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Urban acupuncture: how a small change to a landscape can have a big effect on people's health and well-being

“Urban acupuncture” is a socio-environmental theory combining contemporary urban design with the concept of traditional Chinese acupuncture, using small-scale interventions to transform the larger urban context. The term was originally coined by Barcelonan architect and urbanist, Manuel de Sola Morales and developed further by Finnish architect Marco Casagrande. The concept reflects a move away from large-scale urban renewal projects towards a more localised, cheaper and community approach. “Tactical urbanism” is a similar idea but focuses more on temporary changes to the built environment, intended to improve local neighbourhoods and urban spaces. This movement was inspired by urban experiments including Cicloviá and Paris-Plages. The use of urban acupuncture/tactical urbanism as a quasi-experimental research approach has a short history, one of the earliest experiments being in Tallinn, Estonia where small interventions were installed at a derelict fishing harbour as part of Tallinn Capital of Culture in 2011. As a major part of the BlueHealth project, small interventions, some permanent and some temporary, have been installed in blue spaces in several cities: UK: Plymouth (Teats Hill, a park by the harbour), Estonia: Tallinn (Kopli Rand – an urban beach) and Tartu (Anne Kanal – an artificial canal), Spain: Rubi near Barcelona (Can Mortiz – a small stream and spring) and Portugal: Guimarães (Parque de Cidade – a park with a stream and pond). In each case the intervention was developed together with the local municipality, with different degrees of local community participation, some also as the basis for landscape architecture student projects and in one case partial construction by a NGO and volunteers. Before each intervention was installed a season of behaviour observations and a survey of local residents was carried out. This has been (or is in the process of being) repeated after the installation in order to determine the impact of each. So far, the Plymouth intervention is the only one with complete before-and-after data. The initial results show it brings more people down to the water and has had a discernible impact on the way local inhabitants view the area. More activities are also being carried out. Early estimates of the other projects show similar impacts.