

## THE ROLE OF PLACEMAKING AND TACTICAL URBANISM FOR PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIES: ANALYSING EXPERTS' PERCEPTIONS

Professional paper

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### Abstract

*Placemaking and tactical urbanism have emerged in recent decades as a modern and multifaceted way to improve the quality of urban spaces. They promote well-being and help local communities plan, manage, and maintain their living space. In contrast to slower formal top-down planning, placemaking and tactical urbanism aim for relatively faster, inexpensive, and more widely coordinated interventions. For this paper, a questionnaire was designed and sent to diverse experts to get their opinions on the perceived role of placemaking and tactical urbanism as tools for fostering active cities and to compare theory to practice in different national contexts. Representatives from 23 European countries from various institutions aged between 20 and 69 were included in the study. The results show that a large part of the respondents recommends the creation or reshaping and remodeling of areas for outdoor physical activities and sports activities, with the inclusion of different activities and relaxation areas. Generally, the results suggest that the potential of placemaking and tactical urbanism remains underutilized. The paper provides a good base for understanding certain positions and perceptions related to the transformation of public spaces, key actors supposed to guide the processes, and potential stumbling blocks.*

**Keywords:** *placemaking, tactical urbanism, active cities, urban regeneration, physical activity, and sports*

### INTRODUCTION

The concepts of urban planning and urban design date back, in one form or another, to antiquity and are always evolving and improving according to the respective demands of time. The dynamism of societal relations in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenged those concepts to comply with certain global trends, such as the new paradigms fostered by post-industrial development, needs for ecologization, as well as the growing importance of civil society in the planning process. Initiatives like the New European Bauhaus are also emerging, aiming at active civic participation, more creativity, transdisciplinarity between science, technology, art, culture, and ecology, transformation of public spaces by enhancing active lifestyles and promoting sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion. In this regard, based on the understanding that almost every modern human activity requires planning, communication with different stakeholders, and appropriate space/place for implementation, concepts, and approaches such as placemaking and tactical urbanism are becoming more and more relevant. These are people- and civil society-oriented approaches that, in addition to creating more attractive living spaces, aim also to involve citizens in the design, planning, and implementation of urban transformation initiatives, as well as in the sustainable management, maintenance, and development of public spaces.

Notwithstanding the numerous attempts to define the concepts of placemaking and tactical urbanism (from different scientific fields and professions), some common characteristics are often recognized, such as multifacetedness, transdisciplinarity, and coverage of diverse types of activities. Also, almost all definitions suggest a similar ultimate goal for both concepts – bringing positive changes to the living environment and enabling society and citizens to participate in the planning and implementation of the related processes. Such an ambitious goal inevitably requires taking into consideration the viewpoints, expertise, and experience of a variety of stakeholders: primarily civil society, but also

NGOs, public institutions, urban planners and designers, architects and engineers, scientists and researchers, etc. The basic idea of both concepts is a temporary or permanent transformation or change of existing infrastructures, which is often in the form of smaller scale, fast, dynamic, and flexible interventions and most importantly – within a strong social context. In this way, the shortcomings of standard planning (spatial or urban) like long-term, bureaucracy, technocracy, politicization, comprehensiveness, slowness, etc. could be overcome, providing also the local civil society an equal status (within the planning process) with authorities, formal planners, and urban designers.

The topic gained even greater relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of lockdowns when the importance of public spaces for practicing sports and active lifestyles became more visible. Accordingly, many citizens, local associations, and sports organizations re-oriented their activities, often on their initiative and without the support of public authorities. During that time the quality, accessibility, and aesthetics of the living space were recognized even more as key factors for community well-being. This led to a rethinking of the concepts of active urban places, with a special focus on enhancing the health and well-being of society and providing opportunities for various bottom-up initiatives.

The paper aims to uncover how the theoretical framework of placemaking and tactical urbanism can find its practical implications in the context of promoting active cities and transforming public spaces through sport-based solutions. For this purpose, it starts with a brief presentation of the essence, main ideas, and core principles of both concepts. Then, the second focus is related to conducting and analyzing a survey designed to capture expert perceptions and understandings of the role and potential of placemaking and tactical urbanism in the discourse of promoting active cities.

