

Adaptive Tactical Urbanism In China: A bottom-up movement led from the top down

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the concept of tactical urbanism has gained momentum, emerging as an effective strategy for urban revitalization across various locales. Through experimental interventions, dialogues with governing bodies ensue, while astutely arranged configurations serve to address urban challenges. This discourse examines the trajectory of tactical urbanism within the Chinese context. Its belated introduction to Asia and disparate social frameworks and administrative paradigms make direct transposition of Western precedents proves challenging. Hence, East Asian nations like Japan and China necessitate a tailored approach. This study contends that while overt manifestations of tactical urbanism have yet to materialize formally in China, its principles have gradually permeated certain placemaking endeavors. By dissecting such instances, the merits and constraints of tactical urbanism in the Chinese milieu are scrutinized.

KEYWORDS

tactical urbanism; China; citizen-lead design; community making; Big Fish

1 About Tactical urbanism

1.1 Tactical urbanism

In 2012, American urban designers Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia published a seminal paper titled "Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action For Long-Term Change," which introduced the concept of tactical urbanism. It prioritizes achieving lasting impact through short-term, cost-effective interventions. Furthermore, it underscores its experimental nature, signifying that tactical urbanism design constitutes a protracted endeavor aimed at exploring the feasibility of future schemes through ongoing social experiments.(Figure 1). Tactical urbanism is often perceived as a grassroots response to unreasonable authority and policies, thus prompting the adoption of tactical strategies to negotiate with governing bodies.



Figure 1 Resource: Tactical Urbanism Guide To Materials And Design

A quintessential illustration of tactical urbanism is "Park(ing) Day." (Figure 2) Originating from the global emergence of the "carless" movement concurrent with the widespread acknowledgment of new urbanism principles. In 2005, activists in San Francisco transformed a metered parking lot into a temporary public space, articulating their vision for increased green spaces within the city. Subsequently, the movement evolved into an annual event known as "Park(ing) Day" the following year, witnessing a surge in the number of participating parking spaces. Over time, this grassroots action garnered recognition and support from municipal authorities and the mayor, further cementing its legitimacy. "Park(ing) Day" has since become a staple annual occurrence, underscoring the growing awareness of the dearth of public spaces in urban settings and the constraints imposed by the legacy of car-centric urban planning. Consequently, there has been a notable uptick in investments directed towards public spaces, coupled with a diversification of the urban landscape.¹

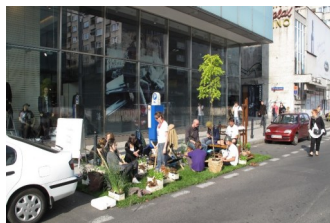


Figure 2 First Park(ing) Day in Warsaw (2009) organised by K. Herman. (photo K. Herman)

1.2 Introduction in East Asian countries

Park(ing) Days encapsulate several key attributes of tactical urbanism: temporality, simplicity, utilization of modest resources, low costs. These tactical interventions represent a revolt against the automobile-centric urban design legacy inherited from the modernist planning paradigms of the last century in the United States. Consequently, much of the experimental practice has been directed towards ameliorating these enduring challenges. But the situations in East Asian nations presents a different scenario. In recent years, countries like Japan and South Korea have gradually embraced the concept of tactical urbanism. However, due to regulatory constraints—illustrated by Japan's regulatory framework—endeavors such as pop-up cafes and Park(ing) Days necessitate official sanction, rendering their implementation arduous. It wasn't until the enactment of the Urban Facilitation Agreement (都市利便増進協定) in 2011 that Some practices of tactical urbanism are beginning to emerge.² (Figure 3)



Figure 3 The discovery chair of the Shibuya Hacking project

Source: 都市を変えるいくつかの戦術的方法

1 Herman, K., & Rodgers, M. (2020). From tactical urbanism action to institutionalised urban planning and educational tool: The evolution of park (ing) day. *land*, 9(7), 217.

2 胡佳雨, & 朱文一. 外之场: 日本战术都市主义若干议题. *城市设计*, 6(038), 30-37.

