Tactical Technical Communication Meets Tactical Urbanism: Subversive Acts of Digital Writing, AI, and Material Practice in the Built Environment

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This article argues that *tactical urbanism* and *tactical technical communication* share a common rhetorical and infrastructural logic. Both practices respond to constraints (whether bureaucratic, spatial, or institutional) through adaptive, small-scale interventions that prototype alternative futures. Drawing from infrastructure studies and public rhetoric, the article employs a multimodal rhetorical case study approach to analyze three paired cases in which communicative artifacts enable or catalyze material change: a temporary street redesign guided by a tactical urbanist manual, a modular public space installation built using open-source CNC design files, and a speculative AI prompt book developed to generate civic dialogue around urban futures. These examples illustrate how tactical technical communication can function as infrastructure, helping to coordinate publics, distribute knowledge, and scaffold civic experimentation. Rather than treating writing as secondary to design, the article positions communication as a core mechanism by which built environments may be negotiated. The conclusion calls for increased collaboration between technical communicators and placemaking practitioners, emphasizing the field's capacity to contribute expertise that strengthens the viability and reach of tactical urbanist projects.

In cities across the globe, grassroots interventions—makeshift planters lining a bike route, hand-painted intersections, plywood kiosks, reclaimed curb space—are quietly reshaping how urban space is used and understood. Often built with limited budgets and temporary materials, these public experiments are part of a growing repertoire of *tactical urbanism*, a design strategy that tests alternative futures through scrappy, small-scale, citizen-led change (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). At the same time, a parallel conversation has been unfolding within the field of technical communication, where scholars and practitioners are exploring how communication functions under constraint, responding to complex systems with limited resources based on non-dominant user needs.

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This approach, known as *tactical technical communication* (Kimball, 2006, 2017), positions do-it-yourself documents, community-authored guides, and user-driven social platforms not simply as containers for information, but as tools for acting within (and sometimes against) dominant systems.

This article brings these two practices into conversation. While tactical urbanism and tactical technical communication have developed in separate spheres (urban design and technical communication, respectively), both involve distributed authorship, iterative design, and improvisation in the face of institutional rigidity. Both rely on communication to create space for action and to make new futures feel legible, desirable, and possible. And both increasingly engage with digital technologies as tools for visioning and persuasion.

Rather than treating writing and design as separate phases of urban development, this brief article explores how tactical technical communication becomes infrastructural, not only describing or supporting material change, but composing it. I examine how DIY communicative artifacts such as tactical guidebooks, modular design files, and AI prompt tools function as forms of infrastructural mediation: they enable publics to visualize alternatives, prototype interventions, and engage in the rhetorical labor of reimagining place. I argue that these texts operate as tactical tools for material engagement, scaffolding action across physical, digital, and institutional terrains. Tacticality, here, is not only a response to constraint. It is a method of small-scale world-building, a way of rehearsing better material futures in the gaps of what currently exists.

Methods

This short, exploratory article employs a multimodal rhetorical case study approach to examine how tactical technical communication operates as infrastructural labor within placemaking and speculative urban design. The central research question—*how does tactical technical communication enable material interventions in urban space?*—guides an analysis of the three paired case studies, each combining a communicative artifact with a corresponding built or imagined spatial transformation. These cases span a range of genres and modalities, from temporary redesigns and participatory installations to speculative prototypes, allowing for close attention to the rhetorical and material dynamics at play. A case study approach is appropriate for this exploratory research because tactical technical communication, as it relates to tactical urbanism, is inherently situated within specific material and social contexts. Examining the communicative artifacts within their specific contexts (on the street, in the community) allows for close attention to how they coordinate publics, enable the mobilization of resources, and ultimately shape material futures.

The analytical approach employed here draws on rhetorical genre analysis (Luzón, 2005; Miller, 1984) to examine each short case through three dimensions:

1. **Genre features:** the formal conventions, multimedia or textual structures, and material affordances that shape how a particular artifact can be used.
2. **Rhetorical work**: the persuasive, coordinating, and infrastructural functions that the artifact performs.
3. **Material consequences:** the ways the artifact enables, scaffolds, or catalyzes physical change in urban space.

