



## EDITORIAL

# Fluid Entanglements: Narratives of Waterfronts in the City

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### ABSTRACT

This introduction to the thematic issue connects the contributors' arguments to the broader context of existing literature and to current epistemological predicaments. The notion of *waterfront* has endured for over 100 years within planning documents and policy discourses, shaping urban strategies and citizens' preferences across the world. This thematic issue examines the current state of narratives and discourses on waterfronts. Waterfronts are investigated to consider the conceptual work evoked to frame urban problems and build narratives that shape planning and policy action. It is asserted that narratives about waterfronts differ: while some define goals for city development relying on specific strands of expert knowledge to justify often questionable decisions, others capture the experiences and representations of waterfronts, including their subjective and autobiographical dimensions.

### KEYWORDS

waterfronts, narratives, materialities, ambivalence, de-industrialization, urban improvement

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There is hardly anything more familiar than strolling along the waterfront. Waterfronts comprise the parts of a city, town, etc. beside a river, lake, or harbor. Whether it is an even pavement or a clay path, in nearly any city, the fluidity of water meets linear firm concrete or stone or soil framings—an assemblage of surfaces. One tends to get as close to water as possible and so do many other passersby. These gathering sites of urban community activity allow for encountering “the more-than-human life” of trees, grass, ducks, and insects, and in the process to enjoy, perhaps, the best parts and moments of urban materialities. Yet, when attempting to grasp this common urban pleasure with the help of existing categories and available arguments, one realizes that this is quite an elusive experience. To give just one example, I, this thematic issue editor, used to often walk along the main river of my home city, Yekaterinburg (one article of this issue is devoted to walks along this river). The name of this river is Iset, part of it became a popular reservoir, named Iset pond, in the city center. Whenever we show friends and visitors around, we rehearse the well-worn narrative of the industrialization of the Urals, the emergence of the city together with its metallurgical plant, and the construction of the dam which resulted in the pond’s appearance. This narrative is, of course, just a part of a wider story of industrialization and the role rivers played in it as sources of water for manufacturing and transportation routes. Yet, every time I walk along the Iset, I am made aware of at least two more narratives. One is about urban improvement and the popularity of renovating waterfronts to make iconic places. Historically, waterfronts developed from being urban areas “for show” through becoming hard working ports to abandoned and derelict places. So, the story of waterfronts being reimagined and rebuilt into urban icons (think Belgrade, Szczecin, Budapest, or Dubrovnik), which are popular with tourists and locals alike and create lucrative urban assets, excites many. The other is an environmental narrative. Urban rivers and the parts of seas close to cities are notorious for being, often, hopelessly polluted, so waterfronts, while making possible the interactions of citizens with beautiful views, confront them also with the changing materiality of water. So, when I walk along the Iset, in a new and posh city area, called Clever Park, I can see how the signs and symptoms of both narratives collide there. On the one hand, one sees an impressive new development comprised from well-designed corporate and residential buildings. People who work and live here have a nice new waterfront at their disposal, with wooden lounge chairs to enjoy the sunset, wooden platforms to feed ducks and to be close to water, and lush lawns. The bottom of the river here was dredged to make it deeper. This is one of the few examples of how the recreational benefits of improved river quality in selected parts of the Iset river is strongly linked to class. In these parts, nearly everything looks neat and appealing. Yet knowing from environmentalist colleagues that the water in the Iset river is nothing but a toxic soup complicates this idyllic picture, making it both more ambivalent and symptomatic of the larger tendencies, unfolding on different scales, that waterfronts “crystallize”.

There are urban narratives and scholarly narratives. Both kinds of narratives were tragically interrupted by the events that started on February 24, 2022. Rivers in Ukrainian cities (Cybriwsky, 2016) acquired additional importance as they often separated the fighting armies. In Russia, the word “toxicity” (which I used above

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to refer to river water quality) has been often evoked metaphorically to explain why hundreds of thousands of people decided to flee their country. People flee, in part, from mental pollution. This situation might remind us of a memorial sign at Leytenanta Shmidta Embankment in St. Petersburg at the place where, in 1922, the “Philosophical Steamship,” embarked with prominent figures of Russian science and culture on board. Old classical depictions of waterfronts evoke unexpected associations. To give just one example, some critics see behind the fog of the New Jersey Hoboken shoreline “allegorical apologia for the informer” (Smith, 2008, p. 87) in Elia Kazan’s (1954) film *On the Waterfront*; this figure, the informer, has now acquired a new and appalling significance. Scholars now try to find new ways to continue a meaningful professional existence while many international projects that began years ago have been stopped or indefinitely suspended. All the more important, then, to see this collection of articles, to which scholars from Russia, USA, Australia, Philippines, Serbia, Turkey, and Norway (some with double or even triple affiliations, including myself) have contributed their thoughts. Taken together, these studies explore the under-researched intersections between the trajectories of waterfront property-led development, changing everyday walking practices, dreamscapes, and diverse links between places and spaces more generally. They take readers to localities which remain off-radar in mainstream academic production. And they do so with use of a wide range of methodologies and approaches.

