Behind the Front
Rethinking urban waterways beyond pretty views and high prices

By Manon Mollard
“Could we rediscover waterways as sites of production, of fundamental use and value to our cities – rather than solely as places of leisure and entertainment?”
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Previous page: At street level an illusory situation of emergency creates a flood, converting transient qualities into mirages. © Manon Mollard

This page: Below ground, volumes act like sponges: absorbing, temporarily holding and eventually releasing water. © Manon Mollard
The architectural designer and writer Manon Mollard issues a call to “reverse engineer” urban waterways and harness the flows of water that keep the city serviced and dry by rethinking its infrastructure of fresh water, rain run-off and sewage.

A few years ago, a developer working on a housing proposal in central London realised that if he built a canal through the middle of the scheme, and brought with it
moorings and boats and all the things that people like about canalside living, the whole cost of actually building that canal would be more than covered by the increase in the prices he could now charge for the flats adjacent to it.

“Waterfront living” is trendy, exclusive and mostly about paying for a nicely framed view out of one’s window – floor-to-ceiling glazed openings that take full advantage of the watery vistas being an imperative. Currently under construction in London, the Nine Elms Regeneration site, for example, feels like the apogee of this lifestyle so cherished by property speculators. It is Britain’s biggest housing development – a fact – but the project website’s claim that it is “the greatest transformational story at the heart of the world’s greatest city” is much more questionable. Stretching from Battersea Park to Lambeth Bridge, the project is remodelling a staggering three kilometre stretch along the Thames into a sparkling new district complete with green spaces, cultural amenities and luxury apartments awaiting to be splurged on by future homeowners – even if the vast majority of these are likely to be foreign investors too busy to drop their suitcases in London and enjoy their newly bought, very own river views.

When water isn’t there to be picture-framed, it tends to be encased in gigantic tunnels running underneath our cities. If romantic views of sunsets over riverbanks are at one end of the spectrum, at the other there are the rivers of everyday raw sewage and waste water from homes and businesses. The latest tunnel to date is Thames Tideway, the construction of which started at the beginning of 2016. Known as London’s “Super Sewer”, it is the biggest infrastructure project ever undertaken by the UK water industry – also a fact – but the claim on the project

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“Rather than just hiding this resource away, could it not also be used in making a great piece of city?”

website that it is “world-leading British engineering at its best”, promising to “deliver a lasting legacy for London”, is also much more questionable. Designed to stop the 39 million tonnes of sewage overflow that end up in the river each year, the Super Sewer proposal might buy a bit of time, but merely postpones the need for a real solution to the problem. How long until we need yet another bigger, deeper tunnel to absorb the future overflow?

Admittedly, waterways haven’t brought out the best from the architectural community in the recent years. The reality is that architects just don’t seem to get involved. When talking about urban waterways, decisions are handed over to engineers and property speculators. Is it because of the scale – too large? Is it because of the programme – too dirty? Is it too demeaning a field for a profession that aspires to more sophisticated projects?

Not so long ago, waterways played a true civic role in the planning of the city, helping generate architecture that was significant. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Strand, the street running along one of the most important stretches of the Thames in central London, was a place of real social invention and exploration in the modernising metropolis. Joseph Bazalgette, the great nineteenth century civil engineer laid the Northern Outfall Sewer under it, one of the first stretches of the Circle Line Underground route was dug beneath it, and alongside it the Adam Brothers designed the Adelphi Buildings, which marked the birth of the terrace as a type – which went on to become the most important housing idea of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England.

Undoubtedly, waterways don’t play the same commercial, social or industrial role they used to, yet our need for infrastructure is greater than ever. Water is clearly vital
to the future of the planet and the future of our cities for environmental reasons – global warming and flooding – but also because waterways, bereft of their previous uses, are now left void. No one speaks for them and we are letting them become sources of spectacle at best – deep socio-political boundaries at worst. Downriver from the waterfront living vistas, the Thames is still used to transport waste and aggregates. Could we rediscover waterways as sites of production, of fundamental use and value to our cities – rather than solely as places of leisure.
and entertainment?

Two thirds of London’s rivers are currently buried underground in 2,000 miles of brick tunnels, channelled into underground culverts as invisible carriers of waste. Today it seems the Industrial Age’s spirit of civic innovation has been lost and the same tired models keep re-appearing. The logic and the numbers backing the Super Sewer project just don’t add up. Surface runoff from rain, for example, constitutes a rich source of potential, a base material to be worked with.

We need to rethink our systems and reinvest our waterways with meaning. Rather than pushing infrastructure to the outskirts and enclosing flows of water into kilometres of pipes flowing underneath our buildings, we should insert it into the core. It is a process of reverse evolution, one that challenges the role of infrastructure in our cities. We should make room for water by preparing spaces to absorb excesses of storm water, effectively flooding entire pieces of city when needed. This new form of infrastructure in turn would generate true urban interiors. Vertical landscapes and narratives are created, the ground floor gains in thickness and the street level is no longer the only datum. Connections between levels are maintained, either physically or simply visually. Plays of water, light and reflections are orchestrated to create new relationship between the city’s different layers, echoing past stories.

*Opposite:* London’s culverted rivers flowing into the Thames constitute some of the city’s incredible network of underground structures. © Manon Mollard