Drawing on infrastructure studies (Read & Frith, 2022; Frith, 2019; Read, 2019; Star & Ruhleder, 1996) and spatial theory as addressed in public rhetoric (Greene, 2023; Rice, 2012), the study positions communicative artifacts as adaptive, situated responses to complex sociotechnical conditions—tools that link discourse, publics, and material environments. Following Kimball's (2006) notion of tactical technical communication, these artifacts are treated not as static texts but as generative interventions that can scaffold navigation in a sometimes hostile world.

Defining the Terrain: Tactical Technical Communication and Tactical Urbanism as Infrastructural Work

Tactical Urbanism

Tactical urbanism refers to low-cost, temporary, and often grassroots interventions that seek to improve public space, test policy changes, or prototype new modes of urban life. Coined and popularized by Mike Lydon and the Street Plans Collaborative, the term has been used to describe a range of practices from pop-up parks and guerrilla gardening to temporary bike lanes and reconfigured intersections (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). These interventions are typically small in scale but high in symbolic value, designed to invite public participation and demonstrate alternative uses of space within existing infrastructural or regulatory constraints. They create "tactile proposals for change instead of plans or computer-generated renderings that remain abstract" (Lydon & Garcia, 2015, p. 6).

Tactical urbanism is both a design strategy and a civic tactic. It operates in the "meanwhile," the space between imagination and formal implementation, offering citizens and designers a way to prototype futures without waiting for top-down approval from municipal officials. Some interventions take the form of city-sanctioned pilot projects, while others are resolutely DIY. In one

neighborhood, residents may transform a vacant lot into a pop-up park using shipping pallets, potted plants, and folding chairs. In another, frustrated cyclists may paint an unauthorized bike lane in the middle of the night to draw attention to a dangerous stretch of road.

While many projects are short-term by design, their underlying goal is often systemic: to shift public perception, influence policy, or build momentum for more permanent transformation (Jiménez, 2014; Iveson, 2013). This iterative, adaptive logic positions tactical urbanism as a kind of speculative infrastructure, a material argument for what a street, a plaza, or a neighborhood could become. As speculative infrastructure, these interventions operate not as polished solutions but as prototypes of possibility, staging material rehearsals that allow publics and policymakers to test, discuss, and imagine alternative systems before formal implementation.

Though sometimes framed as apolitical or purely pragmatic, tactical urbanism can also serve as a subversive practice, challenging dominant narratives about who designs cities and who they are designed for. By working outside or alongside official channels, these interventions often reveal the exclusions built into public infrastructure and experiment with more just alternatives. As a result, tactical urbanism can be read not only as a design movement but as a rhetorical one, communicating alternative values, relationships, and temporalities through its form.

Tactical Technical Communication (TTC)

Tactical technical communication (TTC) might be defined as the inventive, adaptive writing practices that emerge from outside or in resistance to formal institutional systems. Rooted in the work of Kimball (2006) and influenced by de Certeau's (1984) theory of tactics, TTC focuses on the ways individuals and communities create and circulate technical knowledge when they lack institutional authority or access. Where institutional technical communication is often grounded in standardized processes and organizational control, TTC thrives in marginal or contested spaces, offering improvised solutions to immediate needs.

In these contexts, communication becomes a tool of navigation and survival. TTC includes zines, informal guides, user-generated tutorials, and crowdsourced documentation—genres that may lack official sanction but offer vital knowledge in accessible, actionable forms. TTC reflects a pragmatic ethos: getting things done with what's available. Scholars have explored these practices across a range of domains, including self-published repair manuals (Kimball, 2006), alternative instructional texts for women cyclists

(Hallenbeck, 2012), community-generated medical guidance (Alexander & Edenfield, 2021; Edenfield et al., 2019a, 2019b, Edenfield 2021), knowledge-sharing user communities (Das & Tham, 2022; McCaughey 2021), and tactical guides for digital activism (Colton et al., 2017).

