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# Pilot Projects

## Testing Tools, Building Platforms

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POSITION PAPER

VERSION 2

The Lean Urbanism movement will come to life through pilot projects, as they will spread the knowledge from the professionals to community builders and entrepreneurs. They are at the core of the Project for Lean Urbanism, as they will serve to demonstrate the potential for and value of incremental, community-scale revitalization and development by tapping local physical, financial, and social assets that are currently underutilized. The pilot projects will also be used to test and refine the tools, to identify and seek solutions to common barriers in regulation or practice that inhibit small-scale development or rebuilding, and to serve as models for use by other communities.

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### The Big and the Small

Many American cities attempt to revitalize themselves by redeveloping, but this growth can outpace housing supply quickly, and bid up prices even faster than that. This, among other things, may be spurring Millennials, immigrants and more to relocate to affordable cities and towns. They bring new diversity to those communities.

The old models of revitalization and redevelopment seem not to address today's situations, and what's worse, there may not be the resources to undertake the big projects that always seemed to anchor urban revitalization. Big projects have not always created sustainable rebirth, and yet planning, environmental and building control systems and regulations seem geared around projects of a certain size. This discourages small-scale rebuilding and new building efforts, as the complexity and cost may require multiple consultants and funding beyond the ability of small-scale developers, self-builders, or community groups to even contemplate.

The accretion of well-intentioned but complex rules paradoxically pushes the process toward the large projects that residents most fear, and away from the kind of home-grown growth that might be embraced. Even urban homesteading programs like that in Buffalo, NY, where empty properties are sold for a dollar if they can be brought to code, find barriers in terms of lack of finance, uninsurability and the cost of repairs exceeding the value of the repaired property.

This problem may not even be recognized by many city and county officials, who don't realize they are privileging the big and hindering the small. The Project for Lean Urbanism seeks to create tools to enable sustainable revitalization through many small-scale actions — "Making

Small Possible" — and in so doing to also encourage entrepreneurship and job opportunities for many people who don't see starting a business or building/rebuilding as possible for them. We aim to do this by undertaking a number of pilot projects in selected communities to test the tools, get on-the-ground experience, and build platforms for taking the success to other cities and towns.

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### About Lean Urbanism

Lean Urbanism is small-scale, incremental community-building that requires fewer resources to incubate and mature. It is a movement of builders, planners, architects, developers, engineers, activists, nonprofits, municipalities, and entrepreneurs, working to lower the barriers to community-building, to make it easier to start businesses, and to provide more attainable housing and development.

Lean Urbanism is open-access, allowing more people to participate in the building of their homes, businesses, and communities. It is open-source, creating tools and techniques for all to use, and it is open-ended, focusing on incremental and ongoing improvement rather than large-scale redevelopment or new master-planned communities. Lean Urbanism is focused on infill development and reuse in cities and the repair of sprawling suburbs. It aims for the 80-percent solution, avoiding the mistake of letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

The Project for Lean Urbanism will restore common sense to the processes of development, building, starting small businesses, community engagement, and acquiring the necessary skills.

The Project will devise tools so that community-building takes less time, reduces the resources required for compliance, and frustrates fewer well-intentioned entrepreneurs, by providing ways

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to work around onerous financial, bureaucratic, and regulatory processes which because of their complexity favor big projects over small. Lean Urbanism enables the smaller scale. The tools will be made freely available to governments and organizations seeking to get things done, to entrepreneurs without the knowhow to overcome hurdles, and to small builders or homeowners who could build well in an economical, low-tech way. These include immigrants, members of the Millennial generation, makers, and other small-scale community entrepreneurs for whom the barriers to entry have become too high.

The Seven Platforms of the Project for Lean Urbanism are: Lean Building, Lean Development, Lean Business, Lean Green, Lean Governing, Lean Infrastructure, and Lean Learning. Lean Urbanism occupies the seam between the pilot projects of Tactical Urbanism and the policy-focused agenda of Smart Growth and New Urbanism. It supports the key principles of the Charter of the New Urbanism in creating compact, connected, walkable, mixed neighborhoods, towns, cities and metropolitan regions.

The Project is conceived as a multi-year effort to include research, publication, formulation of tools, pilot projects, and projection. The first year was dedicated to research, with the papers published here, and three books published elsewhere, the result of that effort.

The second year will see the selection and implementation of a number of pilot projects, used both to demonstrate the overall concept and to test and refine the tools. The Project for Lean Urbanism is managed by the Center for Applied Transect Studies, led by Andrés Duany and Hank Dittmar, and managed by Brian Falk. Hank Dittmar will coordinate the pilot projects with Brian Falk. The Project has received funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, as well as the contributions of numerous volunteers. The pilot projects will require additional funding beyond that already provided.

