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## **From Moment to Movement? Rebuilding our Relationship with Water with Insights from the Conference “Reconnecting River and City” and the European Project “Bauhaus of the Seas Sails”**

18 Jul 2025

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Climate change and the loss of marine biodiversity are pushing communities living at the edge of water to rethink their relationship with rivers, lakes and oceans. Water has always been part of everyday life and has led to the growth of major cities. Our human relationship with water has transformed throughout history, as our infrastructures and practices adapted to different climates and challenges like water scarcity, flooding or industrial pollution.

The conference “[\(Re\)Connecting River and City](#) – The Seine in Paris and the Ile-de-France: A Model for Nature Positive Approaches in World Heritage Cities for Climate Resilience,” held in Paris on 10–11 March 2025, centered precisely on this relationship between urban communities and water. Organized by Dr. Carola Hein at the [Paris Institute for Advanced Study](#), the event brought together researchers and practitioners working on various facets of the relationship with water — ecological, cultural, historical, political and technical — to think together about a more sustainable and climate-resilient future.

This multidimensional focus on what it means to live with water provided useful insights for the European “Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” (2022–2025). The project, to which I contribute as an impact analyst, collaborates with 7 cities (Venice, Hamburg, Lisbon, Oeiras, Malmö, Genova, and Rotterdam), a border park (Grenspark Groot Saefthinghe), universities and cultural organizations to test new solutions for reviving the relationship between coastal communities and water. Our partners in each city are implementing innovative activities called “drops” to adapt to sea level rise (Future Tidal Architectures), raise citizens’ awareness of water and marine life (Ocean Literacy), and share cooking skills and recipes that benefit both people and nature (Regenerative Menu), to list but a few of our initiatives. You can find more explanations about all 9 drops on the [project website](#) and in this [video series](#).

With the team at Delft University of Technology, we have introduced the project in previous PortCityFutures blogs, highlighting its [activities in the Delta](#) and the [location-based insights](#) that our geospatial platform provides. Below, I discuss my personal reflections on the conference in Paris and how this connects to the transnational

“Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” project. Together, these elements can create a movement for building more sustainable and fulfilling relationships with water.



Figure 1. Presentations at the Reconnecting River and City Conference, 10 March 2025 (Source: Léa Kayrouz).

## What does it mean to “reconnect” with water?

What kind of connections with water were beneficial throughout history and what should we strive for in the future? Through the conference discussions, I learned about the myriad of ways we engage with water, and particularly rivers, for different goals and in pursuit of different values and meanings.

The conference sessions on heritage showed one avenue to rebuilding a relationship with water. We can reflect on the past, the infrastructures, practices and perceptions of water we have inherited, and the many lessons they hold for living sustainably with water. This is what the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET) [aims to do](#). Among their members is the Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center in Philadelphia, opened in 2003 as an education center to keep the memory of the Fairmount Water Works alive. These Water Works were built in the 19th century with technological prowess to provide the city with clean drinking water. The Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center [translates this 200-year history](#) into impactful stories and exhibitions that explore the evolving water uses and practices in Philadelphia and the new challenge of climate change today.

Similarly, in the “Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” project, our collaborators in Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe have realized that looking at their long history of living with water in the Dutch-Flemish Delta region can help them reach their goals. [Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe](#) works with grassroots actors to navigate the complex intersection of nature, agriculture and industry. Historical perspectives can help them take a more long-term view to ensure future generations can continue living in harmony with the particular environment of this area.



Figure 2. Landscape in Grenspark Groot Saefthinghe. “[Contrast 1 \(c\)Sven Dullaert](#)” (Source: [Bauhaus of the Seas Sails: Geo-platform, CC BY 2.0](#)).

While looking to past achievements of human-made water systems can bring inspiring perspectives, we should not romanticize humans’ long-standing relationship with water as an easy and fail-proof solution to global challenges. As conference panelist Valérie Jeanne-Perrier (CELSA, Sorbonne University) explained during the roundtable “Methods and Visualisations: Design,” humans oscillate between fear and admiration of the ocean, at times depicted as violent and dangerous and at other times as an immense, pristine marvel of the earth. Instead of these two extremes, she suggests that a “logic of proximity,” as she termed it, would help humans to coexist better with water and marine life. Such logic balances these intense emotions by encouraging a feeling of familiarity and understanding for the rivers, seas and oceans.

