Urban Acupuncture

- an integrating planning tool or a quick fix?

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What is urban acupuncture?

   I became aware of the phenomenon of urban acupuncture when reading about the city Medellin in Colombia that has experienced a dramatic, positive change in the urban environment over the last 20 years. The municipality used creative ways of city planning to change the social conditions in the city. One of the strategies was to build cable cars to areas that were socially and physically segregated from the wealthier and more formal city. Close to the stations of the cable cars libraries and parks were built as a form of acupuncture of the area. With a sharp needle the city planners put a lot of effort on one spot that hopefully would create better conditions in the whole area. The whole policy was called social urbanism and was inspired by similar actions made in Barcelona (Castro and Echeverri, 2011, p. 100). I thought this was an interesting way of working with integration in a city with huge inequalities and it made me eager to know more.

   In this essay I will critically analyze the use of urban acupuncture as a planning tool. To be able to do this I will first define the words "urban acupuncture" and how if relates to urban shelter. I will then focus on a specific project in Medellin to be able to concretizes the outcome of the strategy. I choose this city since their project is relatively new and which extreme changes are interesting to study from a architecture perspective. I will end the essay with reflections of the role of me, the landscape architect/architect/planner, and a conclusion of what I have learned.

How does urban acupuncture relate to urban shelter?

   To be able to analyze the strategy of urban acupuncture and how it relates to urban shelter I would like to present different definitions of the term. I have found different articles using the term in different ways. For example; the social anthropologist Filip De Boeck (2015) who made a study of Kinshasa in Congo and discovered "invisible" infrastructures (such as an old radiostation in an informal settlement) that were extremely important for the every day life in the city: "They close off many possibilities but also generate new social infrastructures, alternative spheres of social interaction, and different coping strategies and regimes of knowledge and power, which force us to look at city life differently and to question standard urban paradigms and prevailing notions of "slum" life and urban dystopia." (De Boeck, 2015, p. 153). The way he talks about urban acupuncture

indicates that it is something that already exists in the city, it is a part of the urban structure. It is needed and therefore it exists but it is not a strategy of urban planners.

The Finnish architect Marco Casagrande also talks about the term but slightly differently. As an example of urban acupuncture he tells us the story of how he discovered a urban farming community in a "slum" that was planned to be demolished. He started an initiative to make the area accessible through stairs and cleaning up trash and then enhancing the urban farming. " I felt the human energy in Treasure Hill very strong but also that it was now directed towards death, destruction. I needed to make a plan how to tune this same energy towards construction, like turning over the compost that has been the smelly part of the farm just to become the most fertile top soil. I was careful to manipulate these hidden energy flows and the small elements that I introduced to Treasure Hill can be compared to the needles in acupuncture. I call this urban acupuncture." (Casagrande, u.å., p. 1). According to Casagrande, urban acupuncture is a gentle way of doing architecture.

The third definition I found is a form of planning strategy and it is the one I will focus on in this essay. In the book Urban Acupuncture by Jamie Lerner (2014) the author describes the urban acupuncture as the spark that gives the city a new beginning which makes the city respond and develop in a more positive way: "a simple, focused intervention can create new energy, demonstrating the possibilities of a space in a way that motivates others to engage with their community. (…) This gets to the essence of true urban acupuncture—it needs to be precise and quick, that's the secret". Urban acupuncture can be many different things and sometimes it already exists in the city, in those cases the urban strategy would be to do nothing. But in many of the examples that Lerner brings up it is a planned project that often is the beginning of a new story of the city (Lerner, 2014, p. 4).

In the essay " Designing Urban Democracy: Mapping Scales of Urban identity" by Rick Burdett the author visits and documents different projects that can be described as urban acupuncture with the same definition as Lerner's (2014). He describes strong urban acupuncture as strong architectural interventions with good connections to the surroundings. The different interventions create something bigger together. "Together these interventions create a composite urban whole that literally transforms the sense of identity and well-being of the entire community, proving that careful attention to the quality of public spaces and mobility corridors, especially in the harshest environments, can dramatically change the experience and horizons of a neighborhood. " (Burdett, 2013, p.