### Conceptual framework

**Placemaking:** The popularity of the transdisciplinary and broadly defined concept of placemaking can be traced back (to some extent) to the 1960s when it gained prominence as a necessary reaction to the urban development and planning of that time (Gregory, 2023). There is extensive literature on placemaking, with several human sciences and professions being involved, which, however, makes it difficult to create or recognize a precise, operational, and universally valid definition of the concept (Friedmann, 2010). While there are different explanations of the term placemaking, most of them perceive it as a multifaceted and diversified process of changing (positively) people's living environment. The latter can be best achieved when the community is involved in the planning, preparation, and implementation of the interventions so that the living environment meets the needs, values, and sense of belonging of the local people. In this respect, the process of placemaking could involve a wide range of stakeholders: government, policymakers, and administration officers working at the different vertical planning levels, actors involved in spatial planning (architects, engineers, planners, etc.), academic institutions, as well as the local communities. UN-Habitat (2020) identifies four groups of stakeholders, with different competencies, responsibilities, and capacities, that need to collaborate and find a common vision to achieve a desirable placemaking process:

- Civil society: local community members, social groups, and landowners, who have firsthand experience and the best 'local' knowledge and are the ultimate beneficiary of the improved living environment.

- Government: especially those in the administration who have the task of assessing whether the desired changes to the living space are in accordance with legislation and relevant procedures. All placemaking ideas and intentions must be well thought out, prioritized, and aligned with local government goals, rules, and tools.

- Donors: national or international bodies able to offer resources and skills (but often imposing specific rules and regulations to comply with).

- Professionals: experts in planning, civil engineering, architecture, urban design, and other related fields, with relevant competencies, insights, and experience.

In this regard, placemaking establishes itself as a bottom-up tool or method capable of not only improving single places but also of upscaling the positive impacts on the whole community, neighborhood, settlement, region, etc. It aims to design tailored to the local needs 'quality places' that are "active, unique locations, interesting, visually attractive, often with public art and creative activities" (Wyckoff, 2014). In addition to the widespread notion of 'standard' placemaking, (Wyckoff, 2014) defines three more specialized types of placemaking: strategic, creative, and tactical. Their unifying goal is the creation of 'quality places' with wide participation of diverse stakeholders and by taking into consideration factors such as "physical form, land use and functions, and social opportunity".

- Standard placemaking: It is generally a process of creating 'quality places' with direct participation, engagement, and empowerment of the local community, in collaboration with the public authorities, NGOs, and private sectors over a long period. Examples of applying this placemaking approach could be a wide range of projects (street, facade, and park improvements; residential rehabilitation, residential infill, etc.) and activities (diverse events in public places like squares, streets, sidewalks, civic buildings, etc.).

- Strategic placemaking: the goal is to design attractive to talented workers 'quality places' and hence create jobs and income growth by attracting businesses. Such interventions also target knowledge workers, characterized by their mobility and looking for 'quality places' with many amenities. In Strategic placemaking too, interventions are in collaboration with the public, non-profit, and private sectors, generally within a time

horizon of 5 – 15 years. However, in contrast to Standard placemaking, they are generally larger and applied in fewer locations (most often downtowns or around transport nodes and key corridors with dense urban populations). Specific examples of related projects could be building rapid transit lines, rehabilitation, or building new infrastructure, while strategic placemaking activities are often aimed at talented workers, including arts, culture, entertainment, and recreation.

- Creative placemaking: by involving again different sectors and stakeholders it aims to institutionalize arts, culture, and creative thinking in all aspects of the built environment. Examples of projects could therefore be museums and orchestra halls, public art displays, transit stations with art themes, live-work structures for creative people, etc., and of activities – movies in the park, chalk art projects, outdoor concerts, inclusion of children's ideas in planning projects using artwork, etc.

- Tactical placemaking: combining two approaches – the Tactical urbanism discussed in the paper below and the "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" model<sup>†</sup>. Tactical placemaking often relies on testing projects through phases and iterations rather than constructing projects straight from the drawing board. The following are considered key factors for successful implementation: having realistic expectations, finding opportunities for rapid and low-cost change, involving a mix of stakeholders, and designing small-scale and short-term interventions. Specific examples of tactical placemaking projects include road diets, passive solar homes, temporary conversion of a public storage facility into a boat rental facility along a river, etc., and activities such as small-scale initiatives organized on parking lots, pavements or other temporary activity spaces, outdoor music events, etc. (Wyckoff, 2014).

