

Guerrilla Ingenuity:

Building Cultural Connections through Creative Acts of Socially Responsive Design

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“The duty of every revolutionary is to make a revolution.”

Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, 3.

In the summer of 2006, eleven design students traveled to a small town in Romania to design and build a playground for the children of abused and at-risk mothers. In the four weeks that would follow, the challenges posed by this seemingly simple project would prompt the students, who are used to more abstract projects with practically unlimited budgets, to invent a process of design that traded traditional studio techniques for methodologies that permitted more fluidity, mobility, and improvisation.

The flexibility offered by this design methodology enabled the students to successfully navigate the challenges of working within a foreign context and radically expand the scope of the project, without increasing the budget or timeframe. In the process, the team created more than a project that exceeded the demands of the client. They established a compelling proof to the value of their unique methodology.

Properly evolved, this valuable precedent has the potential to offer the designer a more expedient way of engaging the unique potentials offered by the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary design practice. To succeed within this dynamic, the designer must work to not only incorporate current methodologies and technologies, but to rigorously seek out opportunities within foreign contexts, actively generate innovative approaches based upon previously untapped markets and historically external disciplines, and proactively offer services to emerging sectors, industries and peoples.

In short, the designer must think less like a soldier and more like a guerrilla.ⁱ

To illustrate these principals, this paper will pair the insight of visionaries such as John Dewey and Che Guevara with a series of design-build projects completed by students working with the International Design Clinic (IDC) – a registered nonprofit organization that empowers students of design to use their unique talents to help communities in need throughout the world. The resulting dialogue between activist, educator, guerrilla and designer, although still in its infancy, will offer a compelling glimpse into the value of guerrilla design within the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary design practice.

Stage I: See [Connecting Beliefs]

“... at first, the relative weakness of the guerrilla movement is such that it must work only to settle in the terrain, establishing connections with the populace and reinforcing the places that will possibly become its base of support.”

Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare – A Method*, from *The Guerrilla Reader*, 208.

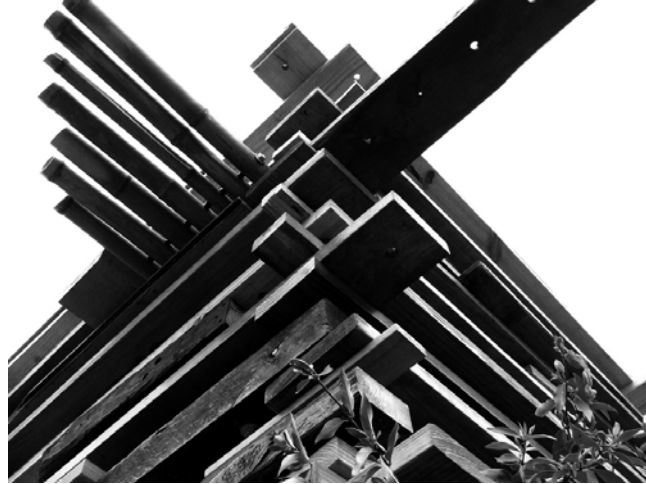
Most guerrilla movements start as a whisper: a small group of disenfranchised people gather together to discuss their discontent or a few college students begin to distribute leaflets that question the status quo. If viewed as isolated activities, these events are of little apparent consequence; their impact is safely masked by their diminutive size and limited scope. On the other hand, if these actions are viewed collectively, as steps in a much larger movement, they quickly gain significance, becoming important catalysts that build popular support and pave the way for more obvious forms of opposition.

However, none of this will occur if the movement fails to gain popular support. This fact is a central truth of any counter-culture movement. To succeed, the actions initially undertaken by the guerrilla must be dedicated toward building popular support by creating an approach that is more righteous and expedient than that offered by the system they wish to oppose. Although there are many ways to realize this ambition, the most efficient is to base the beliefs of the movement on those of the people who will be asked to form its base. Properly articulated, this shared system of beliefs can begin to unite the populace to the movement, increasing the support structure for the guerrilla and somewhat mitigating the fact that the guerrilla's adversary is generally much larger and better equipped. For this reason, in the mind of the guerrilla, righteousness usurps armament.ⁱⁱ

At the same time, the movement must work diligently to make these connections obvious to the people. After all, the justice or expediency of one's stand matters little if it is not publicized. Thus, to create a viable alternative the aforementioned system of beliefs needs to be activated by both a moral and tactical superiority. Without the former, the actions of the movement will most likely be popularly dismissed as the isolated and self-serving acts of bandits or terrorists. Without the latter, the movement will atrophy long before their message has taken root.