359). He defines good urban acupuncture as "a process of intervention through accretion rather than rupture, it allows its constituents to forge new identities around the public spaces and institutions of the project." (Burdett, 2013, p. 359).

Many authors mentioning "urban acupuncture" also mention the Barcelona model which is the name of the renewal of Barcelona that happened in the 90's due to the Olympic games. The city had different strategies to make it a better city to show up but also to live in. Josep Maria Montaner, doctor in architecture at School of Architecture in Barcelona, enhances one of the most important objectives of the renewal: "integration of old, obsolete public spaces, and the creation of new urban parks. This was achieved by urban acupuncture, creating empty spaces (known as sponging) and pedestrianization." (Montaner, 2011, p. 3).

In this essay I will use the definition of Lerner and Burdett who use the Barcelona model as an example. According to them urban acupuncture is a strategy of planners to create an identity to a community and also a way to begin a process of renewal of an area. But how does this relate to urban shelter?

People all over the world move to cities partly because of job possibilities but also because of violent conflicts in the rural areas. Few governments have considered these conditions and the housing supply have been dependent on the market (Davis, 2006, p. 56-64). Burdett (2013) claims the the professionals need to refresh their view of spatial changes. Instead of finding new ways of planning that are adapted to fast changes planners stick to rigid urban models which are not adapted to environmental and social situations in the cities of today. (Burdett, 2013, p. 349). Jamie Lerner writes that smaller interventions can make an organism function and change, exactly as acupuncture on human bodies. (Lerner, 2014, p. 1). Maybe this strategy or perspective on planning could be part of "the new view of spatial change" that Burdett mentions. I think this is why urban acupuncture and urban shelter relate to each other. Urban acupuncture is suggested as a part of a solution on the acute problems of today's slum dwellers. "The best way to bring safety to the slums is to generate business opportunities in the most densely populated districts and the flatlands. Restaurants, shops, service centers, streetlights, and other urban facilities are all beacons of integration.(…) Taking social integration up the hillsides is a good and expedient kind of urban acupuncture". (Lerner, 2014, p 57). When Barcelona started its renewal project in the 90's it was one of the first cities to break with the rational-comprehensive planning model, giving priority to the urban project. In the Barcelona

model the words 'urban acupuncture' were frequently used. A more recent project that was very inspired by the Barcelona model is "social urbanism" in Medellin. When mentioning social urbanism planners and politicians also often mention 'urban acupuncture, 'new centralities', the democratic value of public space ', words taken from projects in Barcelona. (Brand, 2013, p. 3). It is a planning strategy/policy of Medellin which has a much more acute problem with housing for the urban poor. To be able to discuss urban acupuncture I will now present an example of urban acupuncture within the social urbanism of Medellin, Colombia.

Medellin, social urbanism and urban acupuncture

Medellin, Colombia's second city with its almost 3,5 million citizens, has a violent history but is today celebrated for its development and innovative solutions. During the drug war and urban crisis in the 90's the murder rate was 150/100.000 citizen (Brand, 2013, p. 2). During this époque the civil society organized itself against the violence through different kinds of social and cultural projects (Castro and Echiverri, 2011, p.100). Today the murder rate is 26.7/100.000 citizen. The city has, within the concept of social urbanism, invested in a metro system that links the suburbs to the center, cable cars, parks, spectacular buildings and public spaces. This radical turn made the Urban Land Institute name it the Innovative City of the Year 2013 (Bowater, 2015). When investing in new buildings such as schools and libraries in the most neglected areas the city also developed programmes of entrepreneurship and education which aimed to create a more integrated city (Castro and Echiverri, 2011, p. 100).

One type of these interventions are the Library parks. A Library park is a park and a library with a spectacular architecture which is open for all. The city of Medellin highlights the parks as a tourist attractions: "Visiting the parks and libraries is an activity deeply ingrained in the agendas of the people of Medellin, and as of late, for irrefutable reasons, it is included in all tour guides of the city." (Guía Truistic de Medellin).

