

Book Review:

Urban Acupuncture

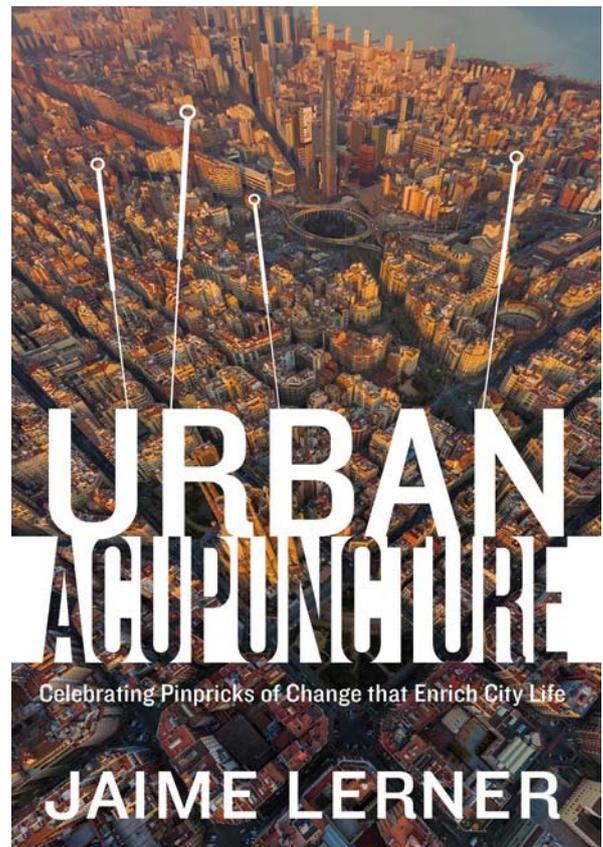
Lerner, J. (2014)

Washington, DC: Island Press

160 pp.

The book *Urban Acupuncture* is written by **Jaime Lerner**, an architect/urban planner turned Brazilian politician. Originally written in Portuguese, the book is translated in English. Lerner is the former governor of the state of Paraná, Brazil, and the mayor of Curitiba, the capital of Paraná. During his term as the mayor, he has initiated several urban revitalization and redevelopment projects, including a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, flood-control public parks, and waste management programs. The new BRT system, which costs much less than a subway or a light rail system, has brought transportation in Curitiba a new dimension. All stations look and feel like train stations and are accessible to the disabled. He also turned floodplains into public parks and made Curitiba among the world's most per-capita park area. These projects have improved the quality of life of people as well as save millions of budget to the city of Curitiba.

That is why this book gives an insight on how to make urban lives more viable and pleasant. His proposed strategy is called “urban acupuncture.” To Lerner, good urban acupuncture is a “spark that sets off a current that begins to spread.” It can bring immediate transformation to the city by drawing people out to the street, creating a meeting place, or fulfilling the urban function that is missing, to name a few. Such a focused urban intervention can create new energy and provide a space that motivates people to engage with their community. This concept of urban intervention follows many great urban visionaries like



Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, and Lewis Mumford, whose works laid the ground for New Urbanism. Whyte (1980) observed and described pedestrian behaviors in an objective and measurable way. Similar techniques used by Jacobs who advocated “four generators of diversity” that “create effective economic pools of use,” including (1) mixed primary uses, activating streets at different times of the day, (2) short blocks, allowing high pedestrian permeability, (3) buildings of various ages and states of repair, and (4) density. Jacobs criticized modernist urban planning

that it destroyed communities by separating residential from commercial uses and creating isolated, unnatural urban spaces (Jacobs, 1961).

To Lerner, a successful urban acupuncture needs to be “precise and quick.” Urban acupuncture could be a revitalization project like San Francisco’s Cannery district or be in the smallest venues like Paley Park in New York. Or it could be a single urban project that leads to broader cultural changes, for example, the Centre Pompidou in Paris or Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao museum. In his book, Lerner gives several examples of urban acupuncture in locations throughout the world from his own experiences from many continents: North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. Lerner emphasizes the importance of small 24-hour shops in New York City and in Zócalo, Mexico City’s historic district. These 24-hour shops, argued Lerner, not only offer shelves of merchandise but also lit up the city after dark and enlighten dreary street corners. As people mingle on the street and meet under the light, the city would become safer.

Much of urban acupuncture discussed in his book involves revitalization or restoration of both natural and manmade urban features. For instance, the revitalization of Cheonggyecheon river in Seoul, South Korea gives us a good glimpse of how salvage of the river and its adjacent areas to make great impact on people’s quality of life. The Cheonggyecheon river was originally underneath the elevated highways, which were torn down to reveal the river and make way for pedestrian. This intervention is called “Aqua-puncture” when water is used as a tool for urban acupuncture. In addition, blighted urban zones like abandoned quarries and craters, argued Lerner, should be turned into vital new civic spaces such as public parks. In San Francisco, the old Ghirardelli chocolate factory turns into Ghirardelli Square, and becoming one of key attractions of the city.

A lack of continuity in urban functions—such as an abandon lot or a big-block urban real estate project with no housing—is also a cause of major urban problems. Filling up these urban “voids” is the first step to good acupuncture. If there is a lot of commerce and industry but no people, then add housing development. If there is a lot of homes and apartments, then add services. The quicker these “voids” are filled, the better. As Lerner stresses, continuity is life. Mixing of uses is equally important in successful urban intervention. Livelihoods should not be separated away from home. As Lerner puts it, “the city is an integrated structure of life and work.”

Physical transformation may sometimes have broader impacts to the intangible side of the city. The restoration of old movie theatre, as being done in Paraná in Southern Brazil, can reinforce cultural identity and restore collective loss of memory of its people. To Lerner, urban acupuncture is the art of stimulating knowledge about the city. It develops people’s understanding, self-esteem, and a sense of ownership, pride, and love for their cities. In return, these feelings could result in “urban kindness”—the actions of people who show their loves to the city and go about their business with pleasure. For example, a dentist in Curitiba plays his trumpet after his office hours. In New York, window washers’ platforms turn floating garden when one architect decided to put plants and flower boxes on the platform. Lerner suggests that we should love your city, draw your city, and feel your city.

Street life is emphasized as a key success of urban acupuncture, and it is important to draw people out to the streets to meet and interact. Through integrating different functions in urban landscapes, a city can become a catalyst of interactions between people. For example, a mass transit hub can turn into a gathering place. In Seoul, a metro station houses an infant recreation area and a small planetarium. Lerner also stresses that good public space design plays a key role in creating vibrant street life. A well-

designed marketplace can attract so many people to the public realm. The atmosphere of La Boqueria market in Barcelona is so lively and cheerful. Street vendors, for instance, provides sounds, colors, and aromas to the street. Music can also bring life to the street.

Lerner describes “urban cholesterol” as the “buildup of excessive automobile use in our vein and arteries.” When the automobile is the major way of people to get around, everything follows: expressways, bridges, and fuel emissions. The solution to this problem is to use less automobile. Avoid automobile use when there are good public transit alternatives. Good urban acupuncture is controlled use of car, which in turn could lead to good cholesterol.

Throughout the book, Lerner gives several examples of urban acupunctures implemented during his term as a mayor of Curitiba, for example, BRT stations that revolutionize Brazil’s public transit systems; street lighting that gives uniqueness to the neighborhood; and a revitalized river that can become a place for people. These examples clearly illuminate his legacy as a successful mayor.

The book is light, yet inspirational, reading. It gives you the feeling of empowerment that you, too, can change your city.

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