According to (Ameel et al., 2023), placemaking is a complex endeavour that could generate long-lasting effects by using lessons learned from both success stories and failures in similar initiatives. They also highlight the importance of place identity, defining placemaking as "the art of creating recognizable, unique and liveable places with a distinct place identity, an identity that works both internally, to residents and users of a place, and externally, to people outside, who may not even have visited the place in question but who nonetheless have an image or mental map of that place" (Ibid., p. 79). In this regard, (Dubois et al., 2023) highlight the sense of place as a key concept for placemaking and emphasize factors such as emotions, personal experience, culture, and the importance of the dynamics and relationships between "the self, the environment, social interaction, and time". Akbar & Edelenbos (2021) also argue that placemaking has a strong social discourse (despite urban design it is traditionally associated with physical transformation) and that the viewpoints and functions of different stakeholders need to be integrated. In other words, when dealing with the transformation of urban spaces, placemaking is not only about "viewing place as static spatial aspect and designing the physical form but also taking into consideration the social processes that construct places" (Ibid., p. 3). In contrast to the 'outside in' approach often used by geography and other sciences to study place, (Friedmann, 2010) proposes that the perspective on place should be 'inside out' – after all, place is experienced and sometimes transformed by those who live there. This is why placemaking as a component of urban planning has the important task of bringing together the diverse interests of urban designers, government, non-profit organizations, the local community, etc. Thus, placemaking, in addition to being an opportunity for people to create attractive, sociable, healthy, and green places, focuses also on satisfying basic human needs within a space and on converting this space

<sup>†</sup> This approach is further described in the Project for Public Spaces website ([www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org))

into a 'place' (Boros & Mahmoud, 2021).

Fingerhut (Alfasi, 2023) labels placemaking as "an alternative to modern planning" in terms of both process and purpose. Regarding the process, placemaking is often about trying to overcome some legal, often excessively bureaucratic, and slow planning procedures. As for the purpose, it sets a priority on enhancing the vibrant community spirit and answering local needs, rather than emphasizing the overall spatial development.

**Tactical urbanism:** On a conceptual level tactical urbanism involves temporary revision or transformation of existing infrastructures, again with a strong social focus of the activities. Like placemaking, the guiding principle is to overcome the shortcomings of standard 'professional' urbanism for the benefit of quicker actions, more dynamism, and flexibility. Although the origin of the concept, in its modern sense, is thought to be the transformation of a parking space into a small park (initiated by a private company in San Francisco in 2005), more broadly tactical urbanism can be seen as a response to certain trends in the United States in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards community-oriented urbanism, including the popularization of the charrette approach. Further, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought the foundation of today's leading social networks and the proliferation of handheld devices, making possible the rapid and digitized dissemination of ideas and the mobilization of people and resources (Wortham-Galvin, 2013), (Lydon et al., 2012) link the then-emerging (post-2005) development of North American tactical urbanism to two other overlapping trends (in addition to the Internet): processes provoked by The Great Recession that started in 2007 (resulting in a need for increasing civic creativity, smaller and more efficient efforts) and shifting demography and preferences (a tendency for many young and educated people to move into once forlorn neighborhoods, and the participation of this younger generation in governance, with a concomitant process of retiring baby boomers).

Herman & Rodgers (2020) point out that tactical urbanism-related initiatives, such as those for car-free urban areas and for promoting street safety, have been in place since the 1960s in the UK, Sweden, the USA, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, etc. Currently, many cities around the world are adopting policies to reduce motorized traffic with car-free days, investing in cycling and walking infrastructure, providing public transport, and limiting parking spaces, etc. Various small-scale and short-term interventions and practices to improve the urban environment have been rapidly adopted since 2005. Their concepts and scopes are influenced by the diverse professionals involved in spatial (and urban) planning and design. Some examples representing the core ideas of those innovative interventions are pop-up markets and beer gardens, chair-bombing, hand-made way-finding tactics, downtown beaches,

unsanctioned bike lanes, guerrilla gardens, pop-up parks, food carts, "open streets" projects (O'Connell, 2013), (Harrison, 2016).

