The regeneration of public life

As the financial crisis deepens in many European countries and the construction sector remains in a slump, many plans for urban regeneration have been shelved. Cities are cutting their spending on large public works, so the time is ripe for low-cost strategies that have a positive impact on the urban habitat.

One such strategy is Public Space Acupuncture, in which independent, but coordinated small interventions help regenerate urban public space and city life. It is based on Zygmunt Bauman’s characterization of the current era as Liquid Modernity.

The new challenges that arise out of the social transformations produced by Liquid Modernity require new ways of thinking and new urban planning tools. We need to revisit the ‘solid’ mechanisms of urban regeneration from the past. The solutions to the current problems of the public space must be found in new dynamic and versatile strategies and innovative forms of collaboration among all the parties involved in urban regeneration.

Of these new tools, ‘Urban Acupuncture’ is a particularly interesting one. Authors such as the urbanist Manuel de Solà-Morales and the Brazilian mayor Jaime Lerner have used the term to describe a strategy based on small urban interventions. These should be realizable in a relatively short period of time and capable of achieving maximum impact. But when urban interventions cannot be implemented in the urban fabric itself, and are limited to the public space arena, then the notion of urban acupuncture can be transformed into public space acupuncture. This is defined as an effective strategy for regenerating urban public space and city life, based on independent, but coordinated small interventions.

Public Space Acupuncture is becoming an important topic in many European cities. This is partly due to the current financial crisis and the economic recession in the construction sector, which has paralleled new developments that could have helped urban regeneration. In addition, many municipalities have been forced to cut spending on major public works and this has increased the urgency for finding alternative low-cost, temporary strategies that are capable of having a positive impact on the urban habitat.

Redrawing the mental map

Examples of Public Space Acupuncture are often part of larger strategies to renovate infrastructure or landscape elements of a city, such as harbour areas and waterfronts. The regeneration of urban life along the Copenhagen waterfront was fuelled by many years of major investments in sewage treatment to improve water quality in the harbour, and the relocation of industry and the ferry terminal. The construction of new cultural landmarks along the waterfront was combined with the creation of a parallel network of landscape interventions. Public harbour baths, urban beaches, waterfront promenades and squares are coordinated interventions realized under a Public Space Acupuncture strategy to regenerate public life along the waterfront. As a result, a forgotten part of the city has become a new centre of urban life. Previously considered merely part of the capital’s functional infrastructure, the harbour has been transformed into a space to linger in, to swim and
If the city is the major, most com-plex expression of construction in a civilization, public space is the pillar of society. But it needs to appear in this pillar, urban life becomes affected and ultimately this is reflected in the stability of society. Many theorists believe that the public space is losing its role in many cities, and as a result the urban fabric is experiencing an unstoppable decline. In his book The Princes’ Garden, Martin Pawley defends the idea that in consumer societies “the decline of public life is both a result and cause of privatization”. In The Fall of the Public Man, the sociologist Richard Sennet describes the concept of “dead public space” as an empty public domain, arguing that “the absence of idle public space contains an even more perverse idea – that of making space contingent upon motion; the public space is an arena to move through, not to be in.”

Although some theorists and professionals talk about a pragmatic view, arguing that the change of the role of public space is part of the natural evolution of society, others point to the negative consequences these changes generate in our cities, and demand urgent action. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the crucial role of public space in regulating social relations between citizens: “public places are the very spots where the future of urban life (and given that the growing majority of the planetary population is made up of urban dwellers, also the future of planetary civilization) is being or in this very moment decided.”

Though the phenomenon is not new, the process of devolution of urban life in the public space has accelerated in the last few decades. Ulrich Beck refers to this period as Second Modernity; Zygmunt Bauman coined the phrase Liquid Modernity. Many factors contribute to this phe-nomenon. The concentration of commercial activities in shopping malls and large-surface retailers, combined with the growth of internet shopping, has caused the progressive disappearance of small shops from the streets. As a consequence, some areas of public space have fallen into disuse. Moreover, the rapid development of new technologies has generated new social habits, such as online social networks and new forms of home entertainment such as DVDs and video games. Collectivist activities, which traditionally took place in the public space, have shifted to the private sphere. A vicious circle has arisen. Public space is used less and less, raising security fears among the public. At the same time it is being in function as a place where people meet and share activities, get to know each other, and where children play together.