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## How Many Pilot Projects?

The Knight Foundation has provided core funding for the initial workshops of pilot projects in two Knight Communities. The Kresge Foundation has provided a grant to develop the concept of pilot projects and to identify further philanthropic and local support. We hope to identify and fund additional pilot projects, for a total of five to seven. This should be sufficient to provide for a diversity of contexts, including geographic, economic, and social conditions within metropolitan areas. For example, it would be desirable to have urban pilots in a declining former industrial city and in the stagnant core of a midwestern or sunbelt city. It would also be desirable to include pilots in suburban areas in need of revitalization, both first-ring suburbs in older cities and towns both large and small, and newer suburban areas hard hit by the Great Recession. These might address main streets and commercial arterials, dying malls and other situations. The scale of the projects would be limited to a neighborhood, corridor, district, or small town.

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## Components of a Pilot Project

A pilot project will identify viable, short-term, incremental improvements and the talent and resources needed to make these improvements, develop mechanisms for getting past blockages and barriers, and develop an action plan for implementation by local people. The three primary products of a Lean Pilot Project are the Lean Scan, a Pink Zone, and a Toolkit. These will lead to an implementation phase where projects are undertaken by local developers and entrepreneurs with support and coaching from the Project for Lean Urbanism.

### 1. The Lean Scan

The Lean Scan is a new tool for finding latent opportunities in a town, a district or a corridor and leveraging underused assets in a way that unlocks synergies between built, financial, social and natural resources. The Lean Scan is to be applied at the scale of the neighborhood, corridor or town, and may be commissioned by or for a state, a locality or a community organization.

Unlike a charrette or public engagement exercise, the Lean Scan is a purposeful exercise in identifying opportunities and barriers. The Lean Scan is more of a scoping effort than a master planning effort. It is not about convincing the general public; it is about engaging community leadership, finding talent and potential, and identifying and cataloging impediments to their efforts to make their community better in the near term. The users of the Lean Scan know the problems (at least most of them), and use the tool to identify possibilities and propose solutions. The Lean Scan aims to convince only elected officials and high-rank-

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ing appointees/staff rather than the local stakeholders. Another function of the Lean Scan is to find and unlock hidden assets, including people and organizations, so while there is an outreach function, it is targeted to finding those who have the will, talent and energy to make good things happen. The Lean Scan is partly about finding the talent (distinct from the experts), and partly about decoding and engaging the power structure.

The final, refined and publicly released Lean Scan will be for those people who already have the energy but have been impeded. It aims to reduce the need for specialized consultants and lobbyists, and simplify and decode the development and building process so that ordinary people can again participate.

## 2. Pink Zone

Each pilot project will establish a Pink Zone — where the red tape is lightened — as the locus for implementation of Lean strategies and improvements.

A Pink Zone may be an overlay zoning category where new protocols are pre-negotiated and experiments are conducted, all with the goal of removing impediments identified in the Lean Scan. The focus will be on issues related to zoning, building, and business. The Pink Zone will be the result of a thorough analysis of the thresholds, exemptions and discretionary approvals needed to allow and encourage Lean, small increments of development. The goal is to define small thresholds and employ the 80-percent solutions that are good enough to allow small development and business projects to be undertaken without compromising health and safety.

For example, a Pink Zone might emulate England's localism agenda by allowing building extensions of up to 50 percent of a building's size to go forward without planning review, so long as neighboring property owners do not object. Or a Pink Zone may allow the conversion from business use to residential or vice versa, without review, for properties under a certain threshold. A Pink Zone might preemptively approve the construction of certain Lean building types, allowing them to avoid planning and go only through building permitting. The strategies will differ in each area, and they will be accompanied by a Toolkit, which outlines both implementation strategies and an action plan.

## 3. Toolkit

A custom Toolkit will be developed in the final stage of a pilot project. Applicable tools will be selected for each area, and detailed to fit the administrative and physical condition of the site.

Potential tools include:

- Governing techniques and strategies
  - Pink codes: Simplified codes which help to enable small-scale development and seek to demystify and simplify requirements, including development that is permitted without further red tape
  - Non-subordinate pairings: An experienced and senior staff member paired with a younger, more entrepreneurial colleague in a co-leadership role, to offer choice to applicants, encourage more nimble working by government, and create a balance of experience with initiative and energy
  - Expeditor: A designated person within government to guide applicants and speed up processes
  - Bureaucrat in a Box: A tool for solving problems within the system
  - Concierge: A facilitator outside of government — ideally within a BID, CDC, or similar organization — to help direct project sponsors to the right people and places
  - Workarounds: Ways to get around rules without violating them
- Thresholds: Identifies what can be done to extend buildings, change uses, bring empty buildings back to life, or alter the public realm or streetscapes without triggering reviews, hearings, and/or additional costs; also adjusts thresholds that favor large-scale projects to be appropriate for smaller efforts
- Building types: Analysis and roster of local building types that don't require expensive construction methods and can be built without triggering onerous code requirements such as those for elevators or additional parking; may include permitting of such buildings, subject to inspection
- Developer in a Box: A tool to help the would-be small developer or entrepreneur get into the game by outlining the roles to be played, techniques for navigating the financial, regulatory, and bureaucratic processes, and strategies for managing the key risk stages without vast resources

