Tactical Urbanism as a response during the pandemic

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Cities have taken the lead in stopping the spread of COVID-19. By adapting the use of public space, local governments have shown their intention to meet the new needs of citizens. In this sense, tactical urbanism is proving to be a powerful tool to find quick and low-cost solutions to urban problems. In this context, Metropolis, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), organised a webinar on 28 October titled “Ibero-American experiences of tactical urbanism against COVID-19.”

“According to UN-Habitat, 95% of COVID-19 cases are concentrated in large cities—this is an urban pandemic!” Octavi De la Varga, Metropolis Secretary General, opened the session with a description of the current context: “According to the World Health Organization, 50% of the worldwide population currently stays in urban areas, and they are the ones that have the most people exposed to the virus. As a result, local governments have had to adapt quickly to meet these new challenges.”

De la Varga gave the floor to 6 representatives from urban planning and sustainable mobility departments from the capitals of Guatemala City, Medellín and Mexico City. Illustrating practical and local responses to transform urban spaces, they detailed the social impact of tactical urbanism projects put in place during the pandemic.

To kick off the contributions, Carlos Alejandro Soberanis Toledo, Deputy Mayor of Guatemala City, together with his colleague, Silvia Casorran Vargas Díaz, Head of Urban Planning, and José Miguel Benítez Pacheco, Director of Social Communication, presented the “Santiago Plan.” In order to improve quality of life, increase opportunities and create jobs, Guatemala has developed a programme in response to the pandemic, which includes three phases: containment, mitigation, and the new normal. In particular, Mr. Vargas highlighted the new “handbook for the use of public space, which aims to establish guidelines to adapt to the new normal.”

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Silvia Casorran, Head of the Bicycle Office at the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, described the use of tactical urbanism in the city of Barcelona: “We are dealing with a whole new paradigm, and we are exploring new horizons by giving the citizens what they ask for. We are creating green spaces in the city, and we are trying to reconfigure the urban environment. We develop very simple projects. Many of the elements we use are recycled, and this makes the process faster.”

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A different perspective was given by Nicolás Rivillas, Assistant Manager of Design and Innovation of the Urban Planning Department of the City of Mexico: “We understand tactical urbanism as an opportunity to give cities a more human component, at the same time as we face the challenges of COVID-19.”

We have a number of pre-existing issues that force us to be much more proactive in taking action in the region, and tactical urbanism has become the healthiest and most actionable way to do this.”

Constanza Delón Córdoba from the Secretariat for Mobility in Mexico City, presented the “Outdoor City (Ciudad al Aire Libre) programme.” Explaining the many difficulties facing the metropolitan area, which has 19 million commuters every day, she explained the way they have managed to adapt to the new reality: “We have implemented a series of initiatives to transform the urban environment. We have created green spaces in the city, and we are trying to reconfigure the urban environment. We develop very simple projects. Many of the elements we use are recycled, and this makes the process faster.”

Diana Lopez Caramazana, Partnership Specialist for the “Cities and Urbanisation” programme at UNDP, concluded the session by underlying the crucial role that urban spaces are playing during the pandemic. She stated that “cities are spaces where everything is interconnected, systems of communicating vessels that need a holistic vision to design responses to urban challenges and ensure a better quality of life.”

Did you miss the webinar? You can watch the full debate by clicking here.