To keep track of the changing environment, (Finn, 2014) connects tactical urbanism with over twenty other urbanism approaches to explain how the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement can be incarnated in planning, whereby citizens can take initiatives that cities will not, or cannot. The main benefit is enabling civil society (ensuring minimal bureaucratic burden) to improve and regenerate the urban environment, hence encouraging foot traffic, community connectivity, efficient use of spaces, and generating related spill-over effects. However, in this sense, tactical urbanism, with its desired short-term actions and quick results (as opposed to strategic spatial planning which is a long-term, wide-ranging, government-led activity), can also lead to almost illegal community-initiated activities. Another important aspect is the compatibility and complementarity between tactical urbanism and (strategic) spatial planning, having in mind their different scales, opposing levels of control, and different implementation pathways. What is certain, however, is that tactical urbanism has a real opportunity to "enrich orthodox planning and make it livelier rather than relying on graphs, charts, statistics, and conventionally written submissions during consultation exercises" (Ibid, p. 719).

Bäckström (2018) identifies tactical urbanism as an approach to placemaking that enhances a sense of belonging and a sense of community, and hence social sustainability. Tactical urbanism can also be channeled through relatively modern micro-urban interventions related to organizing (small, but vibrant) places for promoting reading, arts, culture, spaces for community gatherings, etc. (Sarmiento et al., 2017). Further, it has the potential not only to revitalize neighborhoods but also to raise awareness on certain issues and to develop solutions for the existing problems at the grassroots level (Vallance & Edwards, 2021). The social relevance of the interventions related to tactical urbanism increased further during the COVID-19 pandemic, which provides a good opportunity to re-think tactical urbanism theory and strengthen health-related issues in future planning (Pradifta et al., 2021), (Abdelkader et al., 2023).

In summary, a key feature of tactical urbanism is its focus on the rapid transformation of the function and use of existing spaces, generally inspired by specific issues and needs at a local level. The interventions might often be self-initiated within the community, without (significant) institutional support, or with limited resources, and that's why involvement and commitment of local civil society is critical for success. In formal procedures, local NGOs and community leaders are often equally important to urban designers and administrative officers (Silva, 2016). However, the growing popularity of tactical urbanism does not exclude the possibility of being used for certain political aims and intentions (Webb, 2017).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The empirical part of the research paper is based on a survey conducted as part of an EU-funded project called AMELIA<sup>‡</sup>. The survey aims to get a deeper insight into the potential of placemaking and tactical urbanism to serve as tools for the regeneration and transformation of public spaces and especially for the promotion of active places and cities by:

- Gathering different visions, opinions, and positions at the expert level
- Understanding how both concepts could trigger the creation of active urban places

- Comparing theory to practice in different national contexts
- Analysing the role and involvement of diverse stakeholders

The survey is conducted through an online questionnaire designed to compile the most important issues, transform them into specific questions, and bring in a concise way the quintessence of experts' and stakeholders' notions, ideas, visions, etc. A preliminary list of potential respondents (organizations and individuals), who are somehow involved in urban planning, management of public spaces, sports, and relevant fields and have a high level of expertise and certain practical experience, was drawn. Most of the people who reached out filled out the questionnaire.

The questionnaire is split into five sections. Section 1. covers general information about the respondents. Section 2. asks for expert opinions on some general issues as regards placemaking and tactical urbanism. Section 3 is related to identifying some

<sup>‡</sup> AMELIA – Aesthetic Movement to Enhance Sporty Lifestyles and Inclusive Active public spaces. (Project 101049136 – AMELIA – ERASMUS-SPORT-2021-SCP) Erasmus+ project, co-funded by the EU

specific issues for respondents' own countries. Section 4 concerns personal experience and previous involvement in similar sport-based solutions. Section 5 provides the stakeholders an opportunity to share some good practices.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**General profile of the respondents.** The survey has reached the desired initial level of country-wide representativeness given the participation of experts from 23 European countries in the questionnaire. Most importantly, the respondents come from diverse types of organizations: 32 of them work for an NGO, 17 for academic institutions, 14 for local authorities, 12 for private companies, 11 are non-affiliated experts, 7 are employed by public institutions, 4 by sports association/federation, and 3 by sports club/organization. Further, we have a well-balanced structure in terms of gender (48 males, 46 females, and 6 prefer not to say) and age groups of the respondents (17 aged 20-29, 25 aged 30-39, 34 aged 40-49, 18 aged 50-59, 6 aged 60-69).

