘well, it’s going to be a bit of an inconvenience but it’s for the kids’.

Although not explicitly reflected in this research, this popularity is perhaps also because fewer people are actively inconvenienced by these schemes as they are in effect for only limited times of the day and do not usually impact the mobility of the residents of the street who are often issued exemption permits. As a result of this popularity, very few of the over 500+ schemes installed have been removed, with almost all trials becoming permanent schemes to date. However, their effects as interventions are less well understood. Local authority monitoring has pointed towards some evidence of mode shift towards active modes of travel (although not at all schools) (Hopkinson et al. 2021). Recent research on air quality has also shown a slight improvement at schools with School Streets as compared with control sites (Air Quality Consultants 2021). From this evidence there are indications that effects are highly variable between sites, which is to be expected as schemes vary significantly in size and level of enforcement. As cited by interviewees here, differing outcomes may also be related to extent to which active modes of travel are promoted more widely through activities within the school.

2.4 Discussion

In all, three primary themes can be drawn from the case outlined here. Firstly, London's regional and (some) local governments showed a strong understanding of Tactical Urbanist action prior to the pandemic of which School Streets were an emerging element. Secondly, many of these early experiments were scaled rapidly during the pandemic with central government both funding and advocating for temporary and flexible measures. Thirdly, this change in pace of implementation went against many practitioner understandings of the requirements of a successful School Street intervention and arguably challenged some Tactical Urbanist methodological principles.

Current debates find state activity to sit uncomfortably within the rubric of Tactical Urbanism. Nonetheless, activities like School Streets, when conducted in their most community embedded and iterative form, have justifiably been framed as such. Although many policymakers would not necessarily identify themselves as 'Tactical Urbanists,' they have developed a set of pragmatic policy tactics (both in terms of vernacular and methodology) to implement School Streets and similar interventions in London prior to the pandemic. This is reflected in practitioners' emphasis on the importance of community engagement in successful policy implementation prior to the pandemic. This case study also shows that these actions are embedded in a wider policy and legislative context that has been sympathetic to experimental and iterative approaches to change. Vallance and Edwards (2021) have written on the potential for Tactical Urbanism to ameliorate the 'implementation gap' between the lofty goals of strategic spatial planning and the realities of on-the-ground change for urban authorities. The promotion of tactical interventions as part of the Healthy Streets approach signals that this is perhaps happening in London.

In Milan, prior expertise in Tactical Urbanism supported its rapid rise early on in the pandemic (Maria et al. 2020). This is arguably also the case in London, with approaches to School Streets well established prior to the pandemic, and expertise easily available to share knowledge across London's borough authorities—Hackney's School Streets toolkit for practitioners is a good example of this. However, these facilitating processes were not only horizontal as the Department for Transport also played a role in promoting the legislative pathways for tactical intervention and providing funding to do so. This process of multi-level endorsement of tactical approaches from central to local government is to some extent a slight reversal, or at least complication, of the process of change outlined by Lydon and Garcia. Projects are here less the result of entrepreneurial individual actors within local bureaucracies acting tactically, but often the product of received wisdom and well-recognised examples of policy best-practice for implementing changes at speed. This reflects the increasing recognition of the role of Tactical Urbanism and related approaches within official policymaking.

With its material techniques easily and quickly implementable, intuitively Tactical Urbanism is an approach well suited to the short-term needs of an emergency context. Temporary materials are reversible, allowing for a space to adapt to a somewhat transient set of constraints. Yet from TfL's pre-pandemic Tactical Urbanist toolkit *Small Change, Big Impact* mentioned earlier, to the Department for Transport's guidance on ETOs, to Lydon and Garcia's approach, there is a consistent emphasis that short-term responses should be stepping stones to longer-term change. This too was the goal of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and School Streets, rather than being a temporary emergency intervention they were experimental changes conducted in an emergency. This long-term thinking conceptually aligns the School Streets with Tactical Urbanism more than say the temporary pavement-widening schemes that also proliferated during Covid-19. However, interviewees framed the success of School Streets pre-pandemic as arising through community consent and engagement. For those implementing schemes, long-term viability is connected to a participatory methodology. Although the material approach to temporary change was embraced, the constraints of speed ultimately truncated processes of citizen engagement.

This is an example of the complexities of folding the machinations of the state into a conception of Tactical Urbanism outlined earlier in the discussion of its critical literature. Maintaining a balance between state and citizen involvement, while also attempting either more transformative or more rapid change, presents inherent difficulties. This relates to Brenner's critique which questions the extent to which acupuncture methodologies of urban change can yield widespread urban transformation commensurate with the scale of the problems faced by cities. In one reading, the Covid-19 School Streets represent a rebuttal of Brenner's concerns as a large number were installed quickly and on a scale that would have been inconceivable prior to the pandemic. However, this has been done primarily through what could be read as only a partial version of Tactical Urbanism, borrowing its material techniques without necessarily heeding its methodological tenets of citizen/state creative friction.