Intervention in the Festpladsen, Islands Brygge.

Waterfront promenade in Frederikshalden, Copenhagen.

Public space acupuncture projects in Copenhagen.

A harbour bath at Islands Brygge.

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enjoy, and it attracts large numbers. While it is possible to discuss the success of each intervention individually, taken together they have redrawn the mental map that the inhabitants of Copenhagen have of the public space in the city. Other cases of Public Space Acupuncture concern strategies that only affect the ambit of the existing public space. One example of this is the large network of interventions realized in Barcelona in the 1990s, consisting of dozens of small and medium-sized squares and boulevards. Another is the wide network of children’s playgrounds in Amsterdam, consisting of 728 projects realized by Aldo van Eyck between 1947 and 1978.

Although these examples differ in terms of context, scale and programme, all share a common approach. They are based on small interventions that create direct improvement in the immediate surroundings, but at the same time, because they are part of a broader strategy, they produce a large-scale benefit for the city. All of them are coordinated by municipalities or other local authorities working with a clear top-down strategy, and many of them require substantial public or private investment.

But how can cities be regenerated when may municipalities are wrestling with austerity plans, and private investors have little money available due to the crisis in the construction sector? Could Public Space Acupuncture become an effective strategy for regenerating public life in cities through small-scale, multiple low-cost interventions?

Spontaneous initiatives

Bottom-up initiatives are emerging in many European cities, where citizens are becoming aware of the importance of undertaking direct action regarding public space in the face of local authority passivity. Some of these initiatives have been started and realized entirely by citizens; others have been started with the objective of involving municipalities in the process.

Park Fiction is a project that started in 1994 in the St Pauli neighbourhood of Hamburg. It evolved out of a campaign organized by a resident’s association against a residential and office development in the nearby harbour area. The association drew up plans for a public park and managed to get them implemented. The group organized a series of public events on the site, including lectures, workshops, exhibits, open-air screenings and concerts. Part of the success of a bottom-up strategy is based on not only demanding a public space, but also acting as one already exists. In fact the empty space at St Pauli was already a popular meeting point for residents and visitors and had already become a ‘social reality’ before the park was finally built in 2005. There are many examples of spontaneous use of empty or derelict pieces of public space by citizens. One is urban collective gardens
The objective is ‘social green’: upgrading public space and reinforcing social cohesion.

Social Green

Although connecting isolated interventions does not constitute a coordinated strategy itself, some municipalities are already aware of the possibilities of coordinating them in a new kind of hybrid strategy. Creatief Beheer is a private organization located in Rotterdam that initiates and manages projects in this city’s public space. They involve neighbourhood and citizens’ organizations on one hand and the municipality and housing corporations on the other. They do not create bottom-up projects; they create ‘in between strategies’, working on social problems in urban areas indicated by the municipality or by housing corporations. After studying the case, Creatief Beheer plans a strategy, choosing the places to create collective gardens, small urban parks or recreational areas. They design and build the gardens, which are used and maintained by local residents and people from reintegration programmes, under the periodic control of a professional gardener who works as instructor. Generally local people start off quite sceptical about these projects. There is a typical lack of engagement of citizens with the public space. As a consequence of this, policy makers and designers are searching for new ways to incorporate these voices in the public space design process.

In the neighbourhood. Criticism arises too, for example about the nature of the greenery (especially in winter), which is different from the planning designed and maintained by the municipality. This leads to questions about the level of involvement of local residents in deciding about the appearance of the public space. But the objective of Creatief Beheer is not merely aesthetics. Their interventions are based on what is called ‘Social-Green’, where the focus is on upgrading the deteriorated image and use of public space, while at the same time reinforcing the social cohesion of the neighbourhood.