This collection of essays represents scholars of different disciplines (urban studies, art history, environmental studies, childhood studies, human geography, etc.). It also exemplifies different strategies towards academic guidelines and scholarly objectivity. While for some authors in this collection it is important to provide sociological or economic evidence, others present work which goes against the conventional canon. The pieces presented by **Richard Read** and **Jane Costlow** strike a reader with beauty of their ideas and language, refusal to hide their attachments, longings and desires and capacity not only to stay loyal to their very own water edges but to find enviably idiosyncratic styles of writing for achieving the greatest definiteness. Their pieces have incited me to pause and to weigh in the mind the varieties of knowledge that we subconsciously or somatically possess but often stifle, mesmerized by the uniformity of academic writing formats.

Waterfronts are urban areas convenient for addressing many challenges that the humanities and social sciences face today. We have already had the benefit of a few authoritative books on this subject (Dovey, 2005; Hartig, 2019; Kaya, 2020; Macdonald, 2017; Porfyriou & Sepe, 2017), offering a refined understanding of the ways in which waterfront projects were included in neoliberal programs of urban development only to become sources of numerous and diverse conflicts (Boland et al., 2017). In this vein, Avni and Teschner (2019; see this article also for a compelling typology of the existing literature on waterfronts) examine the following sides of the planning conflicts that have emerged in conjunction with the global redevelopment of waterfronts: (a) land ownership; (b) heritage and culture; (c) social and environmental justice; and (d) environment and resilience. Waterfront redevelopment projects have been used to rehabilitate the now-obsolete industrial spaces, to give a boost to

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localities, to attract affluent citizens, to claim global ambitions, and to attain prestige. Simultaneously, the controversial aspects of these redevelopments are consistently highlighted by critics. They are seen as expressions of top-down decisions, exclusion, and increased privatization of space (Gomes, 2019; Hirt, 2012; Porfyriou & Sepe, 2016). Yet, in recent years, waterfront redevelopment projects have also been increasingly recognized for their potential benefits. Plans in various cities point to a different, and promising, approach to waterfront redevelopment; for instance, The Chicago Riverwalk has been featured as an equity-inspired project, which reframes the river—mostly rhetorically so far—as a public asset for all city residents (Anzilotti, 2016). Relatedly, in this issue **Natalya Antonova** and **Anna Gurarii**, drawing on fieldwork conducted in September–November 2021 in Yekaterinburg, demonstrate the diversity of uses of embankments by young people, ranging from jogging to bird feeding. They also show that the central parts of embankments (the recently renovated ones) are pivotal for collective gatherings while more remote parts of the river shore allow for “marginal” activities.

The proximity of waterfront projects to bodies of water with their specific ecosystems, and the overlapping of economic, social, cultural, and environmental forces in waterfronts’ changing existence, make such projects valuable cases for the investigation of the dialectic between centralization and recentralization. In the case of Russia, citizen mobilization has often emerged in connection to water bodies. If in Yekaterinburg in 2019 the citizens successfully defended a city park located on the shore of the local pond (Nechepurenko, 2019), in Vologda, in 2018–2019, conflicts stemmed from the sloppily implemented and problematically envisioned waterfront redevelopment. This ancient city (Vologda is as old as Stockholm), just like the Swedish capital, boasts 750 years of uninterrupted existence. **Vera Smirnova** and **Ekaterina Adrianova** look at the collisions surrounding the Vologda River embankment renovation project in Vologda city implemented in 2018–2019 from the point of view of different levels of governance at play in the Russian cities, paying particular attention to local experiences and responses. Their article examines the production of socio-spatial inequalities from the perspective of the periphery and foregrounds the discursive practices by means of which various actors negotiate and contest the uses of centrally allocated funds. They examine legal and regulatory documents, project plans and other official documents as well as media posts generated by the local protesters. In Vologda, Tyumen, and Yekaterinburg (the Russian cases in this thematic issue) the municipalities lack political and economic autonomy and need to actively lobby their interests; once they succeed in securing a project, they need to quickly achieve impressive results so that they have something to report about. After allocation by the federal government, the substantial sums need to be promptly used. Reports need to be made about the efficient use of money. The results need to be quick and visible. Shore-strengthening reconstruction followed by the redevelopment of the waterfront can, in principle, be done in various ways, including use of sustainable methods. Yet, in the eyes of the authorities, wrapping the shores in concrete hits the mark. It is not surprising that the short-termism of the local authorities periodically produces outrage on the part of educated urban

citizens, as happened in Yekaterinburg (with success) and in Vologda (to no avail). The activists in Vologda started a public campaign to explain to their fellow citizens that the measures implemented by the authorities would destroy the unique landscape and prevent citizens from using the waterfront as a public good, but the authorities quickly appointed Moscow experts who used their central authority to claim that the suggested strategies were the only ones possible. Part of the Vologda activists' motivation to launch the campaign against the problematic embankment project was local pride; the controversies behind the workings of this complex affect are investigated in the issue's third article based on Russian material.