In light of these imperatives, the actions of the guerrilla fighter typically prioritize long-term survival over short-term gain. The acts of the guerrilla often have as much to do with defining the tactics and beliefs of the movement as they do with their direct consequence. To truly understand the impact of these activities, one must view the actions of the guerrilla fighter less as a fixed set of events and more as a prolonged set of experiments through which the guerrilla learns more about themselves, their adversary and their shared terrain. Although not as stable as the mindset adopted by many military operations, the guerrilla's commitment to an evolving process allows their movement to be incredibly nimble, able to easily fold in the lessons learned through previous experience or quickly adapt their tactics to changing circumstance.

So that my students might be similarly prepared to take advantage of future opportunities, I create projects that cannot be completed using memorized norms and challenge participating students to uncover new opportunities within themselves and their art. For example, in the spring semester of 2006, a team of architecture, interior design, and industrial design students were invited to design and build a playhouse to benefit a local charity. The challenges posed by this seemingly simple project would prompt the students, who are used to more abstract projects – often with practically limitless budgets, to trade the segmented design approach of traditional practice for one that permitted much more fluidity. To point, at the start of the project the students decided to minimize the construction costs so that the money donated for supplies could be given to the group sponsoring the event. In order to realize this ambition, the students needed to find a material that was free and readily available, create a method of working with this material that would answer the demands of the project, and execute their design – all within six weeks. These multiple demands not only rendered traditional methods of working obsolete, but placed enormous pressure upon any potential solution – resulting in weeks of failed attempts. Not until the end of the third week of the project did the students locate an acceptable material: hundreds of small scraps of dimensional lumber that had been thrown away by local lumberyards. While collecting these materials over the next week, the students played with their new material to see what it offered. After many failed iterations, the students finally landed on a response that not only took into account the unique properties of the found material, but to do so in a way that would allow the construction to take place in an extremely short amount of time. The ingenious method of joining thereby created enabled the students to construct their playhouse with 60% salvaged lumber in just over five days. The resulting work not only raised around \$7000 for a local charity that helps grieving children, but it has since been donated to a group that shelters battered women and abused children.



Although small in scope and scale, this project represents something much larger. It is the first step in a movement designed to offer a new paradigm of practice. As such, the most compelling part of this work is its ability to prepare designers to radically expand the reach of their profession generally. The reason: the methodology deployed in this work is hard-wired to the burgeoning age of information. Its fluid nature and direct engagement to the processes of making are ideally situated to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this milieu. As such, this project does much more than create a great product for a worthy nonprofit – it creates a lens through which the students and designers might rethink the professional and educational systems that currently govern their practice.

Stage II: Think [Connecting Ambitions]

“It is likewise impossible to win victory in a people’s war without taking full account of the enemy tactically and without examining the concrete conditions, without being prudent and giving great attention to the study of the art of struggle and without adopting appropriate forms of struggle in the concrete practice of the revolution in each country and with regard to each concrete problem of struggle.”

Lin Piao, *Encircling the Cities of the World*, from *The Guerrilla Reader*, 198.

Once the movement’s belief system has been connected to those held by the people, the guerrilla begins to intensify this relationship by providing opportunities for the people to identify with their struggle. To accomplish this, the counterculture warrior will use the knowledge already gained to create actions that will ensure the maximum reprisal without actually placing the movement at any great risk. If properly designed, these events will allow the movement to limit the risk of failure, so as not to jeopardize the confidence of the people, while simultaneously exposing the violence of the regime. This will not only demonstrate the inadequacies of the causes opposed by the movement, but serve to reaffirm the righteousness of those they support. As these actions increase in scale and impact, the people begin to identify with not only the beliefs of the movement, but its ambitions as well. If not compromised through actions that place the people at risk, the guerrilla’s struggle will eventually become the people’s struggle.ⁱⁱⁱ

