

# Urban Stage 2014: Navigating relationships during a collaboration between local businesses, nonprofits, a large university, and a mid-sized city

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## ABSTRACT

The Urban Stage was constructed as a temporary urbanism project to demonstrate environmental, cultural, economic and social sustainability in an urban environment. One block of Avenue J in downtown Lubbock, Texas was constructed and activated between October 30 and November 7, 2014. This paper will focus on the collaboration and decision making processes between the City of Lubbock, Texas Tech University, and community organizations that enabled this project to take place. The collaborative process between these diverse entities was inherently complex by virtue of the existing organizational structures and complicated further by bureaucratic inertia, the bureaucratic avoidance of responsibility. Leadership actions at various levels of organizational structure were required in order to overcome this bureaucratic inertia and install the Urban Stage.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, Decision making, Bureaucratic Inertia, Leadership, Temporary Urbanism, Pink Noise

## INTRODUCTION: UBAN TECH AND THE URBAN STAGE 2014 PROJECT

The Urban Stage project began in August of 2013 as an initiative of Urban Tech, the downtown studio for the Texas Tech College of Architecture. Urban Tech is a place for architecture students to engage with the city and produce ideas and information for public exhibition and civic advocacy. This studio makes clear the public benefits of architecture, promotes the creation of new knowledge, and serves as a laboratory for ethical professional behavior where community needs supersede private agendas.

Urban Stage was conceived as an attempt to demonstrate the possibilities of a revitalized downtown Lubbock to the greater Lubbock community itself. Downtown

Lubbock can currently be categorized as one of Berger's drosscapes. In a drosscape, "the landscape of the contemporary horizontal city is no longer a place making or a condensing medium. Instead it is fragmented and chaotically spread, escaping wholeness, objectivity and public consciousness" (209) [1]. Within this fragmented drosscape, Berger further argues that "the challenge for designers is...to integrate in the inevitable dross into more flexible aesthetic and design strategies" (203) [2]. Urban Tech has been involved in urban redevelopment since it opened its current downtown location in 2010. After many well-received public presentations about theoretical changes to improve downtown, the Urban Tech staff decided to launch the Urban Stage as an act of temporary urbanism. Figure 1, below, was taken during Oktoberfest, an event held on the Urban Stage, and provides an example of the activated Avenue J.



**Figure 1: Urban Stage street set, October 2014. Architectural Insertions designed and built by the Texas Tech Digital Design and Fabrication Graduate Studio taught by Christian Pongratz and Dustin White. Photo by Mike West, Texas Tech College of Architecture.**

Temporary Urbanism allows urban designers to showcase transformations, using existing spaces as a stage setting for envisioning change. Temporary Urbanism, according to Thomas and Loew, has the potential to "reshape space for changing needs, encourage the use of unoccupied places in innovative ways, and create a vibrant street

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culture [that] improves the economic competitiveness of a city.” [3] Urban Stage 2014 drew on temporary urbanism scholarship from a wide variety of subfields including research on accessible cities and health [4; 5], sustainable mixed use developments [6], and research into the benefits of a collaborative process between city organizations and the public—a process Charles Marohn argues is strongest when it begins with grassroots discussions that filter up from citizens rather than being imposed from above [7]. In addition to these scholarly influences, the Urban Stage project followed the principles of environmental health and guidelines from the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) [8] and the Congress of New Urbanism [9].

Urban Stage 2014 used one block of Avenue J in downtown Lubbock as its setting. For the ten days of Urban Stage, this block of Avenue J, part of downtown Lubbock’s larger drosscape, served as an active downtown space that illustrated downtown Lubbock’s environmental, cultural, economic, and social sustainability. Figure 2 shows this section of Avenue J as well as the accompanying alleyway that was also part of Urban Stage.



**Figure 2: Avenue J Drosscape, Lubbock, TX. Photos by Denny Mingus, Texas Tech College of Architecture**

This paper will discuss the civic, community, and university stakeholders Urban Tech collaborated with in its quest to install the Urban Stage 2014 on Avenue J. The initial academic, civic, and community groups involved in the project included faculty from several colleges and university entities, upper level administrators from Texas Tech University, and a number of nonprofit and for-profit local organizations. Though various parties within these institutions shifted roles throughout the roughly 15 month project, these four types of organizations remained a part of the collaborative process that created the Urban Stage. The Urban Stage project was planned and executed across five discreet phases, each of which required intense collaboration, negotiation of disciplinary boundaries, and moments of leadership

where one group or individual took decisive action within a complex system to move the project closer to completion. Due to the intense amount of collaboration in the project, these leadership moments appear unpredictably among collaborating parties throughout our project, a progression of events that Dooley and Van de Ven’s [10] term “pink noise” because the “casual factors act interdependently, in a nonlinear fashion” (359).