The survey was conducted between 1 March and 30 April 2023. All the results and findings below are based on exactly 100 questionnaires filled during this period.

**General issues.** The results from the survey underline the importance of placemaking and tactical urbanism. Quality and aesthetics of the built environment and public spaces are largely considered key determinants of well-being, receiving an average score of 4,5 on a 1–5 scale (Figure 1.). Further, most respondents are convinced that sport can be used as a powerful tool for regenerating and improving urban places and the environment. However, they recognize significant discrepancies between the potential and the actual role of sport (with average scores of 4,4 and 3,5 respectively), which can be explained to a certain extent by the insufficient awareness of how to use placemaking for promoting active cities.

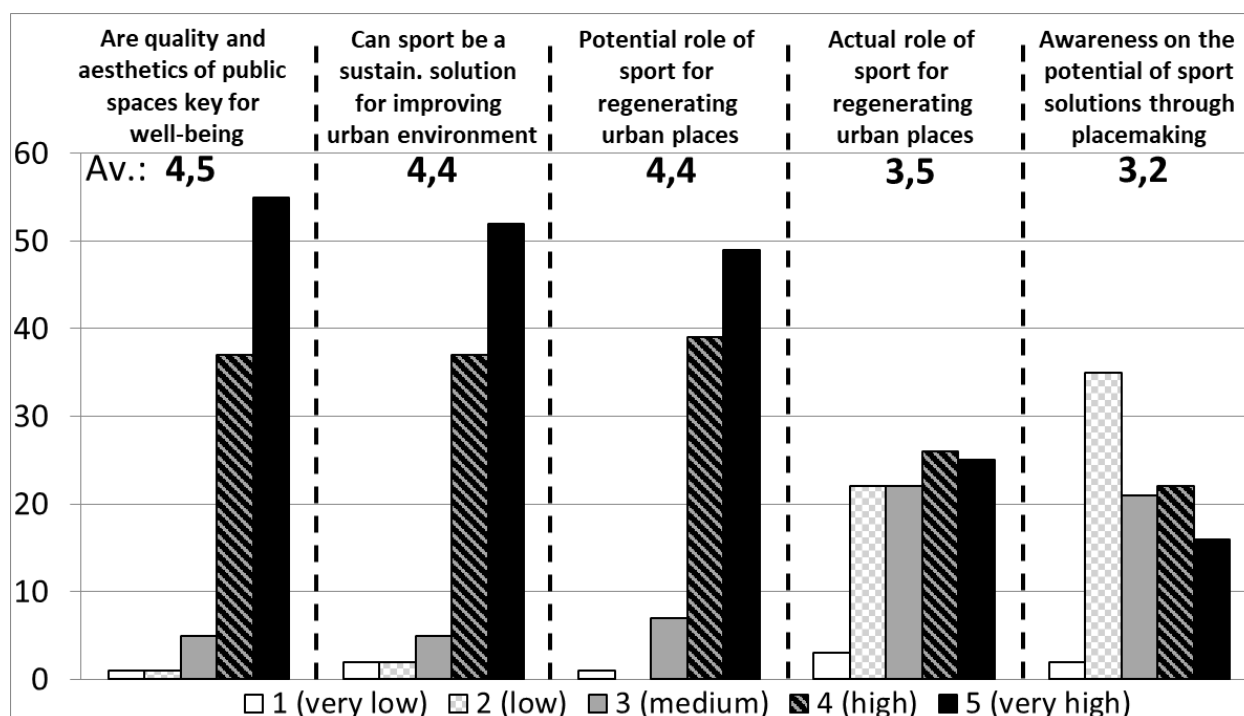


Figure 1.: General perceptions of the respondents

As regards the spaces that should be prioritized for re-designing and transformation to create new places for practicing regular physical activities in the open-air spaces, respondents seem to take a more conservative approach, with 74% of them pointing out parks, 68% sports playgrounds, while squares (49%), streets (39%), and brownfields (39%) remain less popular

solutions. Further, when experts involved in the survey are put in a hypothetical situation to decide within a limited budget and fixed solutions representing different approaches, most of them tend to prioritize a larger number of low-cost activities over building expensive hard infrastructure (yet the role of the latter is also recognized) (Table 1.).