**Vladimir Bogomyakov** and **Marina Chistyakova** analyze the links between hubris and pride in connection with the Tyumen Embankment. Human and social hubris is often justifiably criticized, particularly in the context of climate change. For instance, Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite (2021) posit that “collective human hubris has emerged out of the complex interactions between people, technology, goals, culture, processes, and context, which have led to behaviors that are overambitious and overconfident to the point of recklessness. Humanity's hubris has manifested in unsustainable increases in human population, GDP, energy consumption, and carbon emissions”. The Tyumen-based authors, however, define hubris perceived in their fellow citizens as “creative boldness” (p. 3) and seek to understand the reasons behind the specific attractiveness of ambitious, large, spectacular projects. Waterfronts as large-scale projects are also of interest to **Ana Perić, Marija Maruna,** and **Zorica Nedović-Budić**. They look at the Belgrade Waterfront, popular with the authorities (and researchers), to consider it in the context of authoritarian entrepreneurialism in contemporary Serbia. Seen from the perspective “after February 24, 2022”, this country has been severely impacted by the ban imposed by the EU and USA on investment in Yugoslavia as well as many other sanctions. The path of economic recovery followed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was conducted rather unevenly: urban megaprojects, the authors posit, were used by the major political players to showcase their power and influence, often at the expense of the society at large. They demonstrate how nationalist narratives one-sidedly incorporated urban megaprojects to promote a vision of prosperity and to more confidently put Belgrade as the country's capital on the global map.

Waterfronts are both material and symbolic, static to an extent that they become urban landmarks but also undergoing continual refurbishment. In focusing on the different spaces where people, water and stones meet, this thematic issue is designed to uncover individual approaches to specific cases and, where possible, to further focus on the practical, political but also existential implications of these cases. Waterfronts make possible the interactions of citizens with the beauty and materiality of water. **Polina Golovatina-Mora** examines the nexus of the materiality of urban water in the context of the aftermath of Medellín's acclaimed program, “social urbanism”. In spite of the wide publicity received by numerous interventions in the existence of slums inhabitants, the city's life in the last decade has been marked by numerous outbursts of unrest. The author asks whether the urban regeneration that Medellín underwent could be understood as a more inclusive “social contract” between the city and its

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communities, and uses the materiality of water as the lens with which to tackle this question. How can the limited transformative effects of urban regeneration can be linked to the uses and governance of water? P. Golovatina-Mora draws on more-than-humanist ontologies to offer a utopian concept of the city as the “generation of the inclusive space that provides habitat and life for anyone who wants to live in, around, through and with the city”.

Justifiably thought about as “uncooperative” (Bakker, 2003), unruly, and fluidly countering human will and design, water, perhaps, better exemplifies the roughness and unpredictability of nature than anything else. Notably, many waterfronts are marked by lines of high-water level (think St. Petersburg, Florence, or Alexandria). Yet, the techniques and technologies of managing and embellishing water edges in cities have become more and more sophisticated. Waterfronts often have a rich history stretching from industrial use to becoming busy leisure areas attracting large numbers of people, especially tourists, that have been produced as part of urban regeneration or gentrification schemes. Waterfronts are also understood as “the intersection of maritime and urban space” (Land, 2007, p. 731). They are often the most popular and visible parts of the cities. The authors of this thematic issue examine how specific waterfronts evolved over time and how this was conditioned on local circumstances. These include many material and symbolic factors including connections between cities via sea routes (in the case of port cities) and river routes (in the case of riverfronts). The authors show how waterfronts became emblematic for shifting urban conditions as well as for transformations in maritime technologies and the changes brought by globalization.

Proximity to water increases value of urban spaces and makes them popular among citizens—this is the main argument of rich work about waterfronts. The majority of those who write about these important spaces locate their studies in the urban context. Indeed, urban life, from its emergence through the activities of producing and exchanging goods to those of accumulating wealth and satisfying needs, is related to water. This link is increasingly talked about as a consequence of climate change and a related realization that water is scarce resource that needs to be protected. Several discourses interact with regard to the growing vulnerability of global water: instrumental and technocratic discourses of uses of water, including the urban ones; discourses on sustainable development; and environmental discourses. The development and management of waterfronts involves the engagement of practices, technologies, and stories, but ongoing environmental changes pose a challenge to the very understanding of human-water relations. **Megan Dixon** traces the history of the Boise Greenbelt and locates the emergence of this large area of open land meant to preserve farmland and forests from urban sprawl in the context of climate change. While greenbelts are capable of facilitating carbon storage, they are also profitable in the context of gentrification; Dixon shows how in Idaho, the city has joined the global process of “greenification” by creating its own version of a ubiquitous “park, café, riverwalk” model to cater to the recreational tastes of an affluent urban class while neglecting the ecological specificity of healthy river function. As water supply to the river system decreases under climate change, the widely applied greenbelt model faces new constraints.