What unites these diverse cases is not their content but their tactical orientation. TTC responds to constraint not by appealing to official systems, but by maneuvering within or around them. It privileges immediacy over standardization, access over authorization. Rather than designing formal systems, TTC exploits cracks in them by providing timely, situated support for action. These texts are rarely polished or comprehensive. Instead, they are partial, iterative, and often rooted in personal experience. Yet they exert real influence over how people move through technological, bureaucratic, and material landscapes.

Importantly, TTC often experiments with and remixes genre conventions. Writers working tactically frequently adopt the look and feel of institutional texts, mimicking the structure of official manuals or instructions, while infusing them with new values, voices, and publics. In this way, TTC doesn't just circulate knowledge. Rather, it remakes technical discourse to serve alternative purposes.

The Infrastructural Work of Tactical Urbanism and Tactical Technical Communication

Although tactical urbanism and tactical technical communication operate in different registers—one grounded in space and the other in discourse—they share a core function: both perform infrastructural work, the behind-the-scenes labor that keeps things running. This work often occurs outside formal systems, in moments where institutional processes fall short, move too slowly, or fail to meet public needs. In these gaps, tactical actors build (sometimes literally, sometimes rhetorically) the structures needed to support the collective life of the city.

In infrastructure studies, scholars have shown that documents can act as infrastructures in their own right: not simply conveying information, but coordinating actors, stabilizing practices, and embedding standards within systems (Littlefield, 2025a; Gallagher & Avgoustopoulos, 2023; Adams, 2022; Comi, 2022; Read & Frith, 2022; Weber, 2022). In this sense, a tactical guidebook, an instructional zine, or a community-authored signage system is not only a support text; it is part of the mechanism by which something works. Whether embedded in plywood furniture, traffic cones, or user-made code, these documents help bind people to tools, environments, and one another in ways that make action possible.

Tactical urbanism, too, operates infrastructurally. Painted bike lanes, makeshift benches, and temporary plazas rely on more than physical materials. Behind each intervention is a web of writing: outreach flyers, planning documents, social media campaigns, how-to manuals, and signage templates. These communicative artifacts enable participation, legitimize action, and distribute knowledge. They are often produced by people working without formal design credentials or agency authority. Yet they have the capacity to anchor physical change.

Crucially, both fields emphasize the tactical dimension of infrastructure. Unlike large-scale, top-down systems, tactical infrastructures are pieced together from available materials and designed for short-term use, experimentation, or visibility. They are often temporary, iterative, or disposable. But their rhetorical impact can be lasting. They demonstrate what is possible by modeling alternative arrangements and inviting others to remix.

By viewing tactical urbanism and tactical technical communication through an infrastructural lens, we can better understand how everyday acts of writing and building help sustain the collective life reflected in the built environment, especially in contexts where official infrastructures are inaccessible, inadequate, or unresponsive. In both cases, the work is often invisible, the materials provisional, and the labor distributed. But it is in these small, improvisational acts that new urban systems and new publics begin to take shape.

Case Study 1: *Tactical Urbanist's Guide to Materials and Design* and the Provo, Utah, Pedestrian and Bikeway Project

Finding: *Tactical technical communication enables tentative alignment between grassroots creativity and institutional systems, transforming instructional documents into tools for negotiation and action.*

The *Tactical Urbanist's Guide to Materials and Design*, developed by the Street Plans Collaborative, is a foundational resource within the tactical urbanism movement (2016). Presented in the form of a public, downloadable PDF, the guide blends the structure of a technical manual with the tone of an open-source toolkit. It includes detailed diagrams, cost estimates, use-case scenarios, and even recipes—for example, a washable cornstarch-based paint recipe that enables temporary street markings to be applied and removed without damaging public infrastructure. This cornstarch paint formula became a key tool in Provo, Utah, where community organizers (including myself) used it to stripe temporary bike routes, delineate roundabouts, and create colorful curb extensions on a wide road (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1. Painting the roundabout.