According to Van de Ven, Ganco, and Hinings, [11] Empirical Complexity theory tries to fit a pattern to existing events based on the way a number of causal factors interact (412). It’s fairly difficult to find “nonlinear dynamic models” (Van de Ven, Ganco, and Hinings, 412)[12] to fit organizational patterns of interaction and even more difficult to find models for mapping out the way a series of complicated, hierarchical organizations collaborate on a project. Anderson [13] similarly points to the way “complex systems resist simple reductionist analysis because interconnections and feedback loops [make it impossible to] study other [subsystems] in isolation” (217). In short, components of a complex system are always shifting and changing as they interact with other parts of the system. Despite its clear benefits as a hierarchical structuring tool for explaining interactions within large projects, empirical systems theory can’t fully equate for these interactive, sometimes unpredictable components that arise within a system with so many factors and contributing agencies as we dealt with during the Urban Stage planning process.

## **FIVE DISTINCT PHASES**

In an effort to map these complex interactions, we have broken down the planning process into five distinct phases. Phase one of the project involved gathering initial support for the project from a variety of collaborators, creating mock-up images to showcase what the project might look like, and revising these images and ideas based on feedback from the participating entities. This initial phase helped lay out some of the key supporters for the project and also alerted the team to some possible roadblocks including the inability of supporting individuals and entities to commit time and resources. Phase two discusses the progress and initial setbacks the project faced during its infancy. Phase three began when the Urban Stage project attempted to secure financial backing and key administrative support. During this stage, the project almost died due to a combination of bureaucratic inertia, an uncertainty about how to communicate across institutions, and an inability to find a single entity willing to take lead responsibility for the

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project. Phase four deals with a period of critical administrative scrutiny. Phase five details how several crucial instances of leadership helped all of the participants overcome bureaucratic inertia. This article takes the reader through each of these phases, noting constraints, benefits, and moments of leadership throughout the process. To illustrate this process of participation, a series of diagrams present all of the participating parties and use bolding to indicate which of these entities are active during each phase.

### PHASE ONE: GRAND IDEAS

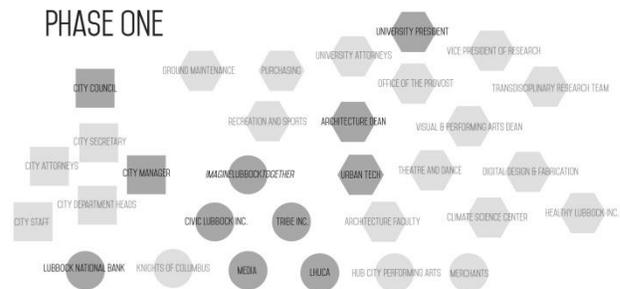
Urban Tech, having developed and presented publically about sustainable urban design concepts for Avenue J, the north-south axis in downtown Lubbock, over a period of three years, needed a way to build support for its urban design concepts. Urban Stage was inspired by temporary urbanism's ability to reshape space with cultural and economic benefits as Thomas and Lowe discuss [14], as well as successful installation events across the country. Early interest in the project from *imagineLubbocktogether*, a local urban revitalization effort produced by the city's Chamber of Commerce, City Council members, University departments, and the community crystallized during a design charrette lead by Bruce Rodgers of Tribe, Inc., a former student in the College of Architecture at Texas Tech University (TTU). Rodgers, known for designing the set for the last nine Super Bowl half time shows, offered high profile exposure for the temporary installation known as the Urban Stage.



**Figure 3: Design Charrette Concept Rendering, by Bruce Rodgers, Tribe, Inc. October 2013.**

Images from the design charrette were featured in the local media, including a write up in the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal* [15], and these images formed the core of public presentations designed to build support for the demonstration project. City Manager James Loomis

informed City Department Heads to “make this happen” following such a presentation. Civic Lubbock, Inc. awarded the project a \$15,000 grant for entertainment and marketing. In the fall of 2013, the feelings surrounding the Urban Stage project were euphoric. Figure 4 illustrates the various roles each of these contributors played during phase one.



