

WORDS DEBORAH TARRANT

# TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

“Tactical urbanism” is a generational approach to planning cities and suburbs, harnessing the power of communities and actively engaging them in the transformation. Lucinda Hartley is one of its key influencers.

**I**N 2007, a newly graduated landscape designer working in the Melbourne office of an international design firm, Lucinda Hartley was presented with a project for a vast information technology park in Delhi.

“I’d never been to India,” she says. “I remember playing around with lines on my computer and thinking, ‘How can I make decisions about where 10,000 people are going to work every day, and design anything useful or relevant, when I don’t know anything about them?’”

This set Hartley on an odyssey of exploration. “As all good Gen Ys would, I quit my job and spent a couple of years working in informal settlements (slums) in South-East Asia, trying to figure out how cities worked.”

Even with no land, no money, no resources and hardly any education, Hartley observed, people created change when connected in communities. “I learned that the power of community changes everything.”

**TODAY**, Hartley is at the forefront of the global “tactical” or “adaptive” urbanism movement challenging the traditional approaches of governments, planners and designers of cities. The movement asks individuals to be involved in how their cities are designed and actively engages them in the transformation. Typically, it uses low-cost experiments to pre-empt more permanent strategic changes in cities. “Think of it like city start-ups.”

Turning streets into playgrounds or parks (sometimes temporarily rolling out astroturf), getting neighbours to turn unused lots into community gardens, wheeling in food vans and creating cycleways, pop-up shops and events are just some of the community-boosting, collaborative approaches used by Hartley and a team of nine at Melbourne consultancy business CoDesign Studio.

While building an international reputation as big-thinking game-changers, CoDesign, which has

rolled out some 40 projects to date, often works small with a “learn-by-doing” approach. An example is the recent week-long prototype created for the City of Melbourne, which turned Dodds Street in densely populated Southbank into a more resident-friendly, carless space with shady spots for neighbours to chat, or eat; where kids could safely kick a football around. The local community gave it a big thumbs-up. “At the end of the week they were begging us not to leave,” says Hartley. The experiment has given city planners the insights to plan for the street’s permanent closure.

Similarly, the CoDesign-ers were asked to enliven the world’s largest network of bluestone laneways in Melbourne’s Brunswick. A community safety project, focused on just one laneway, was supported by the Department of Justice (ABC employee Jill Meagher disappeared there in 2012 and was later discovered murdered) with a \$5000 materials upgrade.

“All the residents know each other now, and they’re connecting over community dinners,” reports Hartley. More remarkably, residents of three or four other laneways are following suit with neighbourly food fiestas.

Indeed, contagion for “placemaking” concepts is spreading. Big developers, including Lend Lease and Mirvac, have asked CoDesign to assist in bringing community spirit and activities into greenfields developments on the city fringes. VicHealth and Melbourne Water also have engaged the group. For VicHealth, CoDesign is looking at suburb-wide changes to encourage more physical activity, making it easier for people to walk and cycle. They are creating Sunday play spaces to encourage children to get outside, and “parklets” to be tended by locals.

When CoDesign was founded in 2010, the intention was to operate as a charity with substantial support from



Lucinda  
Hartley

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## CULTURE MOVES FAST, BUT INFRASTRUCTURE MOVES SLOWLY. TACTICAL URBANISM TRIES TO BRIDGE THAT

volunteers, donations and grants, but more recently it has switched to being a social business, allowing more professional control. “We still invite volunteers to help with some of our experiments.”

CoDesign has changed in other ways, too. It began working across Asia, drawing inspiration about citymaking from environments with comparatively less government control. One salutary lesson in the importance of listening to the end-user came from Hartley’s experience in Phnom Penh, where she set out to build a school for a local slum community only to learn from a teacher that, due to regular flooding, the greater need was for access. Instead of a school, they built footpaths.

**THE COMPANY** focus has returned to Australia. “We all live here,” says Hartley. “We also thought if we’re going to be in community development then we need to be influencing people in our own backyard. We work in Collingwood on Easey Street, so we’re running an in-house project called Life on Easey Street to get the businesses here to contribute small projects to improve the streetscape.”

While her values on the importance of community involvement in citymaking hold strong, Hartley is pragmatic. Undoubtedly, there’s a place for traditional, top-down planning ways. Water systems and railways, for instance, aren’t going to happen in a local context, but social need always seems to run ahead of infrastructure, she observes. “Culture moves fast, but infrastructure moves slowly and tactical urbanism tries to bridge that.”

Giving people a practical experience of what change will look like is a good beginning. But perhaps the greater impact is in helping people connect with their neighbours to “create stuff”.

“We end up with better places and stronger communities because of it. That’s what’s missing from traditional planning.”

Hartley has just relinquished a role on the UN-Habitat Youth Advisory Board, after five years, which gave her several insights to international policymaking. Not a fast process, she reports, although in her time the body convinced more than 100 governments to pass a resolution to mandate for youth involvement in city planning.

“Each generation needs to reinvent what their environment looks like, and tactical urbanism is a very generational approach to how we get people involved in planning.”

Long-term strategic planning rarely involves young people in decision-making, Hartley notes. “It’s more about letting experienced designers leave their mark on a city. That’s important, but I see so much opportunity in giving young change-makers the chance to shape what their future is going to look like.”