

A monochromatic photograph of a river scene. The foreground is filled with dense, tall reeds. A river flows through the middle ground, with several large, smooth rocks scattered in the water. Two white birds, possibly herons, are standing in the shallow water near the reeds. In the background, a dense line of trees borders the river. The overall tone is serene and naturalistic.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH THE RIVER

*P4 reflection | Katarzyna Prokopiuk*



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*looking for the voice of the river (photograph by author)*

In the process of working on my graduation project I had a chance to dive into the topic of my fascination dating back to the beginning of the master programme – urban rivers and their connection to cities. At the beginning, I didn't know how deep of a dive it would be, but nearing the end of the process I see clearly how much I have learned and discovered in the field of urbanism and architecture and within myself. This project has been a chance to expand my knowledge, but also build a new sensitivity in design, and challenge the approaches that I had witnessed and practiced before. The result of the process is a research exploring methodologies of building narratives of an urban river based on the Vistula River in Warsaw, and an architectural project in Port Żerański branching out from the Vistula. The design bridges urbanism, landscape and architecture, but also human and non-human users and different ways of engaging with urban waters and their socio-ecological richness.

## approach

In the research part of the graduation, I took a very poetic approach which led to a series of illustrated narratives representing the voice of the Vistula River and its claims for the future. My goal was and is to incorporate those findings into the architectural project. The design became an iterative process. At first, it was supposed to be an iteration of regularly going back to the urban and landscape scale. And in a way it was. But it was mostly an iteration of going back to the river's voice. It turned out not to be very clear at the P3 presentation, still suppressed by the human one. Afterwards, it was time to listen to the river again – and enter a conversation. This way, the title “In conversation with the river” extended from only the research onto the whole project. The current design prioritizes the river and the relationships it creates with the surroundings. Eventually, my chosen methods worked very well and helped me to build a sensitivity towards the natural environment of my site. I had to trust the process – at first the approach wasn't giving the intended results, but it was worth to continue with it and learn things that were new to me.

## feedback

As I'm doing my graduation in the Explore Lab studio, it was mostly my own task and responsibility to establish which aspects of the project are the most important. The tutors didn't push me – I received guidance within the framework that I set for myself. The suggested exercises challenged me, but also helped to stay on my path and meet the graduation requirements in a way that didn't interfere with my ideas. I appreciated very much all opportunities to discuss the project together with the whole mentoring team – with all the tutors having a background in architecture, I could get very valuable feedback from different perspectives, informed by the research and building technology point of view. Sometimes the suggestions were not exactly the way I would normally work – but as they were rather ways of thinking than solutions, I tried to stay open-minded and test them. Thanks to this, I discovered some new ideas for my project, for example through making physical models.

## learnings

The graduation project obviously increased my knowledge about the topic of urban rivers, my experience in researching them, and my ability to design with their environment in mind. However, I've had no smaller learnings from the journey itself. Above all, I've learned to trust the process. It can be scary to work with a blank page and an open mind, but a good approach will take you to good results, just bear with it. Taking a step back after my P3 taught me that I should not be afraid to take this step back if it helps me to make a bigger leap forward. I learned to be more attentive and sensitive. Working with agents that can't express their needs in a human voice forced me to pay very close attention and step off the beaten path of "traditional" architectural practice. Finally, the graduation is meant to show that you are capable of carrying out a project individually – and I am. But I started appreciating a lot more the conversations that happen during the process and help to recalibrate the design direction – with tutors, experts and fellow students.

## towards P5

In the final part of graduation, I want to focus on strengthening the narrative of my presentation. I would like to develop it as an answer to the river's voice – using storytelling methods inspired by my research. I will also work on supporting the narrative with high quality visual materials – illustrations, models and a video of the Vistula River.