**Figure 4: Phase One contributors included the City Council, City Manager, Lubbock National Bank, the College of Architecture, and the University President. Chart by Juanraymon Rubio, Urban Tech.**

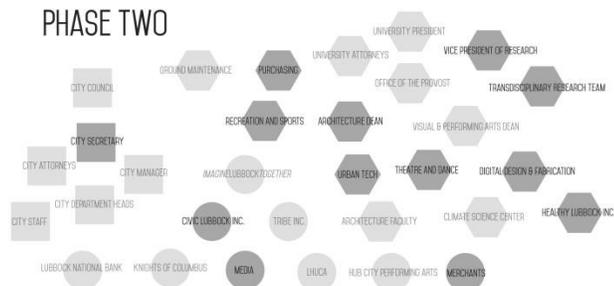
### PHASE TWO: PRESSURES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE PRESENT TIME

The new year quickly saw euphoria turn into serious questioning of the viability and practically implementing the Urban Stage. Meetings with the College of Architecture faculty were largely unproductive as the faculty viewed the project through the lens of preexisting scholarly agendas. *imagineLubbocktogether*, seen as a key organization in building corporate and business support, found themselves in a period of self-reflection and lacked the ability to participate in a meaningful way. The President's office within TTU demanded details in regard to budget and responsibilities. The Urban Stage appeared to be an idea without legs. What was to be initially a late spring event moved to the Fall 2014.

Several other accomplishments during this phase included continued support from the Lubbock community, a research grant from TTU, and public promotion of the upcoming Urban Stage. Event planning and set design continued within the parameters of previously secured funding and commitments. Urban Stage researchers Annette Boles, Texas Tech (TTU) Health Science Center, Adam Cohen, TTU Health, Exercise and Sports Science and David Driskill, Urban Tech were named a TTU Transdisciplinary Research Team and awarded \$4,000 toward Urban Stage research. In addition, the primary exhibition for the First Friday Art

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Trail in April 2014 at Urban Tech promoted the upcoming Urban Stage.



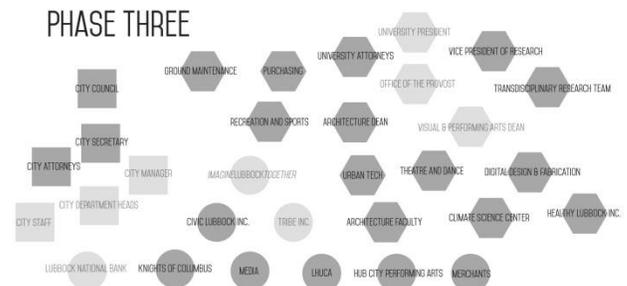
**Figure 5: Phase Two contributors included the City Secretary, Civic Lubbock Inc., the Dean of the College of Architecture, Healthy Lubbock, Tech Sports and Recreation, Tech Theatre and Dance and local media and merchants. Chart by Juanraymon Rubio, Urban Tech.**

### PHASE THREE: BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA

Spring 2014 drew to a close with attorneys from the University and the City each avoiding any responsibility from the temporary installation known as the Urban Stage. The key debate centered on who would purchase event insurance and who would take out the necessary permits for a Street Use license. Production of the Urban Stage continued as a headlining band was signed for Oktoberfest, one of primary events for Urban Stage. In addition, the Knights of Columbus agreed to be the primary beverage vendor Oktoberfest, one of the Urban Stage's key events. Bicycle and running events were planned through TTU Recreation Sports, and TTU Theater and Dance hired Hub City Performing Arts, a company run by TTU Theater faculty Bob and Paula Chandra, to organize the events "Broadway and Gourmet on Avenue J" and a "Fairytale Breakfast." The Digital Design & Fabrication Group with the College of Architecture took the lead in designing a producing the set for the Urban Stage, including a plan for architectural insertions that provided a dining platform and planters for landscaping the street.