Table 1.: Responses to the question “If you are a public officer responsible for increasing sport and play in the urban environment using a fixed budget, which of the following you will choose?”

Organize multiple low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment intended to improve local neighbourhoods and city gathering places (tactical urbanism)	57
Encourage a large number of people to have opportunities to participate in different kinds of open-air games by using low-cost temporary materials and installation (playmaking)	55
Organize a series of awareness-raising events to promote the role of sports and physical activities and explain the citizens different opportunities to get involved (events)	52
Concentrate on entirely re-shaping and re-modeling one important public space/place that can improve urban vitality and be used for physical activities (placemaking)	42
Invest in building one or two, depending on the costs, areas specifically dedicated to sports (playgrounds)	40

The respondents also consider the involvement of local communities as a very important determinant in the process of

transforming urban areas, with 68% of them sharing the opinion that local communities should be involved already in the

designing stage, 43% – in building/organizing the structures/events, 62% – in promoting the related activities and opportunities, and 56% – in assessing impacts.

**Country-specific issues.** Asking experts about certain social, cultural, and political factors/aspects of promoting active

cities reveals significant differences between the countries. Below are summarized results for the five countries that are best represented in the survey (in terms of the corresponding number of respondents) (Table 2.).

Table 2.: Assessment of key components in own country (average scores in a 1–5 scale, with 1 being 'very low' and 5 corresponding to very high)

	Level of practicing physical activities	Integration of sport into the use of public spaces	Citizens' interest to take part in decisions on the use of public spaces	Public interest in promoting active living in public spaces	Effects the legislation has on participatory planning	Extent to which public policies stimulate active living
<b>Average</b>	<b>3,3</b>	<b>3,0</b>	<b>3,2</b>	<b>3,2</b>	<b>2,9</b>	<b>3,0</b>
<b>Bulgaria</b>	2,8	1,9	3,0	2,9	2,3	2,3
<b>Italy</b>	3,2	2,6	3,2	3,1	2,6	2,6
<b>Portugal</b>	2,9	3,3	2,7	2,9	2,9	2,9
<b>Spain</b>	3,8	3,2	2,7	3,0	3,2	3,5
<b>Türkiye</b>	3,4	3,0	2,7	3,0	3,1	3,1

While the average score for each of the studied discourses is close to “medium” (varying from 2,9 to 3,2), generally, the respondents from Spain are most positive, followed by those in Türkiye, while Portugal, Italy, and especially Bulgaria register lower scores. For example, it seems that Spain is in the best position (among the countries in question) in terms of the level of practicing physical activities, the role of legislation for participatory planning, and the influence of public policies on active living. On the other hand, the latter two aspects are considered far more problematic in Bulgaria, as well as the integration of sport into the use of public spaces.

When comes to identifying key investors in creating suitable spaces to increase sport and physical activity, the

responses suggest that: 1) collaborative approaches are needed as all the stakeholders have some role to play; 2) there are certain differences between expectations and reality (Figure 2.). Local institutions are considered the primary actors (mentioned by 75% of the respondents) that should be responsible for ensuring the right conditions for promoting an active lifestyle, yet they don't always step into this role (63% identify local institutions as key investors in practice). The most significant discrepancy between expectations and reality concerns local communities, which (according to the experts) could be more active and potentially have much more influence on the processes. On the other hand, the private sector seems to be involved even more than expected.