"Tactical urbanism" remains a relatively nascent term within the discourse in China. Discussions on this subject are sparse, with limited practical implementation. Moreover, China's stringent public space management policies, surpassing even those of Japan, pose additional hurdles to the dissemination and adoption of related theories. Notwithstanding these challenges, within a subset of ongoing practical projects, certain Chinese designers have embarked on urban experimentation endeavors, albeit not entirely aligning with the conventional definition of tactical urbanism. Against this backdrop, this article endeavors to investigate the prospects of integrating tactical urbanism into China's urban fabric. Additionally, it aims to assess the nascent indications of tactical urbanism within extant schemes, offering insights into the trajectory of its future evolution within the Chinese context.

1.3 Tactical urbanism in China: The concept is not popular

In China, the understanding of the pop-up concept is predominantly confined to economic analysis and exhibition design within the realm of business marketing. Regrettably, there remains a dearth of research exploring the phenomenon of urban pop-ups from the perspectives of architecture and urban design. Over the past two years, the scant literature available has been limited to just two journal articles introducing the concept of Western tactical urbanism. This glaring gap in scholarly discourse underscores the urgent need for further exploration and examination of the implications of pop-up initiatives within the context of urban planning and architectural discourse in China.³ Despite the limited adoption of tactical urbanism in Chinese architecture and planning, there has been a notable surge in global discourse surrounding this concept in recent years. Consequently, the principles of tactical urbanism have begun to permeate certain placemaking initiatives within China. Although still in its infancy, this trend signals a growing recognition of the potential of tactical interventions to address urban challenges and enhance public spaces. As such, while tactical urbanism may not yet be commonplace in Chinese architectural and planning endeavors, its burgeoning influence suggests a promising avenue for innovation and experimentation in the country's urban development discourse.

According to Mike Lydon, the prevailing definition of tactical urbanism underscores the transformative potential of low-cost, short-term interventions, yielding enduring impacts. Notably, within China, there exists a dearth of designers specializing in such practices. Consequently, this paper endeavors to explore the prospects and obstacles surrounding the diffusion of tactical urbanism concepts within the Chinese context, offering insights derived from ongoing placemaking endeavors. Through a nuanced examination of these dynamics, this study aims to elucidate the intricacies of introducing and operationalizing tactical urbanism principles within the unique socio-cultural and regulatory milieu of China.

1.4 Case study in Shanghai: "One square meter action" by Big Fish(Figure 4)

Big Fish Construction is a young organization founded in 2018, consisting of architects, planners, media professionals, community builders and other operators. Their projects are primarily focused on community making, with an emphasis on generating common good by mobilizing the initiative of citizens.⁴

Their primary focus lies in Shanghai, where their projects, while community-oriented, also exhibit

3 丁小涵, & 朱文一. (2019). 西方城市快闪理论研究. *城市设计*, (3), 56-69.

4 社区更新·展 | 上海大鱼营造: 斜杠青年的青色组织. (15 C.E., November 20). Sohu. https://www.sohu.com/a/354013631_260616

tactical strategies in their operational approach. These strategies involve implementing low-cost, short-term interventions aimed at instigating long-term change, with project feasibility validated through prototyping. In the subsequent discussion, I will delve into their initiative titled "One Square Meter Action," initiated in 2021 and slated to continue through 2024. Through this examination, I aim to elucidate both the merits and shortcomings of this project from a tactical perspective.

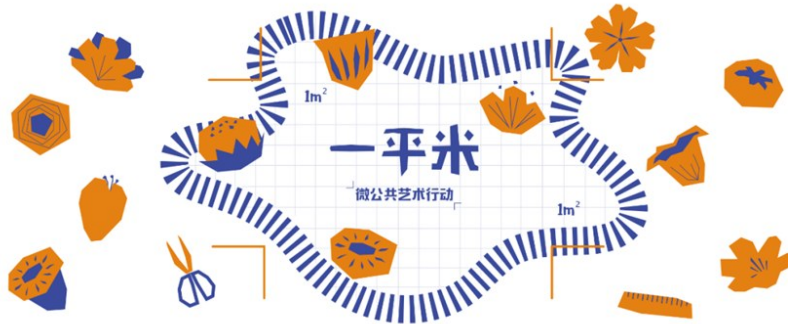


Figure 4 "One square meter Micro Public Art Tour"(resource: internet)

1.5 "One square meter action": project introduction

Situated in Shanghai's Xinhua district (Figure 5), the project unfolds within the backdrop of a quintessential old cityscape, representative of Shanghai's rich historical heritage. Characterized by a diverse array of commercial housing, public housing, villas, and other residential typologies, the area grapples with high population density, pronounced aging demographics, and aging infrastructure. Despite the absence of comprehensive academic documentation on the project's entirety, insights are garnered from social media platforms and the article titled "Urban Street Experiments in Milan and Shanghai: Transforming Streets in a Tactical and Experimental Approach," authored by Huang (2023). Through this article, pivotal milestones and events associated with the project are recorded, offering valuable insights into its tactical and experimental nature.⁵ In this article, the author participated in the project and recorded some important time nodes and events.

