



MOOD ENHANCERS

A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TEAM EXAMINES THE EFFECTS OF NATURE ON THE URBAN MIND IN REAL TIME.

BY JOANN PLOCKOVA

According to the results of the pilot phase of a project called Urban Mind, nature does indeed nurture. Urban Mind uses smartphone technology to assess the impact of nature on mental well-being in cities, merging the immediacy of real-time data collection with a growing body of evidence about environments and mental health. Developed in response to an open call put out by the Van Alen Institute, the research project and open source app were created by a cross-disciplinary team including the neuroscientist Andrea Mechelli of King's College London, the artist and researcher Michael Smythe of Nomad Proj-

ects, and the landscape architects Johanna Gibbons and Neil Davidson of J & L Gibbons.

It's one of several smartphone-based studies, including LondonMood and Mappiness, that explore the effects of the environment on mental well-being, but Urban Mind is distinguished by its cross-disciplinary team and the inclusion of specific types and amounts of nature—sky, trees, birdsong, and so forth. “We’ve had a long-standing interest in how nature and landscapes influence our health,” Davidson, a partner at the London-based firm, says. “In regard to mental health, we always had a sort of instinct of how important it might be, but there’s been a lack of robust scientific data to support that hypothesis.”

Preceded by a baseline assessment that included demographics and trait impulsivity (an indicator of those at greater risk of mental health issues), the app poses a series of questions that asks participants about their current environment (Can you see trees? Can you hear birds singing?) and mental well-being in the moment. Prompts were sent to participants seven times per day over a period of one week. Data was collected in real time using a technique called ecological momentary assessment. “So as you’re walking around the city or in your office, the questions you’re asked require a response within a fairly limited time frame,” Davidson says. “What that means is that the responses you are getting are without bias.”



You were indoors 25% of the time and outdoors 75% of the time.



It felt overcrowded 75% of the time and not overcrowded 25% of the time.



As a member of the mixed team of academics and practitioners, “we saw some benefits in the different disciplines challenging each other’s preconceptions,” Davidson says. J & L Gibbons brought a knowledge of city planning, a strong interest in research, and a decade of experience working with the mayor of London on a policy framework project focused on the city’s green infrastructure plans. “We think landscape architects are quite well placed across a lot of disciplines to see where there might be opportunities to connect the dots,” Davidson says.

Results, published in January in *BioScience*, showed that exposure to natural elements such as trees, sky, and birdsong positively affect mental well-being in the moment, but also that those effects linger beyond the moment. And for people with more potential to develop mental health issues, those benefits were even greater. “In real terms,” Davidson says, “this might inform the work of landscape architects to inform a frequency and a distribution of urban nature interventions that can lead to the improved long-term well-being for urban communities.” ●