

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF BLUE HEALTH IN CITIES?

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Nowadays, it is pretty typical in urban planning to think of green spaces and green infrastructure. However, an equally critical and often – until now – neglected yet complementary aspect is that of blue spaces and infrastructure. What are blue spaces? In the BlueHealth project funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 research program¹, blue spaces are defined as “outdoor environments – either natural or manmade – that prominently feature water and are accessible to humans.” If you searched for “blue infrastructure,” you would probably find references to water supply and urban drainage systems, not the network of blue spaces that may be intertwined with but also separate from green infrastructure.

Thus, it is high time that blue spaces and blue infrastructure were treated equally with their green equivalents for several important reasons. Firstly, can you think of a major city not on the coast, a river or a lake? It is tough to do so! And how have we often treated the water? We have ignored it, buried it, canalized it, or industrialized it! Luckily, this trend has been reversed. Many great projects worldwide are restoring rivers, creating wonderful urban spaces where ports and docklands used to be, and incorporating water management within street systems. We are all attracted to water – to stroll along a riverbank, lie on

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the beach, swim in a lake, splash in a fountain - and some of the earliest nature-based health therapies involved sea bathing and spas. Of course, water is not without its risks – drowning is one of the leading causes of death - while water is very volatile with flooding, pollution events, algal or bacterial blooms, and other risks present, so we also need to take care.

In the BlueHealth project, we wanted to strengthen the evidence base for the mental, physical and social health and well-being benefits of blue experiences. We developed a simple model showing the pathways and vital role of urban blue space planning. Based on that, we built the evidence base and BlueHealth Toolbox – for urban planners and

designers to use when working on new blue space projects to maximize the health and well-being benefits and assess the potential risks. These tools have been validated and tested and are freely available for anyone to use. They are handy for conducting before-and-after assessments of a blue space so that the success of a particular project can be evaluated. We also produced an edited book which is fully open access. It tells a rich story, from presenting the theories and basis of the evidence through the tools mentioned above to a series of critical reviews of great blue space projects. These are supplemented by a website eventually containing 180 critically reviewed projects - the BlueProfiles.