The project unfolds against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic, with a primary objective of exploring avenues to cultivate resilient community environments amidst and beyond



Figure 5 The site: Xinhua community, an iconic old town in Shanghai (source: internet)

⁵ Huang, J. (2023). Urban street experiments in Milan and Shanghai: transforming streets in a tactical and experimental approach.

the pandemic. Envisioned as a collaborative endeavor, the design team endeavors to facilitate citizen participation in deliberating and shaping the community's essential needs. By mobilizing citizens' engagement, the project seeks to identify intervention targets for community development. The overarching plan is delineated into three distinct phases(Figure 6):

- 1.Street Pop-Up Testing: In this initial phase, temporary interventions are deployed on the streets to gauge their efficacy in addressing community needs and fostering resilience.
- 2.Prototype Design and Testing: Building upon the insights gleaned from the pop-up testing phase, prototype designs are developed and subjected to rigorous testing to refine their functionality and suitability for the community.
- 3.Final Intervention Design: Drawing upon the lessons learned from the prototype testing phase, the final intervention design is formulated. This design encapsulates the culmination of citizen input, design team expertise, and community authority guidance.

Phase of cycle	Implementation Session	Evaluation Session	Modification Session
Pop-up test cycle	One-day pop-up action	To interview people's attitudes and ideas to test the feasibility	To define the main concepts and framework of action
Season 1 cycle	The design and implementation of proposals led by Big Fish	To track and report on the actual usage and public satisfaction	To summarize the achievement and promote through exhibition
Season 2 cycle	New round of issues initiated and realized, emphasizing the master of local community teams	To track and report on the actual usage and public satisfaction	To conclude a replicable mechanism

Figure 6 Resource:Urban street experiments in Milan and Shanghai.

During the first phase, the project team employed fluorescent tape to demarcate a one-square-meter square on Xingfu Lane, a bustling thoroughfare in Xinhua.(Figure 7) Within this delineated area, a thought-provoking message was inscribed: "If this square meter belongs to you, what would you like to do here?" Armed with cameras, the Big Fish team meticulously documented the reactions and interactions of passersby, engaging them in dialogues to glean insights into their perceptions and aspirations regarding public space utilization. Through this innovative pop-up experiment, the team aimed to discern residents' attitudes towards and interests in public spaces, thereby fostering a participatory approach to urban design: What creative endeavors would individuals undertake if granted ownership of this modest plot of open space?

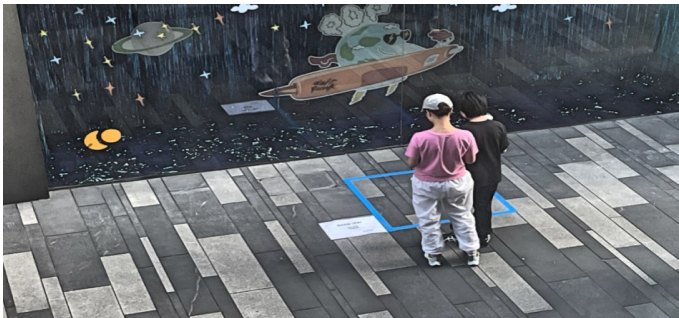


Figure 7 one-square-meter square on Xingfu lane(resource: Big Fish)

Indeed, this initial phase serves as a crucial step in the strategic process: evaluating the feasibility of the approach itself. The outcomes reveal a significant level of citizen interest in the topic, with individuals demonstrating a diverse array of ideas regarding incremental urban updates. This

collective engagement underscores the potential efficacy of the strategy and highlights the importance of citizen involvement in shaping the urban landscape.