The complexity of urban acupuncture

As written above the municipality of Medellin promotes its libraries and parks as tourist attractions. I think this is the core of the complexity of urban acupuncture. For sure, a library, a beautiful building and a park is well invested money and something unusual in

socio-economically poor areas. It might be useful and appreciated by the inhabitants and it might create a sense of identity in the area and generate more pride and trust towards the authorities. The fact that tourists and visitors visits the parks can also gain the residents since they are potential customers to local stores and vendors. On the other side of the coin they invite tourists and other people to visit the area, which could be controversial since the income inequalities in Medellin are huge and it could easily turn into a safari of poor areas. The spaces become some sort of institutionalized areas in an informal neighborhood. They are also used as selling points of the city which gives it credit on the global city market and could perhaps be a kickstart of gentrification of the areas. To deepen the understanding of this complexity I will present some of the investigators' thoughts about the social urbanism in general and the Library parks in particular.

The location of the metro cables and library parks have been carefully decided in participatory processes. The process did not only result in these spectacular projects but also electricity and water connections, legalization of property holdings, imposition of property taxes, control of social events and inclusion in official business registers (Brand, 2013, p. 11). The library parks per se offered variety of services including computer and information technology, training courses, cultural activities, spaces for sport and recreation, social programmes, business set-up advice and so on (Brand, 2013, p. 5). The parks became not only useful facilities but also landmarks and places of encounter that could generate integration. The architects were mostly Colombian and the libraries provided the areas with a sense of self esteem, equality and feeling of stewardship in their own city (Castro and Echeverri, 2011, p. 100-103). In his book "Urban Acupuncture" Lerner (2014) describes this phenomena: "To stimulate self-esteem is fundamental acupuncture. That's what happened with urban transport and solutions for waste disposal in Curitiba. It's what happened in Bilbao with the Guggenheim Museum and all its other recent conquests." (Lerner, 2014, p.70). The mayor of Medellin in 2009, Sergio Fajardo, talks very positively about the parks and interventions within the social urbanism. He means that there is a greater awareness that the city is one and that "we are all in this". He also says that everyone in Medellin knows about the investments and library parks and that they are proud of them. He highly believes in the power of spaces of encounter, that people, instead of being at home and scared, can go out to squares and parks and meet. He also believes that this has helped his movement to win the municipal elections a second time. That two mayors from the same roots win the elections in a row is very uncommon

(Dávila, 2009, p. 53). Residents in one of of the areas where they built a park, a library and a cable car station witness about the positive effects of the social urbanism: "Around the Granizal sports pitch that´s improved a lot because they've put in lots of clothes' shops and bars." and "Well, here on Sundays at the terminal on the station side, they have put in lots of stores; there are some that are more for dancing, the park is more for fun and there´s something for everybody."(Agudelo, Mejía, Sarmiento and Córdoba, 2013, p. 110). The residents have noted a fall in actions of violence and the new activities and meeting places that the projects have offered (Agudelo et al, 2013, p. 109).

Although all the mentioned achievements seem very positive it is very hard to measure the results of the library parks, whether they generate self esteem and trust or not. Intempts of measuring the results of the social urbanism and library parks have been made. Actually the improvements of family income have followed the general trends of the city and have not been higher (Brand, 2013, p. 9). Also, rent of housing have increased as well as street vendors (Agudelo et al, 2013, p. 109). Increasing rent is a clear indicator of gentrification and can have negative effects on the social diversity in the area as well as serious consequences on the every day lives of the residents.

In an article by Brand (2013) he partly criticizes the social urbanism due to that residents do not think that the living conditions have changed very much. The appropriation of the buildings is difficult since they did not fit in with every day routines and income generating activities did not give result. Whereas the libraries and metro cables have created a more integrating city with new "centralities" the map and borders have rather been redrawn in a different way (Brand, 2013, p. 13-14). The upgrading of the areas close to the cable car stations is obvious but only two blocks away there is almost no approvements (Agudelo et al, 2013, p. 114-115). This, of course, is part of the negative aspects of urban acupuncture.