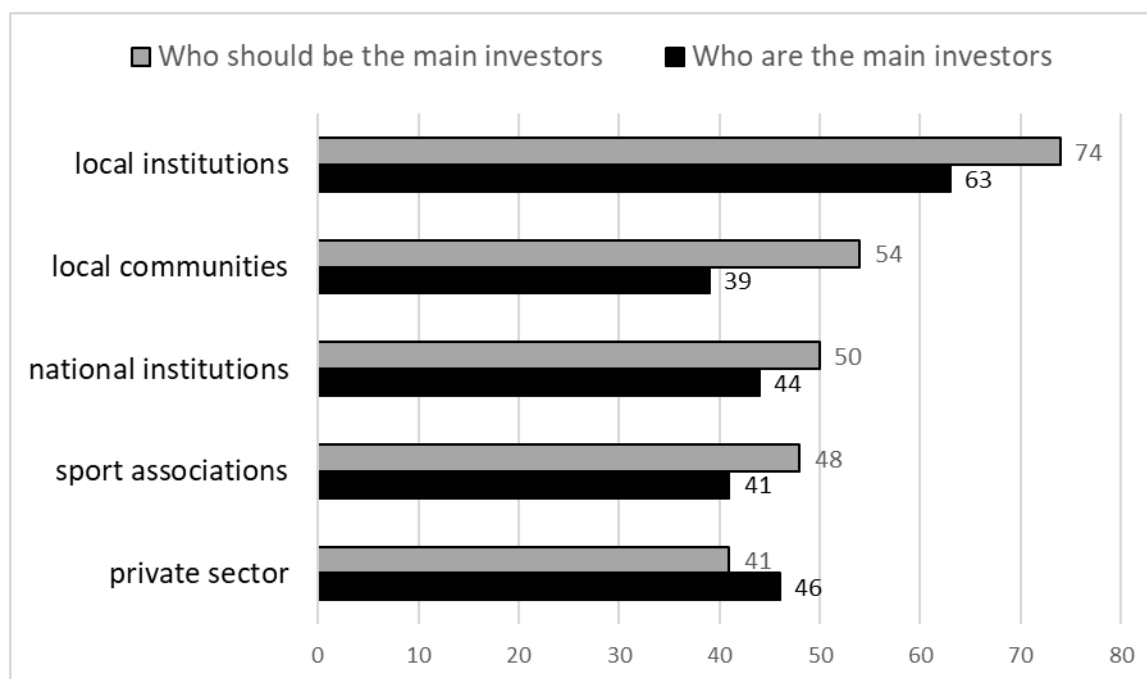


Figure 2.: Differences between respondents' perceptions of who should be and who are (in reality) the main investors in creating suitable spaces to increase sport and physical activity in their own countries

**Personal experience.**

While not all the respondents have previous experience, 46% of them consider developing placemaking and tactical urbanism activities related to sport and physical activity in the future, 50% say 'maybe', and only 4% don't intend to get involved. The experts also generally realize that implementing

such activities might not be an easy task (answering the question "How easy do you think it is to develop tactical urbanism/placemaking?", 4% say "very easy", 22% – "easy", 37% – "medium", 27% – "hard", and 2% – "very hard"). This might be explained to a certain extent by some major problems/obstacles perceived by the respondents:

- Lack of enough public funding and commitment
- Hard collaboration with public authorities
- Lack of input and engagement from local communities when developing the activities
- Regulation restrictions and bureaucracy
- Scale of the initiatives (the problem is often too large for one initiative)
- Mistrust, lack of imagination, lack of volunteering

culture

In terms of key partners, when planning and implementing current or potential activities related to placemaking and tactical urbanism, respondents give priority to local institutions, local communities, and sports organizations, while (though having lower average scores) national institutions and private sector are also considered important (Figure 3.).