This case, known locally as the 300 West Pedestrian and Bikeway project, was a weekend-long tactical intervention aimed at reimagining how a car-dominated street might serve pedestrians, cyclists, and residents. While the physical materials were important, the *Tactical Urbanist's Guide* played an equally vital role in the project's rhetorical infrastructure. It served as a genre of alignment, bridging community imagination with institutional legitimacy. Volunteers used the guide's illustrations and materials tables to plan installations, while organizers cited its language and metrics to gain (temporary and limited) buy-in from city engineers. Rather than developing entirely new designs, we adapted visual templates and technical terms directly from the guide, translating its recommendations into locally specific actions.

The document's rhetorical power lies, at least partially, in its hybridity. It oscillates between the language of grassroots creativity and professional design. On one page, readers encounter playful signage strategies (pp. 72–73). On another, an analysis of street barrier selection criteria (p. 27). This dual register enables the guide to circulate widely across various audiences, including activists, planners, public works departments, and volunteers alike. In doing so, it functions as what genre theorists might describe as a boundary object: a flexible framework that supports coordination across divergent stakeholders while retaining a coherent purpose.

The guide's infrastructural work becomes most visible in what it enables. It standardizes without centralizing. It invites remixing without compromising

safety. And it makes technical knowledge available at the street level, quite literally on the pavement. In our case, the cornstarch paint recipe made the difference between a conceptual proposal and a temporary, real-world prototype. More than a set of instructions, it gave us permission to act and a shared language to explain what we were doing to intrigued neighbors.

The Provo project, which ultimately helped lead to the permanent installation of a crosswalk on a busy segment of the street, illustrates how tactical technical communication can activate new publics and reshape material environments. The intervention itself was brief, but the communicative infrastructure that enabled it continues to circulate. This case shows that tactical communication is not always about direct disruption; it often works by strategically borrowing the legitimacy of established systems to advance alternative goals. Infrastructure, in this sense, includes not just physical materials but also shared vocabularies, design logics, and scalable genres (like the manual form repurposed in the *Tactical Urbanist's Guide*) that support local action while embedding broader values of transportation justice and localized control.

Case Study 2: Wikiblock Library and Modular Civic Interventions in Akron, Ohio

Finding: *Tactical technical communication can distribute authorship by transforming residents from users of public space into co-fabricators of civic infrastructure.*

The Wikiblock Library, developed by the Better Block Foundation, is a digital archive of open-source street furniture and material infrastructure designs optimized for non-specialist community use. It allows users to download CNC (computer numerical control) cutting files for benches, kiosks, planter boxes, and other urban elements, all designed for simple fabrication with standard plywood and a local CNC router from a high school or community woodshop. These blueprints are meant to be automatically cut, assembled without nails or screws, and installed with minimal expertise. In effect, the library applies the logic of flat-pack furniture to civic design, offering communities tools to build their own public infrastructure.

More than a collection of files, the Wikiblock Library functions as a genre of distributed technical communication. Its documents embed technical expertise into a reproducible, adaptable format that can be understood and used by non-specialists. Each set of plans includes structural details, material specifications, and clear assembly instructions (with simplistic, Ikea-style illustrations), allowing users to fabricate components in schools, makerspaces, or garages. In doing so, the library supports a participatory model of design that treats everyday people not as end-users but as producers of public space.

Figure 8.2. Allen Bike Rack Assembly Manual

This participatory ethic was central to the Akron Better Block project in Ohio, where local residents and high school students used Wikiblock designs to transform a neglected street into a temporary civic plaza (Nightengale, 2016). With guidance from the documentation, participants built seating areas, kiosks, signage, and planters that created a lively, walkable environment in just a few days. The physical transformation was matched

by a rhetorical one: users moved from imagining change to building it, enacting a shift in authorship and agency.Wikiblock designs do more than instruct; they invite action. They encode an ethic of openness, remixability, and iteration. Once downloaded, the files can be customized, modified, or combined to fit local needs. By enabling this kind of flexible production, the documents themselves become infrastructural tools for civic authorship. Rather than centralizing expertise in architectural firms or city planning departments, they distribute technical power to residents, students, and volunteers.