In other cases, municipalities develop special programmes in which they collaborate with neighbourhood associations and technical offices, and these too can be defined as Public Space Acupuncture. ‘Estonoesunsolar’ (‘This is not a vacant lot’) is a coordinated strategy of interventions in vacant lots in the centre of Zaragoza. Numerous vacant lots, located in a densely built up area with few green spaces, are transformed into public landscape interventions. In 2009 the municipal housing office started a programme in response to the many complaints from neighbourhood associations about the neglected state of vacant lots in the historic city centre. This was combined with a programme to provide work for long-term unemployed people. Initially the plan was just to clean up private vacant lots, but soon the technical office proposed that some be opened for public use. This change of strategy enabled numerous urban works throughout the city centre to be integrated into the public space network. In 2009 the private plots in the most frequented areas of the historic city centre, whose owners were willing to collaborate, were taken in hand. The success of this led to the creation of the ‘Estonoesunsolar’ technical office in 2010 to manage the process. The authorities in different city districts and the technical office proposed plans that they considered important to develop because of their strategic location in the city. Thus the initial system was transformed into a strategy of Public Space Acupuncture, which today has realized more than 30 interventions. Empty spaces which have no function have been re-activated and transformed into ‘places’ that are a new focus of activity in neighbourhoods. The project has met with an enthusiastic response from local people, and demand for new projects has spread to areas outside the centre of the city. The project has been well covered by local media and a fresh public debate has sprung up about the use of public space. Questions have been raised about the potential of vacant lots to improve public life in the city, the success of small pocket parks versus central parks, and the social benefits of creating small, temporary meeting points at the neighbourhood level.

Similar strategies are now being studied in Madrid and Valencia.

Citizens’ participation

The strides in information technology of the last few decades have generated a global tendency for people to be more active in many more fields than they were previously. The time of passive bystanders has passed. In many places neighbourhood and residents’ associations are taking a more active role in debates about public space. As a consequence of this, policy makers and designers are searching for new ways to incorporate these voices in the public space design process.

Collective gardens and small urban parks in Rotterdam.

Public space acupuncture by Creatief Beheer, in Rotterdam.

A vacant lot of San Blas in Zaragoza is transformed into public space.

A former vacant lot in Movera.

Public space acupuncture in Zaragoza: the ‘Estonoesunsolar’ strategy.

The objective is ‘social green’: upgrading public space and reinforcing social cohesion.
The large-scale, rigid interventions of the past have in many cases been replaced by open and flexible strategies in which the whole is fragmented into smaller, independent parts. Public Space Acupuncture strategies can provide a structure which can be implemented in phases, integrating open design processes based on citizens’ participation. This flexibility can help reduce the risks of an entire project being delayed or grinding to a halt, which makes management and cost control easier. There are disadvantages too, however. A participatory process can be organized when so many different actors and interests are involved. The answer in City Park Ørestad project is: fragmentation and inter-relation. This binomial has been applied at several levels. First, the physical and functional fragmentation of the park programmes into a flexible matrix of round activity fields makes it easier to ‘absorb’ different programmes in close dialogue with stakeholders and residents of the urban area. ‘Islands à la carte’ is a very defined, but at the same time open, programmatic entity to negotiate. It combines different functions in similar shapes, mixing variety and unity in a single flexible design strategy. Second, the process is also fragmented. With so many actors involved, it has to be divided into independent parts that are coordinated in a continuous feedback loop. MUTOPIA has been in charge of both the design development and the parallel participatory process. Work in progress was presented to the parties involved at thematic workshops, where discussions generated new inputs for the next design phase. The medium-scale Public Space Acupuncture strategy used in the Ørestad project offers an alternative to the traditional design approach, where the residents and stakeholders can be engaged during the design process. The new neighbours have welcomed the project and consider it an important step towards creating a sense of community and ownership. Criticisms that have arisen about the specific design, materialization or functionality of some of the islands, have been taken on board in the open strategy to modify future interventions. The good level of maintenance of the park testifies to the strong sense of collective ownership that has characterized the project from its outset.