Following the success of the initial experiment, Big Fish transitioned into the design intervention phase. They mobilized nearly 100 residents to actively participate in the design process, encouraging them to articulate their own community concerns and aspirations. Subsequently, Big Fish facilitated a collaborative selection process, wherein the most promising proposals were identified through a voting mechanism involving community officials, residents, and the organization itself. From the plethora of submissions, 10 schemes emerged as the most valuable, characterized by their emphasis on child-friendly amenities and fostering community interaction. Notably, these schemes adopted a "mini intervention" approach, with each proposal predominantly confined to a compact one-cubic-meter footprint. Even schemes involving ground patterns eschewed traditional painting methods, opting instead for tags.(Figure 8)(Figure 9)



Figure 8 Child-friendly project "full of laugh"



Figure 9 A 'mood mailbox' for residents to speak out one-square-meter square on Xingfu lane(resource: Big Fish)

In 2022, the project advanced to its subsequent phase, where Big Fish facilitated a deeper engagement and refinement of the plans with the citizens. However, this stage departed from the former designer-citizen collaboration model, instead encouraging citizens to lend mutual support and assistance to one another acting as facilitators and observers. Big Fish fostered a spirit of communal collaboration, empowering residents to further develop the project collectively.

Following another round of voting and screening, four projects emerged as the frontrunners, representing a blend of child-friendly spaces and community interaction zones. Notably, compared to the previous phase, the intervention areas in this stage expanded, while the design schemes attained a higher level of maturity and sophistication.(Figure 10)

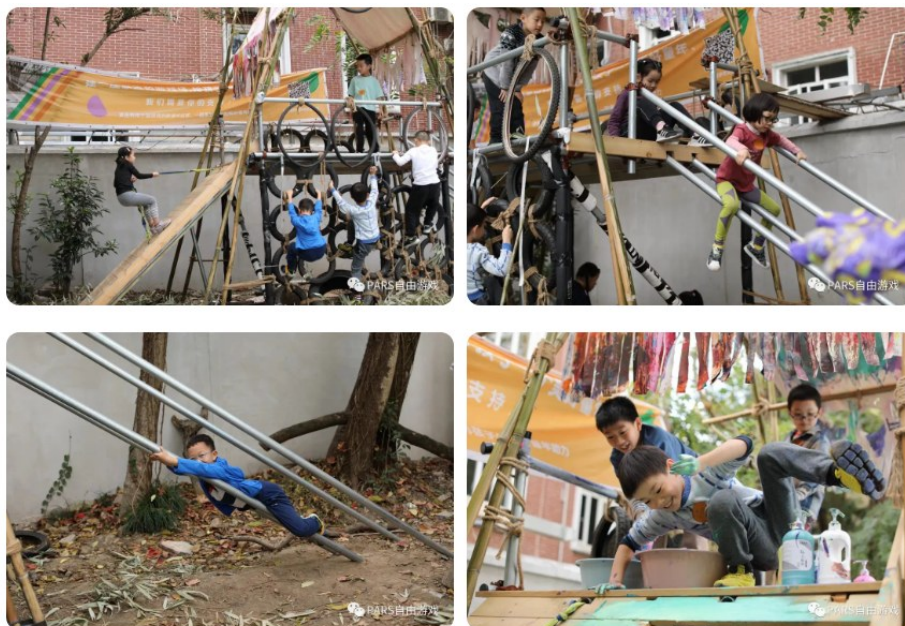


Figure 10 One of the finally landed project "orange playground"(resource:Xinhua community)

2 Critics: advantages and disadvantages

2.1 Adaptive solution : tactical urbanism without "disobedience"

Indeed, as outlined by Mike Lydon in "Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Actions for Long-Term Change," one of the key advantages of tactical urbanism lies in its ability to facilitate bottom-up, citizen-led initiatives that challenge existing policies and authorities through insurgent actions. However, the cases observed in China showcase a nuanced approach characterized by adaptive introduction. Here, we witness government-led initiatives that invite citizen participation in tactical design events. This signifies a departure from the traditional grassroots insurgency model, instead embracing a collaborative framework where government authorities and citizens collaborate to address urban challenges and effect positive change. While the approach may differ from the conventional insurgent tactics espoused by tactical urbanism, it nevertheless embodies a pragmatic and inclusive approach tailored to the socio-political context of China. So the position of Big Fish is between the citizens and the authority.