This case demonstrates how tactical technical communication can scale community involvement by embedding infrastructural capacity within the documents themselves. The Wikiblock Library makes public space construction more accessible, but it also redefines and redistributes what counts as expertise. It shows that the work of placemaking can be widely shared and rhetorically generative, one modular bench or pedestrian island at a time.

Case Study 3: Reimagining Urban Spaces with Speculative Design AI

Finding: *Tactical technical communication can prototype civic imagination by using experimental media to spark participatory world-building.*

Unlike the previous case studies, which focus on physical interventions, this final example explores how technical communication can shape urban discourse through technology-mediated speculative design. Rather than offering concrete solutions, speculative design encourages critical reflection by asking "what if"—a question that opens the door to imagining alternative systems, values, and ways of living (Jagoda, 2023; Hoffman, 2022; Dunne & Raby, 2013). This approach aligns with a growing body of rhetorical and technical communication scholarship that treats design as a way of assembling publics, testing possibilities, and shaping affective attachments to place (Littlefield, 2024; Gries et al., 2020; Galloway & Caudwell, 2018; Le Dantec, 2016).

In 2022, I created *Reimagining Urban Spaces with DALL-E 2,* a visual rhetoric prompt book developed through my early experiments with one of the first publicly available AI image generators. The book guides users through a simple but provocative process: upload a photo of a city space, erase part of it, and write speculative prompts to imagine what else might belong there. My goal was not to produce polished plans, but to spark conversations and help people visualize futures that might otherwise remain abstract or politically out of reach (Littlefield, 2025b).