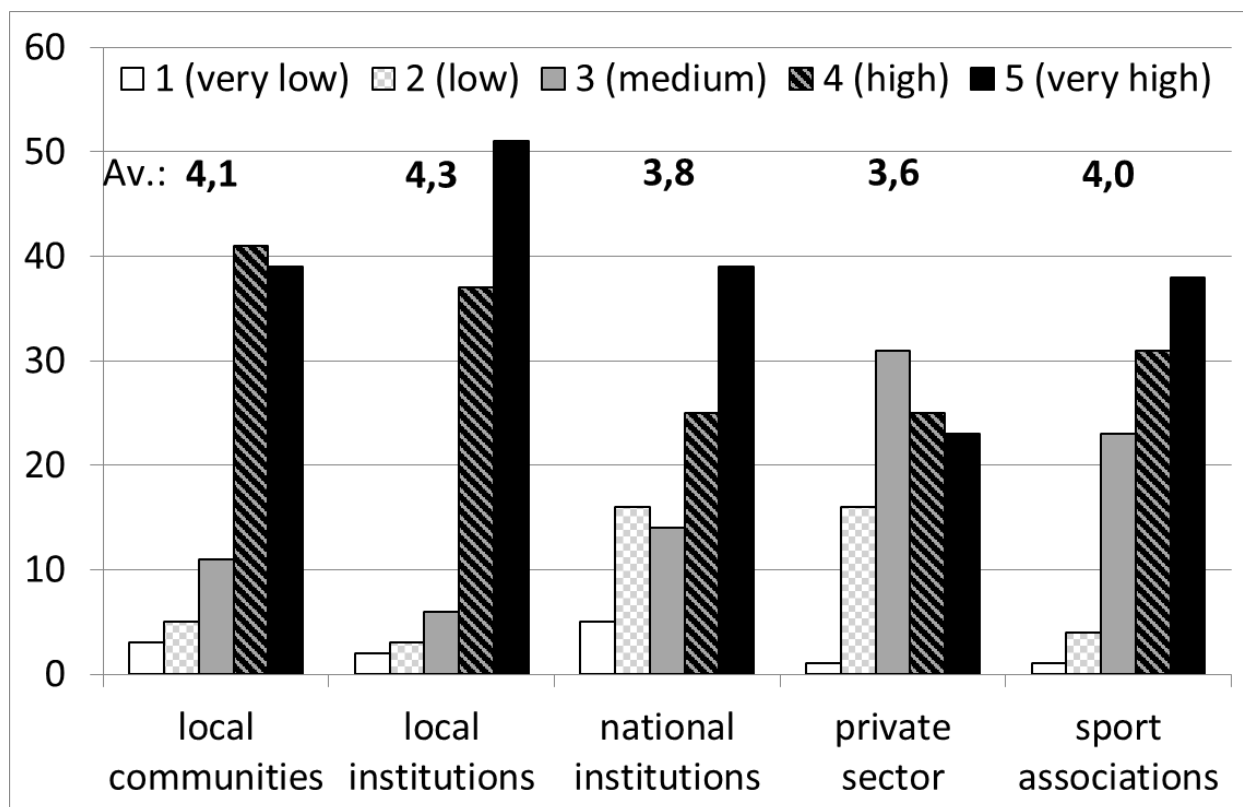


Figure 3.: Importance of different stakeholders for respondents' current or potential activities related to placemaking and tactical urbanism

**Collection of good practices.** The experts were also able to identify some good practices in placemaking and tactical urbanism, with some of those practices used in creating a

“Sourcebook of Sport-Based Solutions: Collection of 101 good practices” (Lioce, 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

Placemaking and tactical urbanism are evolving as a logical continuation of the processes started in 1960s and culminated with early 21<sup>st</sup> century trends in urban planning and urban design towards increasing civic participation in the planning process. Both approaches are oriented toward people especially grassroots communities, aiming at short-term, dynamic, flexible, ‘bypassing’ standard planning procedures, and highly socially oriented activities and interventions. Key features of both approaches are their transdisciplinarity, multidimensionality, and diversity of stakeholders and interested parties that should be involved in the design, planning, implementation, and management of the activities.

The empirical part of the study can be summarized through some key findings:

- Experts recognize the potential of placemaking and tactical urbanism (and related sport-based solutions) for promoting well-being and positive urban transformation

but find that the general awareness of those issues and the actual role of sport are not in line with its potential.

- Local institutions and local communities are identified as key stakeholders/partners.

- Experts believe that changes are more likely to be induced by small-scale, low-cost activities and events than by investing in hard infrastructure.

- There are significant differences between countries in terms of major drivers and determinants of urban regeneration.

- Respondents are very keen on executing tactical urbanism and placemaking activities, yet they are generally worried by some potential obstacles.

Thus, the study provides theoretical and practical inputs for envisioning, designing, and prototyping real-life solutions for the regeneration and transformation of public places using the concepts of placemaking and tactical urbanism.

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