The position of the designer is very important. (Figure 11)The case of Lakemen's "T-house" (Figure 12) exemplifies the role of designers as ordinary citizens within the realm of tactical urbanism. Lakemen, a student who had experienced better urban environments abroad, returned to his hometown and identified issues stemming from car-centric planning legacies. Viewing these problems through the lens of a regular citizen residing in the affected neighborhoods, Lakemen was able to discern the project's key points with precision. This grassroots perspective allowed him to accurately address the community's needs and concerns.

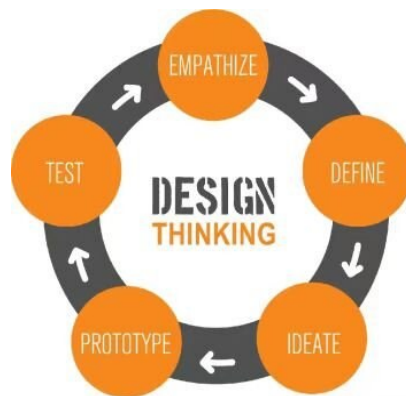


Figure 11 the position matters: the "empathize" as the beginning of thinking
Resource: Short-term Action for Long-term Change



Figure 12 Lakemen and his "T-horse"

source: T Horse. (n.d.). City Repair. <https://cityrepair.org/thorse-mobile/>

In contrast, the Chinese context presents a more top-down dynamic, wherein projects have limited room for negotiation with authorities. The "One Square Meter Action" project exemplifies this scenario, where design initiatives are conceived from the bottom up but necessitate top-down support. This means that projects must undergo scrutiny and approval by authorities before implementation, limiting the autonomy of designers and citizens alike. Despite this hierarchical arrangement, efforts are made to integrate citizen input within the confines of established administrative frameworks, albeit with varying degrees of influence on project outcomes.

The approach adopted by Big Fish in China reflects an adaptive solution. Rather than directly challenging existing policies, their strategy revolves around creating a platform for residents to voice their perspectives on community development and actively participate in the planning process. Through a collaborative effort between professional architects and residents, the project follows a strategic model of creating prototypes, conducting tests, persuading authorities, and implementing permanent interventions.

By empowering residents to express their needs and desires directly, Big Fish's approach fosters greater community engagement and allows authorities to gain insights into the demands and aspirations of the people they serve. This adaptive strategy demonstrates a pragmatic alternative to directly opposing policies, leveraging grassroots participation to effect meaningful change within the constraints of the existing governance framework.

2.2 Formalism :short-term intervention ! But long-term change?

However, the drawbacks of this innovative model are also evident. The ideas are invariably subject to review by the authorities. In other words, the solutions are invariably confined within the parameters of existing policies, thus limiting the scope of operation considerably. Ultimately, only a temporary amusement park constructed by residents themselves and a few minor installations were realized. Furthermore, there was no plan from the outset of the project to amend policies by the authorities, and in fact, the designers themselves did not harbor such ambitions. Consequently, the project struggled to yield long-term impact. Additionally, these solutions crafted solely by residents lack the professional insights of architects or urban planners, rendering the final outcomes difficult to replicate and disseminate.

We exemplify the proliferation of tactical urbanism through the "Walk [your city]" initiative, a project initiated in Raleigh, North Carolina. Designer Tomasulo aimed to promote walking by challenging the perception of time associated with pedestrian journeys. To achieve this, he strategically placed signage throughout the city indicating walking or cycling times between various destinations. Following the success of the pilot phase, Tomasulo opted to open-source the project, making the sign templates freely available for download. Subsequently, the campaign gained momentum and expanded to encompass additional states.⁶ In undertaking these actions, the designer augmented the project's impact in two significant ways. Firstly, by incorporating QR codes into the signs, individuals could scan them to access additional details about the city, facilitating engagement and enabling Tomasulo to gather feedback from the public. Secondly, by adopting an open-source approach, the project became replicable, thereby simplifying its dissemination and fostering wider adoption.⁷(Figure 13)

