DIY Urbanism: changing communities, one piece of artwork at a time.

By: Kim Scaff

In today’s society, where the economic crisis has many people’s hopes and dreams derailed, there is a group of people that many would compare to superheroes. These people, also known as do-it-yourself urbanists, develop ways to recreate areas within cities to allow for better living environments.

There are several different types of urbanism including: system urbanism, green urbanism, traditional urbanism, etc. However, the one that seems to be popping up in cities all over the country is DIY or Do-It-Yourself Urbanism. This type of urbanism consists typically of small groups of people who alter public spaces and create more livable environments for the common good. A few examples of common DIY urbanism are: dumpster pools, sit-ins, and guerilla gardeners. Even our hometown city of Cincinnati partakes in DIY urbanism.

Last November the Niehoff Urban Studio hosted an event highlighting DIY urbanism. There were various speakers from the director of Niehoff Urban Studio and the Community Design Center Frank Russell, to different DIY urbanism groups, including: Pop Shops, The Bombshells, Future Blooms, Artworks, and the Par Projects.

First among the groups to present, was the Pop Shop group. This group does exactly as the name states; they “pop” up shop in vacant storefronts in the Over the Rhine district here in Cincinnati. The final Friday of every month, this group sets up shop in a new storefront and local vendors sell their creations. Pop Shops are a unique and “green”
way to shop while supporting your community at the same time. The main purpose of Pop Shops is to attract people to lease the buildings where the Pop Shops are taking place. Thus, boosting the communities of Cincinnati.

If you take a glimpse at the Bombshells homepage, you will see that the Bombshells are a group of women who “juxtapose vandalism with the non-threatening nature of fibers.” The Bombshells are an example of guerrilla DIY urbanism. The Bombshell ladies dress up in blonde wigs and work to cover various objects in the Cincinnati area with yarn while many of us are sleeping. Previous projects include the covering of a Metro bus, the Cincinnati Red’s statues, as well as a giant banner that hung from a storefront in downtown Cincinnati.

Future Blooms is a group that blossomed from Cincinnati’s Neighborhood Enhancement Program, which seeks to improve the visual appeal of various cities and neighborhoods in Cincinnati. The vital goal of Future Blooms is to repair and restore blighted communities and in doing so, reduce crime. One particular project that the Future Blooms group completed was two old shops on Vine Street that had caught fire. They replaced the windows with wood and painted windows on the wood, it’s shocking to see the difference that a few cans of paint and some wood can do for a building, more less a community.

Another DIY urbanism group that presented at the event was Artworks. This particular organization also creates art that invigorates the Cincinnati community, but does it in a slightly different way. Artworks, combines students, artists, and community members of all ages, with opportunities in the arts. One event, in particular, that Artworks presented was the Midpoint Midway Box Truck Carnival. This wasn’t your ordinary
carnival, instead of clowns and rides, this carnival took place inside of 10 different box trucks. The box trucks included everything from a movie theater, to putt-putt golf, and even a lollipop shop for the little ones.

One of the last groups to present that evening was parProjects. This group works with local artists, businesses, and organizations to bring communities together with creative projects. At the moment parProjects is raising money to build a “new generation of creative center for the arts.” This building will be created using recycled materials such as shipping containers that tend to be more “green” and energy efficient.

Altogether DIY urbanism is quite the buzz these days. By lessening crime and recreating communities in the process, these groups and organizations are transforming cities one work of art at a time. Each group that presented that evening had a unique plan of shaping the future of Cincinnati, plans that if carried out could radically change the city.

You can view recent projects and other information regarding the Community Design Center and the Niehoff Studio at www.uc.edu/cdc

Speakers included:
Tamia Stinson- Pop Shops
Pam Kravetz- Bombers
Catherine Richards- Future Blooms
Tamara Haravy- Artworks
Jonathan Sears- Par Project

Respondents:
Rebecca Williamson (architect and UC professor)
Vincent Sansalone (artist, architect, and UC Professor.)