Unfortunately for the guerrilla fighter, this task is made difficult by the fact that these beliefs and ambitions are typically subject to the ever-shifting conditions posed by the social, economic, or political climate – factors which can be extremely volatile. To quote revolutionary Che Guevara, “If the military situation will be difficult at first, the political will be no less ticklish. And if one single military error can liquidate the guerrilla movement, a political error can stop its development for long periods.”^{iv} To overcome these difficulties, the guerrilla must work to recast the field of battle in a manner that emphasizes their assets, while limiting the impact of those held by their adversary.

In many ways, the landscape of contemporary design practice offers a similar field of inquiry. Within this dynamic, knowing the facts of one's field is no guarantee of success, for the facts of today will inevitably become the trivia of tomorrow. Instead, designers must be empowered to move beyond the information presented by their academic and professional context and invent new opportunities. Indirectly, renowned author and thinker John Dewey addresses this imperative by writing "Information is knowledge which is merely acquired and stored up; wisdom is knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life."^v In light of these observations, the leaders of tomorrow will be those who are not only able to take advantage of the innovations, technologies, and partnerships offered by others, but are equipped to uncover or create these opportunities themselves.



In order to train my students to operate well in this manner, I compel them to assume an active stance within their education – an imperative which was clearly demonstrated when I took a team of students to Oradea, Romania, to design and build a playground for the children of at-risk mothers. Within the rigors of this foreign context, the students were prevented from making a direct translation of the lessons learned the previous spring and relying upon an innate body of knowledge. Instead, they had to approach the project without preconception, discover what their new context offered, and improvise a response based on this knowledge.

For example, to prepare for their experience overseas, the team worked diligently before leaving to uncover a method of working with commonly discarded materials. Although admirable, this work was severely limited by the fact that it was created using an assumed context – a fact which did not become clear until the team arrived in Oradea and discovered that the Romanian culture, having endured years of poverty, discarded little that might be of later use. This made it virtually impossible for the team to find scraps, even in the smallest quantities. Sensibly, the students quickly abandoned their initial stand and worked to create a new method of working.

This new methodology began with reconnaissance. Instead of operating in a vacuum by assuming a context or attempting to operating in isolation, the team spent the first few days developing partnerships with those who knew more. Through this loose network of Romanian citizens, craftspeople and businesses, the team discovered that a local construction site had excess topsoil that they would give to the team for the cost of transport. Having no idea how this material would be used in the design response, the team nevertheless jumped at the opportunity to directly engage an accessible material and asked to have as much topsoil as possible. The piles of dirt that resulted eventually become the cornerstone for the design response, giving birth to an elaborate play landscape for the children served by the client. More importantly, it established a new method of working for the team. Rather than design for scrap (as assumed), the team would dedicate their efforts to developing partnerships that would allow them to uncover accessible materials and

tectonics. Then, as the trucks delivering rocks, pebbles, or broken bits of concrete rumbled to the site, the team would work with each other to find out ways to use their new-found treasures to create the environment requested by the client. Although somewhat presumptuous (generally speaking, the team had no idea how they were going to use the materials prior to their arrival) and inefficient (as the design shifted to accommodate previously unknown materials), this methodology proved to be quite successful, allowing the team to complete not only the play area requested by the client, but a massive overhaul of the entire site.

Yet none of this would have been possible if the students had been chained to assumed norms or established patterns of knowing. The students entered Romania thinking that the root of their design response would be found in reclaimed materials, only to find that their ambition, although noble, was redundant within a culture of little waste. In response, they amended their position in light of previously unknown circumstances and found value within the most common materials. The project born of this shift is much more than a proclamation of the elegance held by even the most common materials; it is a testimony to the worth of fluid and improvisational thought and a compelling proof to the value of guerrilla design.