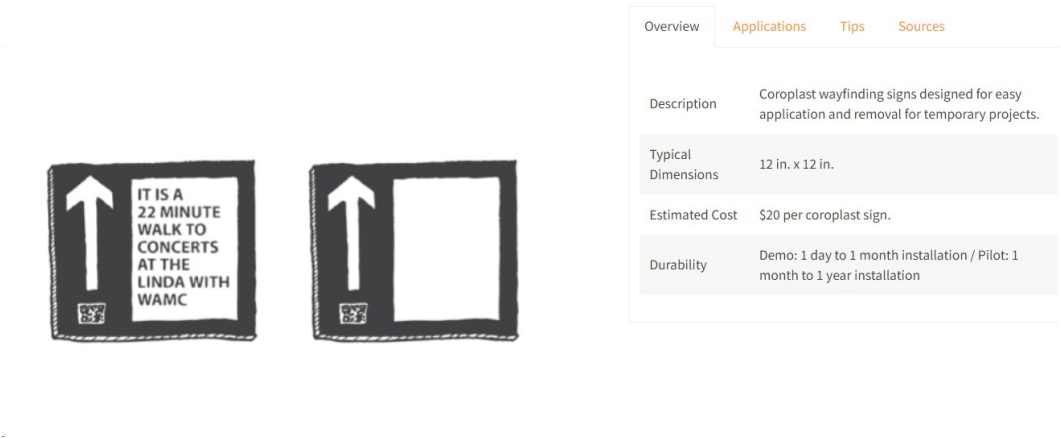


Figure 13 Resource: TACTICAL URBANISM GUIDE TO MATERIALS AND DESIGN

However, in the case of the "One Square Meter Action," the plans devised by residents lack universality and do not address issues shared by the entire city or even multiple cities. Furthermore, there is a deficiency in concrete statistical standards to substantiate the positive impact of these programs on the community. Most significantly, despite concerted efforts to publicize their activities, the project is not open-sourced, thereby impeding the spread of similar initiatives.

6 Wernbacher, T., Platzer, M., Schneider, J., Titze, S., Denk, N., & Pfeiffer, A. (2020). Walk Your City: Using nudging to promote walking. *REAL CORP 2020 Proceedings, Tagungsband*, 15-18.

7 <http://tacticalurbanismguide.com/portfolio/walk-your-city-signs/>

3 Conclusion

While the approach taken by Big Fish may not embody a universal, replicable model for urban public space renovation, nor does it fully embody the ideals of urban development, it nevertheless encapsulates the essence of tactical urbanism: employing low-cost, short-term, experimental, and iterative design strategies. The project begins by drawing attention to a simple blue tape square, serving as a catalyst to gauge community interest in small to medium-sized public spaces. Subsequently, residents and architects collaborate to design physical space prototypes, culminating in the selection of a practical project. The overarching aim is to elicit residents' needs for quality public spaces within their community and to transform perceptions of the area through actionable interventions.

The fundamental distinction between this project and "Park(ing) Days" lies in their operational modalities. While "Park(ing) Days" leverage tactics to directly alter physical spaces and subsequently shift public perceptions, Big Fish employs tactics primarily to facilitate residents' expression of genuine desires. Despite the actual participation of residents in the "One Square Meter Action," the project's initiation by community authorities constrains tactical freedom significantly. Unlike Lakemen's ability to transform physical infrastructure through direct action, Big Fish implements a "bottom-up" strategy within the confines of a "top-down" constraint. Thus, while "Park(ing) Days" aim to change physical spaces and subsequently influence minds, Big Fish employs tactics primarily to empower residents to articulate their true aspirations for their community. This approach ensures that grassroots ideas are incorporated into government-led projects, enhancing the diversity and local relevance of urban renewal efforts. Consequently, it serves as an alternative strategy within the confines of stringent public space management systems. However, as the project transitions from the pop-up test phase to the intervention phase, its limitations become more pronounced. Some small, toy-like urban installations may fail to resonate with society to the same extent as a comprehensive parking lot makeover. Moreover, this model lacks replicability or scalability for two main reasons.

Nonetheless, this project represents an innovative experiment within the context of China. Urban designers in China contend with numerous constraints and must navigate within predefined parameters. The case of Big Fish illustrates how they act as intermediaries within a top-down design mechanism, employing tactics to engage citizens in city construction and striving to achieve "top-down bottom-up" design. In essence, this project offers a valuable model for the future practice of tactical urbanism in China. The challenge lies in determining how to implement tactics within a system characterized by constraints, paving the way for future discussions and developments in this area.

Funding

Funded by the community authority, Big Fish Construction has been entrusted with the execution of the project, acting as the principal implementing organization. Through this collaborative effort, the project endeavors to forge a more resilient and community-centric urban fabric that can withstand the challenges posed by the pandemic and pave the way for a more sustainable post-pandemic future.

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