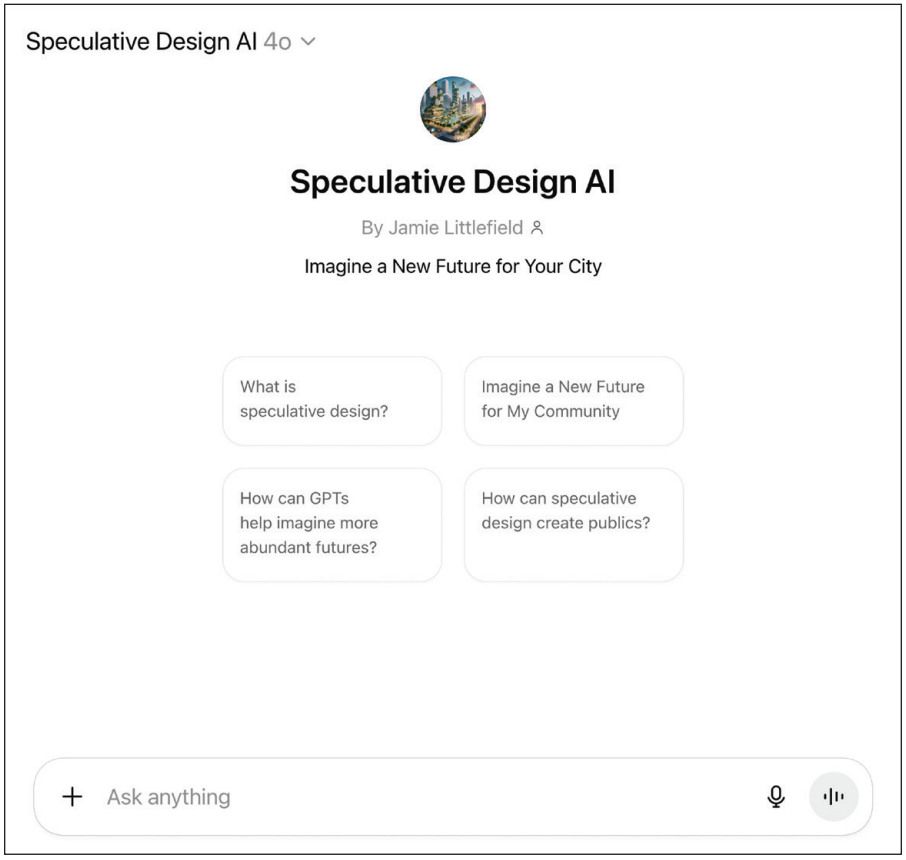

Figure 8.3. Speculative design AI interface

To expand on this, I later developed a custom GPT-powered bot called Speculative Design AI (Figure 8.3). Users describe a place they care about, share concerns or hopes for it, and then co-create speculative prompts and images. The tool includes follow-up questions to encourage sustained reflection and dialogue. Designed for accessibility, it lowers the barrier for people without formal design backgrounds to engage in envisioning and discussing the future of their environments. For example, when asked to help the user imagine a "more walkable" downtown Dallas, TX, the bot asks clarifying questions such as:

> **What specific concerns do you have about walkability in Downtown today?**
>
> (Examples: dangerous intersections, lack of trees/shade, poor public transit integration, empty sidewalks at night, too many surface parking lots.)

> **What hopes or dreams do you have for the future of walkability there?**
>
> (Examples: turning streets into pedestrian plazas, adding cooling infrastructure, bringing more housing into the core, pop-up gardens, artist-designed crosswalks.)
>
> **What values should this future prioritize?**
>
> (Examples: climate resilience, public safety, community joy, equity in mobility, cultural expression.) (Speculative Design AI GPT, 2025).

After prompting the user to consider their values and intentions for the specific place, the bot creates a written description of the co-created design and generates an accompanying visual. It then invites further discussion and feedback from the user.

These tools have been accessed by over a thousand beta users online. In one example, I used the prompt book to generate visual alternatives for a vacant lot across from my home—a plaza, a garden, and a mid-rise housing development. These images became a starting point for neighborhood conversations. The goal was never to finalize a design but to activate imagination, create space for public dreaming, and shift the narrative around what is possible.

While the *Tactical Urbanist's Guide* and Wikiblock Library offer templates for building physical infrastructure, these AI-based tools offer early prototypes for ways we might envision change in the future. They operate tactically by inviting remixing, fostering speculation, and distributing the work of civic imagination amongst non-experts. In this way, speculative design expands what technical communication can do and who it can empower, especially at the level of cities and urban systems.

Conclusion

This exploratory article has considered how tactical technical communication and tactical urbanism operate as intertwined forms of infrastructural labor, enabling small-scale interventions that shape the built environment and public imagination. Through three case studies—a city street redesign inspired by a tactical guidebook, a modular urban intervention supported by open-source fabrication files, and a speculative AI project designed to engage communities in future visioning—I have shown how tactical communicative artifacts can do more than inform. They can organize participation, coordinate material change, and create new publics capable of imagining and enacting alternative futures. These practices challenge narrow definitions of technical

communication by highlighting its role not only in documenting systems, but in designing and testing them. They also invite us to reconsider the boundaries of the field, expanding our understanding of what counts as technical or infrastructural work.

At the same time, my early approach is partial and incomplete, intended more as an introductory bridge between two disciplines than a full examination of tactical work and civic change. Each short case here offers a situated glimpse into how communication scaffolds urban experimentation, but broader research is needed to understand how these grassroots infrastructures scale (or fail to scale) across context and location. Questions remain about how urban practices persist once their temporary forms dissolve and how the infrastructural labor behind them can be recognized and sustained.

Even with these limitations, the cases here point to an opportunity for the field. Moving forward, technical communicators are well-positioned to partner with tactical urbanists who are already doing the work of reimagining cities. We bring skills in public-facing writing, participatory design, and communicative infrastructure that can help build publics and support the longer-term viability of material interventions. In practice, such collaborations might involve co-developing project guides that double as public engagement material, creating open-source templates for street interventions, developing speculative technical tools, or designing evaluation reports that translate the outcomes of temporary projects into language that city officials could act on. Technical communicators might also help civic groups frame their interventions through visual or narrative storytelling that attracts volunteers and local press. In turn, tactical urbanists can offer real-world test sites that allow technical communicators to see how their seemingly static texts take on active, infrastructural life within the built environment. By collaborating across disciplines, we can help make space, not just for better documents, but for better material futures.

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