Production of the set and booking entertainment moved forward while the key entities for the event found themselves in a bureaucratic stalemate. Bureaucratic inertia is often "compounded as policy is passed down the chain of command" (Congleton 424) [16]. In the project's case, TTU and the city both had clear policies about how to take responsibility when interacting with other major entities. When interacting with other groups, the city requires permits, while the university uses contracts. Both of these binding documents require the

other party to assume responsibility. These existing policies created an environment that discouraged collaboration. Because neither entity was willing to assume responsibility, crucial documents like the Street Use License Forms were being completed without knowing who would sign on as the responsible party. The large number of parties illuminated in Figure 6 helps illustrate the scope and complexity of this stage.



**Figure 6: Phase Three contributors included the City Council, City Secretary, City Attorneys, the local Knights of Columbus, Civic Lubbock Inc., Architecture Faculty, Hub City Performing Arts, and the Climate Science Center. Chart by Juanraymon Rubio, Urban Tech.**

### PHASE FOUR: SUMMER ADMINISTRATIVE SCRUTINY

Summers present unique challenges to continuity within a University setting. The College of Architecture sends faculty with approximately 110 students aboard each summer for international studies programs. TTU Theater and Dance are off to various summer stage productions and researchers travel and/or seek solitude to write. Various community organizations are involved in summer vacations and time with family. University administrators use this time to plan and prepare for the next academic year. For Urban Tech and the Urban Stage it was a time of administrative scrutiny. The Director of Risk Management for the University, Attorney for Purchasing, and Chief Financial Officer for the University each were engaged in reviewing and advising the President on the Urban Stage. University Communicating and Marketing became familiar with the proposed demonstration project. After checking with these parties, the President issued an ultimatum requiring proof of financial solvency and responsible parties as reviewed by the COF by July 31, 2014 as a condition of approval for the Urban Stage.

Complicating the financial situation, Institutional Advancement and Development issued a statement



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negotiating various systems, resolved itself in an unpredictable fashion. The nonlinear, unpredictable way the situation resolved itself—the adoption of responsibility from one of a series of equals to ensure the project’s survival—owes more to the pink noise orientation of the organizational hierarchy at play. Nested complex systems certainly don’t always require an unpredictable solution to be resolved; however, pink noise’s twin concepts of reliance on others and unpredictable interactions as parties rely on each other provide a useful frame for understanding the way co-dependent organizations, each with their own nested systems of demands and priorities, can achieve successful outcomes when the solutions aren’t consistently apparent at the outset of a project. The planning process behind Urban Stage represents a case study about necessary organizational collaboration, bureaucratic communications, and the functionality of nonlinear, nested complex systems that demand flexible responses to solve practical problems

## OUTCOMES



**Figure 9: An outdoor concert on the Urban Stage Pocket Park, October 2014. Photo by Denny Mingus, Texas Tech College of Architecture.**

The City of Lubbock, community organizations and businesses, and TTU reaped benefits from the 10 days of collaborative events. Extensive coverage of the Urban Stage by the news media promoted the Central Business District as a valid node in the redevelopment of downtown Lubbock [18]. The cultural arts communities received a boost since Urban Stage events were located at the nexus of a newly drawn, but intensely active district. Downtown businesses saw an immediate surge in sales and an expanded client base as previously empty store fronts were filled both with popup and permanent businesses. The events on Avenue J were so successful that property owners received solicitations to sell their property from developers. TTU as a whole was presented

as an active player in the redeveloped of downtown Lubbock, a priority since TTU’s campus is very close to the downtown area. Students in architecture, theater and dance, restaurant, hotel and institutional management, and recreational sports engaged the community directly in meaningful ways, meetings TTU service learning goals. The agenda for the TTU Transdisciplinary Research Team was moved forward, as Dr. Jenni Vanos was able to document climate data reflecting the transformation from a hard surface to green environment, and measure public tolerance of the immediate weather situations. Dr. Adam Cohen developed the tools to measure cognitive connection by participants in activities design to link downtown Lubbock to the campus and to the adjacent canyon lakes system. Healthy Lubbock, Inc., part of the TTU Health Science Center, was able to illustrate the healthy aspects of the Urban Stage with informational bits mounted throughout the site. Urban design goals successfully demonstrated included supporting places for sidewalk dining in lieu of street parking and the conversion of alleys into pocket parks. Pocket parks and other changes to the landscaping softened the environment. The greatest success, according to Dean Andrew Vernooy, College of Architecture, was the process of collaboration between city, community and university. While some of the Urban Stage events will continue on as community events promoted by various community organizations, the Urban Stage 2014 project demonstrated the potential of collaboration to successfully negotiate complex systems across multiple institutions.

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