This makes sense. Water makes up more than 70% of the earth and around 60% of the human body. It is part and parcel of the human and non-human experience. Yet, in spite of this, the awareness of water often remains passive among urban communities. It is as if water were in the background of our lives.

### **Seeing water**

Our sense of proximity to water is challenged by the spaces we live in. As discussed during the conference, water is often invisible, kept underground or in the walls of buildings. Conference panellists Zuzanna Sliwinska and Léa Kayrouz brought hidden water stories to light in their contribution to the “Methods and Visualisations: Design”

roundtable. They uncovered these stories by conducting spatial analysis of water-related museums in Paris, using the WAMU-NET database of water museums. They combined this information with maps of hydrological systems and historical water infrastructures such as aqueducts, at the scales of Paris, the Île-de-France region and the entire Seine River basin.

This showed connections with past water systems, such as the Bièvre River, which used to flow through Paris in the 15th century. It was in the same period that the tapestry dyeing atelier of the Manufacture des Gobelins was founded and rose to fame. Today the Manufacture is also a museum, which allows us to connect with water in another manner. The river was essential to the dyeing processes of the time, although nowadays it flows underground, “mostly forgotten in the urban landscape,” in the words of Zuzanna and Léa. They believe the Gobelins museum could use this hidden connection to tell its story in a way that highlights the deep interdependencies between our rivers, industries, infrastructure and culture.