## reflection questions

*What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?*

The project is a continuation of my interests from previous study semesters – sustainability, education, and urban rivers. Explore Lab allowed me to work at the intersection of different master track domains – with research being strongly informed by urban design theories and looking at the river on a larger, urban scale, and design connected to the landscape. It helped me work towards a mature project which spans across many scales and disciplines, offering a thorough understanding of the topic. Architecture should be developed together with urban and landscape design, and this is what I wanted to achieve in my graduation.

*How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?*

The research started from a specific problem of my design site – a conflict of interests, in which I wanted to hear the voice of the river. I later expanded my perspective to look at the river in Warsaw as a whole, and narrowed it back down to design with my newly gained knowledge. The process helped me understand deeper the human-river relationships and build one myself. The research approach had a big influence on my project and guided me from the initial anthropocentric standpoint to designing spaces for coexistence. The voice of the Vistula shows that the river is for everyone, human and non-human alike, and I wanted my design to be open to everyone as well. The research showed that design should bring people closer (but not too close) to the river and build a sense of personal engagement with it. This is reflected in design strategies that enable observation, reflection and interaction.

*How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?*

You won't achieve a different result if you keep doing everything the same way – this principle also applies to design, and I had to learn it during the process. In the research I argue that we need an approach shift, and I also needed to experiment with how exactly to apply my findings. Working with narratives opened a new perspective – a more delicate one, with a lot of nuances. At first I was afraid it wasn't "academic" enough, but then I realized that my goal was to bring the river closer to design, not keep it at a safe, academic, distance. Still, I made sure that my methodology and analysis were rooted in academic research principles to make the narrative outcomes valuable and reliable. I was a bit too shy in exploring my ideas at the beginning, but later I learned from the river – to follow my own path.

## *How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?*

As I stated in the conclusion of my research paper – “the continuous and unfinished practice of openness and sensitivity becomes an ethical imperative – and a necessary element of designing sustainable, responsible and well-connected urban river spaces” – especially in the face of climate change. And if it is the right thing to do to look after those who don’t have a public voice – why exclude non-human agents? My design combines human and non-human needs in ways that prioritize the protection of the natural environment. The methodology that I proposed can be further used for research, but also education (from a young age), planning and discussions about the rights of nature. It is rooted in academic research practices, but accessible and understandable. Additionally, designing on my chosen site can inform the discussion about the future of Port Żerański.

## *How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?*

The research, although based on the example of the Vistula in Warsaw, and therefore very specific to its unique nature, was carried out according to a methodology that can be applied to other rivers or even expanded onto other natural elements. In other words, it was a profoundly developed example of how to apply the designed methodology. The project is also scalable and can be extended with other interviewees, aspects of the river etc. – The design is very context-specific, but the approach of listening to the non-human can be transferred to other projects.

## **own reflection**

### *How do I make sure that I incorporate the voice of the river in my project? How to detach myself from the known and practiced ways of anthropocentric design?*

The success in this matter seems to be about constantly going back to the basics – reading the narrative and checking if the project answers it. What can help is setting design goals early on, based on research findings. In my case they evolved a bit later in the process and retrospectively I think that I could have made them clear a lot earlier. It is good to often challenge your own project, be the advocate of the devil, or rather of other debate sides. Representing the river requires being confident, as sometimes compromise is not an option. What additionally helped me was using my imagination in a similar way that I did in my research. Trying to imagine the river’s voice and a discussion with it about my design, thinking to what extent it would be satisfied with the result.

*How will this graduation project influence my future professional design practice?*

The project reinforced my interest in urban river spaces and gave me an immense amount of knowledge on the topic compared to when I was at the beginning of the process. Given the rising interest in urban rivers revival, this might be a direction that I continue to pursue in my career. Working with a site that's a topic of heated discussion showed me how important it is for architects to take a position that protects people and the natural environment, and set an example of good practices. I believe that the process strengthened my skills in designing across scales and disciplines. Regardless of what projects I will work on in the future, my graduation taught me to be sensitive, open-minded and attentive to the natural environment. An approach at the intersection of narrative thinking and writing, landscape, urban and architectural design will bring a lot of value to my practice in the future.