2.4.1 *Tactical Urbanism as Pragmatism*

That the language of flexible, iterative urban intervention can sit comfortably within institutions of government, without necessarily the need for creative friction and citizen participation should not be so surprising. In the UK, local and regional governments have increasingly engaged in a pragmatic form of policymaking. The demands of a new enthusiasm for localism have accompanied the relinquishing of funds under a long decade of austerity (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Lowndes and Gardner 2016) introducing new constraints. There are numerous academic accounts of the shifting approaches to urban governance, associated mostly broadly with neoliberal reform since the 1970s and more recently the acceleration of financialization in the context of post-2008 state austerity. The varied list of concepts that fit within this rubric could include the rise of the urban entrepreneurial state (Harvey 1989), new urban managerialism (Phelps and Miao 2020), 'fast policy' (Peck and Theodore 2015), among others. This is a large and variegated literature, but common themes pertain to the way in which contexts of austerity, privatisation, and state withdrawal create the conditions whereby policymakers increasingly take on the methodologies of the private sector. This might be through forming partnerships with other charitable or commercial entities to deliver projects, borrowing readymade low-cost ideas 'that work' from other authorities, and continually justifying expenditure in terms of return on investment as opposed to normative goals. In very general terms, urban authorities have been asked to do more with less. This sentiment was frequently repeated by interviewees, who spoke often of the need to pursue the most impactful actions possible within severely constrained circumstances. School Streets have been actively framed as such, considered to be a win-win-win policy deliverable on a low budget.

In this context, the Tactical Urbanist language of *short-term action for long-term change* or *small change big impact* not only resonates with the current climate of urban governance, but it is also prefigured by it. Thus these interventions and 'tactical' techniques considered here should also be considered within the broader constraints of contemporary urban governance.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to understand the extent to which practitioners' use of temporary and flexible implementation of School Streets concurred with the practice of 'Tactical Urbanism.' In some respects, in focusing on smaller residential streets the use of School Streets and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods in London reflects a concern, familiar to many Tactical Urbanist schemes, with more quotidian urban spaces. This focus is perhaps a product of the two-tiers of responsibility for London's roads, with smaller residential streets falling under the remit of local borough authorities who were most responsible for the street-based response to Covid-19. The result, however,

is a focus on the mobility of children and carers who are often under-emphasised in transport planning. These ‘mobilities of care’ (Sánchez de Madariaga 2013), which often fall to women, typically utilise routes other than the radial commutes frequently prioritised by city planning. In this domain interventions on residential streets and at schools may have an outsized effect. Although Tactical Urbanism has not necessarily explicitly emphasised mobilities of care, it does share a common concern with the spaces and mobilities less considered by orthodox planning. In this way we might point to tactical characteristics in the general orientation of School Streets.

This case study has also pointed to many of the more obvious ways School Streets resonate with Tactical Urbanism, namely through the use of temporary materials, on street trials and an action-centric approach to implementing them. However, as a term Tactical Urbanism has provided a broad umbrella under which diverse and perhaps contradictory approaches and interventions have sought shelter. Lydon and Garcia’s reconciliation of state and citizen action in their conceptualisation of the term describes a great deal of the state-led implementation of temporary or experimental street-based interventions including School Streets. However, the production of these interventions during Covid-19 is altogether more complex. In line with Lydon and Garcia’s articulation, many interviewees for this project saw School Streets as altering mobility primarily through community participation and only secondarily through infrastructural change. With community co-creation difficult during the initial stages of the pandemic and expedience emphasised, active community engagement was severely curtailed in the case of London’s School Streets. In this context many measures appear experimental, or temporary, but not inherently Tactical Urbanist. As the critical literature on Tactical Urbanism has emphasised, state adoption of its material approaches without serious citizen participation is necessarily incomplete. Given this, a different vocabulary may be needed to describe the state-led emergency response to urban mobility during Covid-19. This should ideally acknowledge the ways in which pragmatism has been increasingly embedded in many domains of urban governance, prefiguring much of the use of state-led Tactical Urbanism now seen here.

This case study highlights some of the tensions within Tactical Urbanism, especially when translated into the context of state action. When state-led projects define the formal processes through which citizens can intervene in outcomes, opportunities for the creative friction are contingent on good faith participation by urban governments. Although the requirement for expedience presented by the Covid-19 pandemic was helped by using the temporary and flexible material techniques of Tactical Urbanism, this speed of change and restrictions on social gathering necessarily required trade-offs in terms of opportunities for the creative co-design of these schemes. Thus, considering the context of Covid-19 reveals tensions between the temporary material vernacular of Tactical Urbanism and its participatory methodology of change.

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