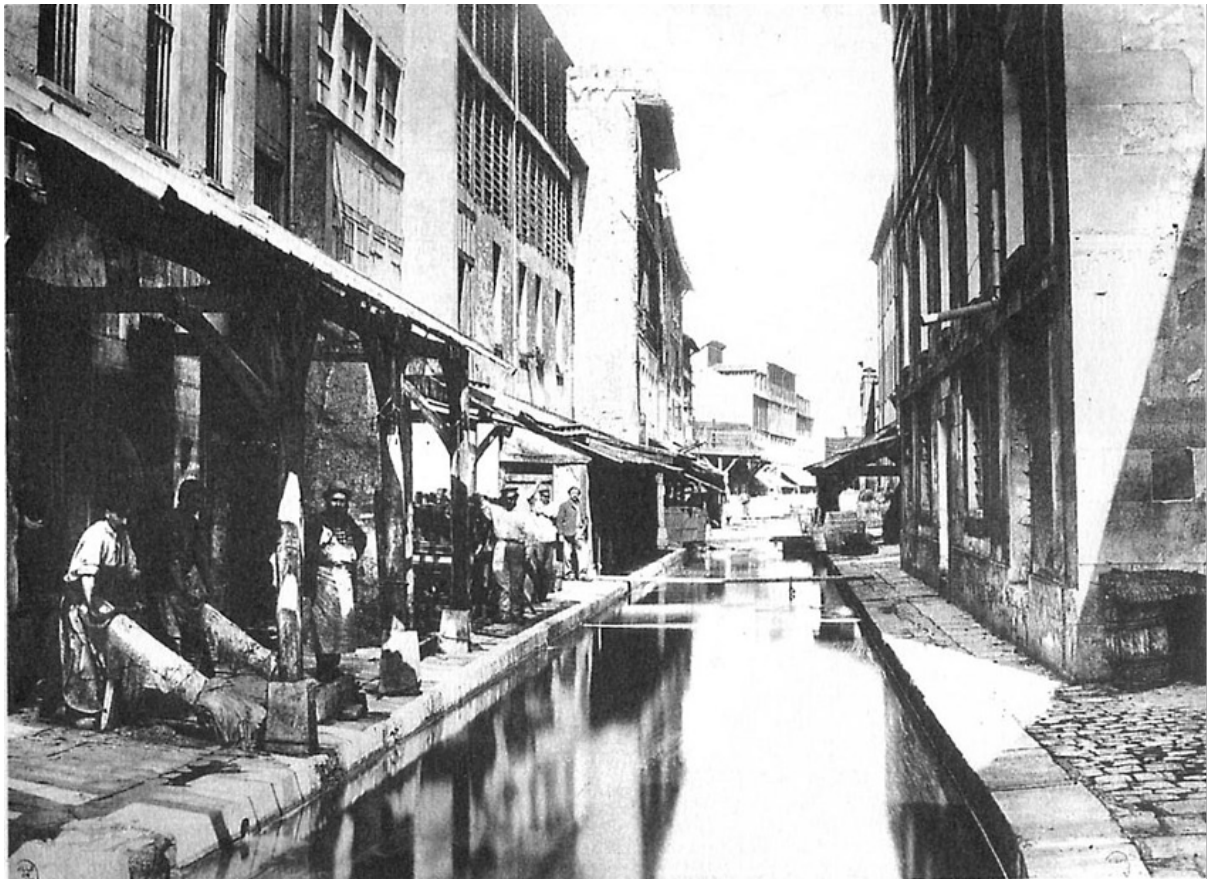


Figure 3. [Tanneries sur la Bièvre](#), Paris. Late 19th century (Source: Charles Marville, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons). Picture used in: “Mapping Methods for Understanding Water Heritage in Paris: Lessons from the WAMU-NET World Inventory and the UNESCO Heritage Atlas for Paris” presented by Zuzanna Sliwinska and Léa Kayrouz in Paris on 11 March 2025.

Residents of Venice, one of the cities participating in the “Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” project, and with deep historical ties to water, have also seen growing forms of spatial disconnection with its lagoon. In the San Basilio and Santa Marta areas, a fence separates residents from the lagoon due to port activities. As part of “Bauhaus of the Seas”, architecture students from the Università Iuav di Venezia took part in a one-week [workshop](#) in September 2024 to reimagine the design of the waterfront and improve the connection between sea, land and people. They developed creative ideas to restore the physical access to the lagoon for inhabitants and revive Venice’s rich water heritage through cultural activities.

However, students struggled to imagine a future of living with water in which the interests of young people, workers, ports and cities could be reconciled. More open dialogue and negotiation of priorities between all these actors might be needed to allow students to shape the regeneration of the waterfront and bring their essential contributions to plans that will affect their future on the island.

Not only physical or sensorial barriers prevent us from seeing and interacting with water. Tools such as maps, which we humans use not only to visualize the world, but also to [manage and control](#) resources (see also the presentation by Dr. Amit John Kurien, [PortCityFutures Talk](#), 23 May 2025), promote certain narratives of rivers, seas and oceans. Indeed, the maps we use are often [centered on land](#). The most widespread world map uses the Mercator projection and focuses on countries and continents, with Europe at its center, while shrinking oceans and depicting them as if they were separate bodies of water. Despite the prevalence of water on the globe, these maps do not show the vastness, richness and interconnectedness of oceans and underwater living ecosystems.

### **Living with water**

Our Western infrastructures and maps are shaped by different economic and political interests and keep water out of sight, mind, and heart. Identifying this problem points us to solutions. Geographers, spatial planners, architects, designers and artists can play an important role in making water more visible.

*Our Western infrastructures and maps are shaped by different economic and political interests, and keep water out of sight, mind, and heart.*

Over the past two years, the partner cities of the “Bauhaus of the Seas Sails” project have gained a deeper understanding of the power of place and of sensory experiences to reconnect communities with water. In Venice, alongside the above-mentioned architecture workshop, groups of senior citizens took boat trips to the lagoon and shared their memories of living with water. In Genova, inhabitants of the Vernazzola neighborhood retold stories about their local beach. In Oeiras, artist Francisca Rocha Gonçalves used sound installations to sensitize the public to underwater sound pollution

affecting marine species such as fish. And in Malmö, local artists brought children and adults from disadvantaged neighborhoods to the sea for the first time. This was significant because Malmö is a [spatially segregated city](#) where some inhabitants never go to the sea while affluent residents live by the waterfront (for example, near Ribersborg beach).



Figure 4. [Human portraits](#), Genova pilot (Source: Davide Busetto. [Bauhaus of the Seas Sails: Geo-platform](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)).