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## Implementation Phase: Projects on the Ground

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Following the development of the plan for action, the emphasis will shift to the local community. The Lean Scan, workshop and Pink Zone will establish a platform and a local group to coordinate action, pool resources where necessary, provide technical support, and liaise with the government expeditor. The Project for Lean Urbanism will back up this effort by providing training for local

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developers and project managers in relevant Lean tools and techniques. In addition, a project coordinator will be named to visit regularly, work with the local community, provide encouragement and advice, monitor progress, and help connect each pilot to the larger project and other pilot projects. The Project for Lean Urbanism will prepare case studies and evaluation reports for each pilot, detailing outcomes and assessing what worked and what could be improved.

Funding for the implementation phase will support training and program management and coordination of the overall platform rather than create a special subsidy for individual projects. While the full revitalization of a community will take multiple years, follow-up support should last one year to 18 months, and small projects should begin to appear on the ground within the first year.

The implementation phase will also require significant commitment and resources from the local government, from the business or community group coordinating the effort, and from local developers, businesspeople and nonprofits to lend their expertise and exploit opportunities that arise.

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### Selection Process

A successful pilot will be located in a community with the following criteria.

- Land and housing are relatively affordable
- Municipal leadership supports the need for reducing process burdens for small enterprise, development, self-building, and retrofit
- An engaged base of local support among local businesses, homeowners and residents, and organizations such as BIDs and community nonprofits
- Willing to tap into the energy of immigrants, Millennials, makers and downshifting Baby Boomers, among others. Sees diversity as an asset
- Recognizes that empty buildings, older neighborhoods, and declining strip malls and shopping centers can be assets rather than liabilities when creativity and incrementalism are applied

The Project for Lean Urbanism will select the pilot projects after soliciting expressions of interest from potential cities, including Knight Communities. We expect to engage in a dialogue with philanthropic partners to identify potential cities and to issue an invitation to up to 20 communities before narrowing the choice to the eventual five to seven pilot sites. Communities will be asked to express their interest in the form of a letter of commitment and brief proposal, identifying local support, resources to be committed, and outlining the way that the community fits the criteria outlined above.

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### Expected Outcomes

Each pilot should deliver the following outcomes.

- The engagement of a broader local demographic in the activities that contribute to community-building
- The building of a constituency for and partnership to deliver incremental, small-scale development projects and grow local businesses
- A clear plan and set of identified projects within a Pink Zone, a code to permit their approval, and a local government commitment to expedite approvals
- Approval and implementation of Lean projects, with built projects and new businesses on the ground
- Community members who have been enabled and trained to shape their communities
- Communities that are on the path to revitalization
- Tools, techniques and processes that can be replicated and implemented in other communities

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### Conclusion: Enabling Small Is a Big Thing

Some might argue that making small possible is antithetical to the widespread change needed to meet the massive problems of concentrated poverty, and neighborhood decline. But Making Small Possible can be done on a large scale. It is only a matter of creating platforms that support a large number of small, incremental improvements.

What's more, the gradual approach and sensitive knitting-together of community resources supports the goal of increasing local home and business ownership and the revitalization and stability they bring to a community. In many communities, we find that small, funky workspaces are fully occupied. These small business spaces are the backbone of the economy, yet we don't focus on making more of them.

Lean Urbanism is thus not only a tool for a simpler and more cost-effective scale of revitalization, but also for one which is aimed at ensuring community benefit and control of the process — developing the social capital of a community along with the built capital.

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**Hank Dittmar** is a global sustainability authority and urbanist, advising governments, companies and communities all over the world on making cities and towns more liveable and resilient.

Hank was Chief Executive for The Prince's Foundation for Building Community from 2005-2013. Prior to that, he was Founding President and CEO of Reconnecting America, and was Chairman of the Congress for the New Urbanism from 2003-2008. He has been the head of a US-based

foundation, a regional planner, an airport director, and an outreach worker with street gangs in Chicago's inner city.

He is currently a Senior Research Associate at the University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education. He is the author of the 2008 book *Transport and Neighbourhoods* (Edge Futures/Black Dog, 2008), and co-author and editor of *New Transit Town – Best Practices in Transit Oriented Development* (Island Press, 2004).