Stage III: Make [Connecting Talents]

“Faced with the general superiority of the enemy, the plan is to find the tactical form of achieving a relative superiority at a selected point, whether it be to concentrate more effectives than the enemy, or to assure an advantage in making use of the terrain, thus upsetting the balance of forces. Under these conditions, a tactical victory is assured. If the relative superiority is not clear, it is preferable not to act. Combat that will not lead to victory should not be carried out, as long as the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ can be chosen.”

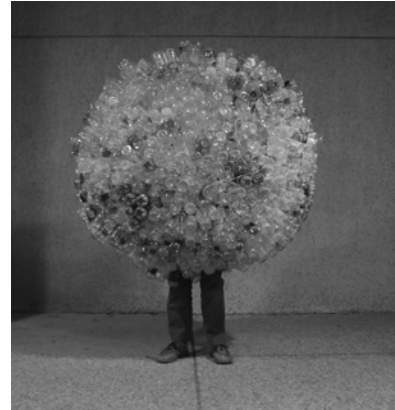
Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare – A Method*, from *The Guerrilla Reader*, 209.

The people’s movement, having established a connection between themselves and the beliefs and ambitions of the general populace, now moves to empower others to take on an active role within the struggle. Starting with simple tasks that require minimal skill and risk, providing information or holding weaponry, and gradually moving to more complex operations, the guerrilla equips the populace to gradually escalate their role in the movement. If not subverted, this increased investment will eventually result in the populace assuming the role of guerrilla fighter.

This trajectory will reach this end unless the costs incurred through continued involvement become too great for the people to bear. Thus, the guerrilla is very careful to create controlled levels of involvement and not allow any volunteer to take on actions that exceed their personal capabilities. If the guerrilla fails in this regard, not only will their action likely fail, but they risk losing a potential fighter. Even more galling, if this failure becomes well-known, they ostensibly place the entire movement at risk as future recruits think twice before joining the fray.

Fortunately for the guerrilla, the subversive tactics generally used by the movement are ideally situated to provide for this gradual training process: the quick attacks and surprise maneuvers used by most counter-culture movements limit the vulnerability of new recruits; the simple weaponry and manageable missions leave little room for failure.^{vi} In addition, the overt reliance of the movement upon a supportive populace creates a wide recruiting net. After all, those who hide soldiers or weaponry today will be participating in raids tomorrow.^{vii}

In many ways, the project taken on in the spring semester of 2007 speaks to this stage of engagement. During this semester, a team of students working with the IDC were asked to exhibit work in the Pass It On: Connecting Contemporary Do-It-Yourself Culture exhibition hosted by the A+D Gallery in Chicago. In response, the students decided to create an act of provocation that would challenge others to do work for great things. To be more specific, our team of student-members decided to design and construct an urban tent for Chicago’s homeless that was safer, drier, warmer and more portable than the cardboard tenements currently deployed using only discarded materials and simple methods of construction.



Although programmatically simple, the distinct client, strict budget (\$0) and tight timetable (five weeks) challenged the students to create a method of working that would allow them to move seamlessly between acts of design and construction. Through hands-on research and playful acts of experimentation, the students once again worked to uncover, test, and evolve promising solutions until they arrived at a proposal that used simple, repetitive operations to transform trash into a shelter. Affectionately called Street Urchin by its student-designers, the final proposal used clever detailing and simple, repetitive techniques to produce a completely watertight and easily transported shelter from nothing more than discarded plastic shopping bags, rubber bands, and used water bottles.

Wanting to disseminate their findings to a wider audience, the students created a small, pocket-sized manual that uses simple graphics and photos to communicate their unique twelve-step construction process. The team then sent hundreds of these booklets to the A+D Gallery of Chicago as well as a local art gallery, where patrons of these venues were invited to take a copy and enter into the issues faced by the homeless. Additional copies of this manual were also given to the local homeless population and the agencies designed to serve them. In this way, the work of the IDC not only empowered the homeless to construct more adequate housing, but empowered local citizens to become involved in finding a more permanent solution.

Stage IV: Do [Connecting Work]

“Revolution that does not constantly become more profound is a regressive revolution.”

Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare – A Method*, from *The Guerrilla Reader*, 204.