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Several pieces in this collection also address the place waterfronts occupy in the context of the dramatic transition from the industrial to post-industrial phase of the history of human settlements. Formerly serving as gateways to cities, closely connected to urban communities (and often communities in themselves), these embankments or riverfronts, complemented by canals and quays, were enablers of industrial and trade activities which then became unused parcels of abandoned and often polluted land by the middle of the twentieth century (Airas et al., 2015). While many of them underwent impressive renovation to accommodate a growing demand for urban land, some still remain only partially used. Their partial abandonment and the range of associations they evoke prompt scholars to link them to powerful narratives of decay and conflict. In this vein, **Jane Costlow** writes, not without irony, about her “moving through a place that can be used as emblem for all kinds of claims and multiple monikers: post-industrial decay; urban revitalization; environmental cleanup; dirty Lew, mighty Androscoggin; hybrid, invisible, abject, home”. Costlow also records the ambivalent experiences of climate change (it feels good when it is warm while living in harsh climate); but more important, she claims, is to raise one’s head, so to speak, from one’s mundane preoccupations and to try to see the bigger picture, i.e., the whole river, from the chance for salmon to thrive again to the consequences to river streamflow of decreased snowpack.

Istanbul is the other city that has invited reflections on the consequences of deindustrialization. **Esen Gökçe Özdamar** describes the districts Cibali, Üsküdar, and Kabataş, which to every visitor to Istanbul signify areas beloved by tourists. Sightseeing tours along the Bosphorus Strait depart from Kabataş Pier, and along the shore Üsküdar one can walk toward Maiden tower. Cibaly is famous for its Cibali Gate, a part of the Byzantine walls on the Golden Horn. Yet, E. Gökçe Özdamar is focused on a little-known page of the history of industrial Istanbul—its tobacco manufacturing. Tobacco factories and warehouses were located in the above-mentioned coastal neighborhoods comprising an important part of the industrial heritage of the city. Esen Gökçe Özdamar traces components of this heritage both tangible (as the possibility of employment) and intangible (the smell of these neighborhoods). The author places the prospect of these structures’ survival into the context of new development of creative industries, hoping that this will provide a renewed way for these buildings to interact with the coastline and citizens.

Two articles unravel the affective dynamics produced by waterfronts, seaside experiences, and their cultural representations while critically examining the links between autobiography and the researcher. Researcher-initiated autobiographies (Hanssen, 2019) allow the discovery of interconnections between the written, filmed, or depicted events and their effects on subjects. **Richard Read**, drawing on personal correspondence with current citizens of the Welsh seaside resort Borth where he spent his childhood holidays, wittily juxtaposes the partially successful interventions of the local university’s “hydrocitizenship studies” and the pressing and genuine “water issues” of Borth locals: “urgent late-night emergency emails as colossal waves from the Irish Sea pound the backs of houses, spilling obstructive rubble through alleys between them onto the road”. Read examines the film made about the bog behind

the village which runs along the shore along with his dreams filled with “jubilant, exploratory wonder at Borth and its waters”. If in Read’s essay it is mostly men who speak and ponder on their past and present experiences, **Aireen Grace Andal**’s article is centered around childhood memories of Viracnon women who spent their childhood along bodies of water on the coast of Virac, Catanduanes Island, Philippines. While trying to answer the question of how waterfronts are remembered and (re) constructed as gendered spaces, Andal also addresses the connections between her informants’ “lived and fantasised childhoods with water”. Water-related myths about sea mermaids and sea monsters, as opposed to everyday encounters in the port and coastlines, supplied her childhood memories with a mixed sense of both mystery and reality, which made feelings about water perplexing. The memories of the waterfront were also gendered: specific water-related places—the port, seaside market, and beach—produced reflections about contradicting gender roles, i.e., viewers of male bodies thought of themselves as both sexualized beings and family providers.

The articles in this issue discuss ambitious renovation plans which ignore the rising sea level and climate change in general and propose to build impressive solid structures on top of derelict surfaces and next to urban waters. Citizens have little control over the speculative investment frenzy combined with the politicians’ attempts to increase their visibility through spectacular large projects. Yet, the resulting waterfronts still offer relief and relaxation to the citizens. Most of citizens will have a difficult time finding a better place to enjoy the city. All of them build their own relations to the water edges and this issue’s authors offer us the ways to reflect on these and other incongruities.

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