According to our “Bauhaus of the Seas Sails” partners, activities that activated the senses were not just pleasant and stimulating for participants. They also helped revive an understanding of water as an ecosystem that is alive, interconnected, and inseparable from our human lives. Physical experiences of *being* in water (sailing, swimming,

snorkeling...) were combined with creative practices such as storytelling and interactive art workshops to raise awareness about water ecosystems among citizens.

Creative practices and the participation of artists were central in making these experiences educational and facilitating changes of perspectives. Indeed, they helped participants empathize with marine life and see themselves as part of the ecosystem by highlighting what brings humans and marine species together. This includes having a body, needing food and a healthy environment, and engaging with other beings through mutualistic relationships, as shown by the [Zoöp model](#) developed by the [Zoonomic Institute](#). In Malmö, artists followed a similar approach by inviting children to dance like seagrass during an interactive theater piece called "[Strandfynd](#)." Such experiences around water recognize the agency of citizens who are not told what they should believe or how they should act. Instead, they are exposed to new experiences, feelings, information and ideas that they can use to rethink their own relationship with water and marine life.



Figure 5. [Pilot kick-off activities](#) at the Malmö South Wharf and Ferry Terminal on June 8, 2024, World Oceans Day (Source: Anna Seravalli. [Bauhaus of the Seas Sails: Geoplatform](#), [Public Domain Mark](#)).

**Changing our relationships with water durably**

There is no one way to revive our collective relationship with water. This was apparent in the range of disciplines represented at the conference in Paris. The “Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” project, too, shows the multiplicity of possible approaches but also the need to adapt solutions to local contexts and differences between groups in society.

In big coastal cities like Rotterdam, Lisbon, Malmö and Hamburg, many groups coexist and come from different economic, cultural and educational backgrounds that often shape their relationships to water. The aforementioned example of unequal access to the sea in Malmö reveals one part of a much wider problem. For a person who lives far from the waterfront and faces pressing socio-economic challenges such as seeking a job and raising children as a single parent, going to the sea for the first time might already be a big step and feel like a luxury. For them, continuing to build a relationship with water might not be an option without additional support in the form of economic opportunities, childcare or better public transport services.

*Communities want to connect with water... if there is a long-term commitment from local organizations accompanied by tangible improvements to their lives.*

“Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” partners — including municipalities, universities, cultural organizations and also grassroots [Ocean Ambassadors](#) — are learning that communities want to connect with water... if there is a long-term commitment from local organizations accompanied by tangible improvements to their lives. Without this, the creative activities mentioned above risk falling short of durably reshaping human relationships with water. As such, European initiatives like “Bauhaus of the Seas Sails” need to think and plan long-term, making sure that their efforts are embedded in practices and initiatives that will outlive the project set to end in December 2025. Our project is at this critical stage. The different cities are wrapping up activities and preparing for the future. At Delft University of Technology, we are assessing the environmental, social and cultural impact of the project and supporting our partners in thinking about long-term solutions.

## **Conclusion**

There are many emerging solutions to rebuild a more sustainable relationship with water, and plenty of people who can help. Communities living by rivers, seas, and oceans are well-placed to guide this effort. Considering the high attendance of over 70 people at the Paris conference, the 18 “Bauhaus of the Sea Sails” partner organizations and the dozen Ocean Ambassadors who [met in Rotterdam](#) in June 2025 to reflect on their participation as grassroots actors in the project, a new water movement might be taking shape. It is particularly important to push for sustained [political momentum](#) around the seas and oceans after the UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June 2025. By inviting creative practices, sensory experiences, emotional connection and ecosystemic perspectives, this emerging movement could make a unique contribution to existing efforts to live more sustainably with water. Our “Bauhaus of the Seas” is sailing on this journey, learning

along the way and welcoming ideas, networks and collaborations to create long-lasting change.

We are all on the same boat, and we hope you join the voyage!



Figure 6. Bauhaus of the Seas Sails (Source: [Bauhaus of the Seas Sails](#)).

### **Acknowledgments**

This blog post has been written in the context of discussions in the LDE PortCityFutures research community. It reflects the evolving thoughts of the authors and expresses the discussions between researchers on the socio-economic, spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships. This blog was edited by the PortCityFutures editorial team: Eliane Schmid, with special thanks to Carola Hein for her valuable comments.