In the eyes of the guerrilla, the final stage is simply an open-ended expansion of the third. By systematically repeating the cycle of increased engagement leading to greater numbers, the guerrilla intensifies their grip on the populace. With each successful campaign, the guerrilla strengthens the viability of their alternative and diminishes the perceived risk of involvement. This increases the size of army, enabling the movement to take on larger and more decisive encounters, which, in turn, leads to great viability and enrollment. Thus, by designing experiences that empower an ever-growing number of people to become vested in their movement, the guerrilla increases the size and capabilities of their army, until they tip the balance of power in their favor.^{viii}

The IDC is currently in the midst of this process. With each new project, the programs of the IDC have only garnered greater interest on the parts of all participants, from the students to our international partners. In response, the IDC is currently working to expand so that design students from across the country might participate. As a first step in this expanded initiative, in the summer of 2008, the IDC will send a team of students to Bombay where they will spend the summer working with volunteers from various Indian universities and charities to design portable school shelters for children living in the slums surrounding Bombay.

Yet, this growth represents only another stage in the process. Thus, although all of the works undertaken by the IDC can be appreciated as creative, socially responsive products, I believe the

thoughts and processes upon which they are based are far more compelling. To truly appreciate these projects, one must realize that the work created not only empowered the clients to assume an active role in their livelihood, but empowered the students to assume greater responsibility for the course of their field.

ⁱ "It is not possible to foresee everything, and the urban guerrilla cannot let himself become confused or wait for orders. His duty is to act, to find adequate solutions to each problem he faces and not to retreat." Carlos Marighella, "The Minimalist," from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 221.

ⁱⁱ "...while the military and police act on behalf of the enemy, whom the people hate, the urban guerrilla defends a just cause, which is the people's cause. The urban guerrilla's weapons are inferior to the enemy's, but from the moral point of view, the urban guerrilla has undeniable superiority. This moral superiority is what sustains the urban guerrilla." Marighella, Carlos. Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla. (Montreal, Quebec: Abraham Guillen Press & Arm the Spirit, 2002), 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ "To achieve victory over a powerful army that is hated by the population, it is necessary to scatter it, attracting it here and there, defeating it in small battles, in a suitable field for the urban guerrillas, until the population turns against it and more and more people join the army of liberation, regional eschelons, and groups of self-defense (local guerrillas)." 230, Abraham Guillen, "Urban Guerrilla Strategy," from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 230.

^{iv} "Let us think about how a guerrilla focus could begin. Relatively small nuclei of people choose favorable places for guerrilla warfare, either begin a counterattack, or they weather the storm, and thus they begin to act. The following must be clearly established: at first, the relative weakness of the guerrilla movement is such that it must work only to settle in the terrain, establishing connections with the populace and reinforcing the places that will possibly become its base of support." Guevara, Che, "Guerrilla Warfare – A Method", from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 208-9.

^v John Dewey, How We Think (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1997), 52.

^{vi} "Operations should consist of scattered surprise attacks by quick and mobile units superior in arms and numbers at designated points, but avoiding barricades in order not to attract the enemy's attention at one place. The units will then attack with the greatest part of their strength the enemy's least fortified or weakest links in the city."

Abraham Guillen, "Urban Guerrilla Strategy," from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 229-230.

^{vii} "The guerrilla movement, in its growth period, reaches a point where its capacity for action covers a specific region for which there is a surplus of men and an overconcentration in the zone. The bee swarming begins when one of its leaders, an outstanding guerrilla, moves to another region and repeats the chain of developments of guerrilla warfare, subject, of course, to a central command." Che Guevara, "Guerrilla Warfare – A Method", from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 210.

^{viii} "Guerrilla warfare or a war of liberation will, in general, have three stages: the first, a strategic defense, in which a small hunted force bites the enemy; it is not protected for passive defense in a small circle, but its defense consists in limited attacks which it can carry out. After this a state of equilibrium is reached in which the possibilities of action of the enemy and the guerrilla unit are stabilized; and later the final moment of overrunning the repressive army that will lead to the taking of great cities, to the great decisive encounters, to the total annihilation of the enemy."

Che Guevara, "Guerrilla Warfare – A Method" from Laqueur, William, ed. The Guerrilla Reader: A Historical Anthology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977) 210.