Once again, it must be taken into consideration that the feeling of identity and trust towards the municipality is hard to measure, both in positive and negative ways. The mayor might say that the feeling of a whole city is stronger and it might be true but the income inequalities of Medellin are still huge. A negative aspect that is hard to measure is the new, "civilized" culture that the metro cables brought to the areas. The stations are carefully guarded and strict rules of behavior is implemented when traveling. Since the violence is very common in the areas this image of security is questionable and could lead to less trust in authorities as well as feeling of belonging (Agudelo et al, 2013, p. 114-115).

The social objectives of the social urbanism was to create a city where everyone felt part of the city and a more even distribution of facilities (Montaner, 2011, p. 3). The result in Medellin have been analyzed and it is hard to answer if the city has succeeded with these objectives. On one hand there have been a lot of local approvements and physical, positive, changes. This have lead to that fact that social urbanism has been a great marketing tool of Medellin. The image of an innovative, enlighten city gives it a great position in the global city market. But on the other hand the commodification of the city could weaken the connection with the poor sector and destroys some of the trust that has been created through the projects (Brand, 2013, p. 13-14).

The role of architects

The mayors or decision makers in municipalities have an important role in planning and I will therefore talk a little bit about their perspective on city planning and urban acupuncture. I think that it is important since urban acupuncture can be very successful in media which of course serves the mayors' objectives. It is also important to discuss because the political system with voting periods potentially can create an unsustainable planning system were the mayors only take action to get votes and if they don't win the projects stop. The mayor of Medellin during the implementation of the library parks, Sergio Fajardo, argumented that he tried to work sustainably. To be able to succeed with that he encouraged people to vote so that he could continue with his work. This means that there is no guarantees that projects will work sustainably (Dávila, 2009, p. 50). It is easy to understand the attraction of the cable cars and library park for the mayors. They promote both an economically competitive and socially progressive image both to a global and local audience (Brand, 2013, p. 10).

As an architect I would be extremely happy to get the opportunity to work with a spectacular library that shall belong to the people of the slum areas. It is both a fun design assignment *and* a meaningful project. Although learning about the actual changes of life of the people living in the area electricity systems and water supply seems to be more important than spectacular architecture and even creative infrastructure such as cable cars. In the case of Medellin and social urbanism the role of the architect is quite important since the the municipality invested a lot of money in the design. Since they also wanted to have a participatory process I think the architect could have something to do with that. I think this role is extremely important and the architect could be the one who finds the

small ways of changing the project so that it matches with the users' need. With a better participatory process the architect could have created a library and park that connected better to the daily routines of the people in the area and would put a greater impact on their everyday lives.

Conclusion

In this essay I have investigated how people working with city planning and urban design use the words "urban acupuncture". I have narrated about an example of the strategy in Medellin, Colombia, where it were part of the planning concept social urbanism. It is an attempt to a new type of planning which is more adapted to the informal and segregated city with an urging need of housing, livelihoods and public spaces. Since the development of Medellin have got a lot of attention there is a lot articles about the projects analyzing its ups and downs. To me it is very hard to separate the general positive outcomes of the social urbanism (electricity and water supply, transport, activities, participatory design, housing, possibility to new livelihoods) from the concrete physical interventions that can be defined as urban acupuncture (libraries, parks and public spaces). An other important but difficult distinction is whether the projects have gained the local residents, the mayor or the economy of the city (and thereby, maybe, both the mayor and the local residents). It is also hard to measure the outcome of a spectacular design and whether it generates feeling of belonging or not. This makes it very difficult to understand whether urban acupuncture makes a city more integrated or not. Although it is a fact that the libraries and parks have played an important role as a new image of the city and its development. As I have mentioned above I think this type of branding or commodification of a city can be problematic but it might be important to be able to get global investors and local vistiors that gain the economy.

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