Landscape festivals

Time is an important factor in public space intervention. Temporary interventions designed specifically to exist for a short period of time, such as a few months or a year, can modify our perception of the public space in a city and enrich the term Public Space Acupuncture. Landscape festivals are an interesting example of strategies based on coordinated temporary interventions in the urban public space. These partially transform the public space of a city for a few months, establishing new relations between citizens and their urban habitat. A festival based on a particular theme, where interventions are strategically concentrated on specific areas of a city, can be considered a temporary Public Space Acupuncture strategy. ‘Lausanne Jardins’ in Switzerland is a thematic landscape festival that has been organized on four occasions since 1997. The most recent edition, in 2009, developed a series of 35 small-scale landscape interventions located along the pedestrian urban routes parallel to the new subway line M2 that connects the city from north to south. The interventions worked as interface devices between the citizens and the new infrastructure, which in many cases drastically changed the image of the city. They also modified citizens’ perceptions of their own city, reinforcing the emotional relations between people and their public space.

Short-term interventions in the public space raise many questions about efficiency, the need for them and their sustainability. Nevertheless, they can offer emergency solutions to temporary public space problems. They can also be a valuable way of trying out an initiative, which can lead to a successful permanent future solution. In top-down, bottom-up or even hybrid strategies, Public Space Acupuncture provides an open field for experimentation based on innovative forms of collaboration between the actors involved in the construction and use of the city, where the public space becomes the battlefield where urban life is defended.

The master plan for the development of Ørestad City in Copenhagen concentrated the main public spaces of the development into two urban wools: City Park and Kay Fiskers Square. Landscape architects MUTOPA came up with a proposal based on an acupuncture strategy. The intention was to create a common identity for both public spaces by having them share a common layer consisting of a granite pavement and a grass carpet, and by adding a new programme layer to support social activities, social interaction and public life.

Fragmentation and inter-relation

The urban development was planned along the lines of a functional mix of living and working that would attract a wide range of users: families, schoolchildren, senior citizens, workers and visitors. Different users demand a wide range of activities, it is an extra challenge to develop a sense of community in a new urban area developed in a short period of time. In response to these requirements, the design of City Park Ørestad was organized under a citizens’ participatory process that would take into account the functional needs of all the parties. The participatory process was also the first step towards the creation of a sense of community. The main actors involved in the process were Ørestad Development Corporation (responsible for the development of the entire Ørestad) and Grundfondersingen, a joint venture of 25 private property owners, which acted as a ‘multiple’ client with a range of interests and agendas.

But how can a truly participatory process be organized when so many different actors and interests are involved? The answer in City Park Ørestad project is: fragmentation and inter-relation. This binomial has been applied at several levels. First, the physical and functional fragmentation of the park programmes into a flexible matrix of round activity fields makes it easier to ‘absorb’ different programmes in close dialogue with stakeholders and residents of the urban area. ‘Islands à la carte’ is a very defined, but at the same time open, programmatic entity to negotiate. It combines different functions in similar shapes, mixing variety and unity in a single flexible design strategy.

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Hernan Hernandez Architects has been based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Since 2001 their office CASANOVA + HERNANDEZ ARCHITECTS has been located along the pedestrian urban routes parallel to the new subway line M2 that connects the city from north to south. The interventions worked as interface devices between the citizens and the new infrastructure, which in many cases drastically changed the image of the city. They also modified citizens’ perceptions of their own city, reinforcing the emotional relations between people and their public space. Short-term interventions in the public space raise many questions about efficiency, the need for them and their sustainability. Nevertheless, they can offer emergency solutions to temporary public space problems. They can also be a valuable way of trying out an initiative, which can lead to a successful permanent future solution. In top-down, bottom-up or even hybrid strategies, Public Space Acupuncture provides an open field for experimentation based on innovative forms of collaboration between the actors involved in the construction and use of the city, where the public space becomes the battlefield where urban life is defended.