

Storyscape Neretva - P4 reflection paper and report

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*El paisaje es una educación. Educas tu mirada
y tus ojos, las formas de ver las cosas
y las formas de crear espacios.*

*Los ocupas y los imaginas en el pasado,
les otorgas tus propios significados,
los inventas y fantaseas sobre ellos
en un intento de recargar la memoria del ayer.
Hablas de estructuras que alguna vez
fueron un todo.*

*La naturaleza se llena de implicaciones estéticas,
de mitos y leyendas.*

*Dibujamos en la tierra con los dedos
sin darnos cuenta de que eso no son fronteras,
sino líneas
que unen puntos distantes y diseminados por el espacio.
Todo se mueve,
las piedras se mueven,
te das cuenta de que el paisaje es algo totalmente distinto.*

D. Guijarro: Totalidad e Infinito (economías de la transferencia de otro(s) tiempo(s) para el arte)

Reflection

The graduation lab “Neretva Recollection: Materiality of War, Flowing Memories and Living Archive” makes our group of seven landscape- and six architecture students pick up some of the loose threads of the city of Mostar where the disruptions of the Yugoslav wars are still more or less visible in many parts of the city. The river Neretva flowing through the centre of the city was in that time connecting and disconnecting body as the bridges crossing it were continuously being destroyed and rebuild, while at the same time providing shelter, water and more. Our own projects thus started from the river growing out into the city finding a focal point of personal interest to eventually design an architectural intervention that engages in some way with the mentioned conditions of living archives, war- and non-war bodies, traumatic landscapes and more.

On the field trip to Mostar end of October 2018 I encountered large amounts of waste and signs of neglect and contamination along the river that through the complex interrelations of karstic river systems are potentially dangerous for an area much wider than directly apparent. This is diametrically opposed to the older stories of the city closely connected to the riverscape I heard from my mentors as well as family and friends.

As a consequence, I started diving into research about the ecological implications of karst, pollution and remediation. But as these are for me just technological-scientific fixes I focussed even more on the social relationship of the river with the city understanding an imbalanced relationship as the initial cause of the pollution. So besides the technological research I head dived into stories and narratives I found or was told in archives, in conversations, webpages and more, but also in objects found on the riverbanks and the city to trace back meanings and relations in the entangled network of objects, territory, human and non-human being. All of this to understand and contextualize the disrupted relationship of Mostar and Neretva in the wider discourse of nature and culture. Especially as architecture, in its very essence of providing shelter and protection from nature-born harm, positions these two concepts very far apart, if not even opposite each other.

The first examinations, already before the field trip, resulted in first soft maps of swimming and diving spots, former orchards and other memories of the riverscape; a map covered in words, little drawings and other soft, subjective information. Later during the field trip being enriched by interviews, photos and found objects as well as archival material from different times. This research resulted in the production of the panorama of the “Big Story of Neretva”, a section through time and space to explain the development of the relationship of the river with the city. Surprising was that the allegedly long connection of Mostar with the river seems to a rather recent phenomena of the last decades or at least century.

Next to these more archaeological, digging, unearthing methods I tried to situate myself the most possible within the river, swimming in Neretva and spending several hours on the riverbanks, sensing the riverscape with all my senses and taking notes.

While focussing strongly on these stories and narratives the spatial analysis lacked some attention as no more information on the morphology of the river was available than CAD maps that mostly skipped the riverbed, google maps aerial images and mainly our own photos and sketches on site.

Personal experiences in this way became my main tool to understand the current situation in Mostar. A tool which allows to understand the multiple dimensions and subjectivities of a place, filling the space you visit with life, that for instance due to the season might not be there. Especially in the case of Mostar and Neretva this was of great importance, as it allows to abandon the loud, major narratives of the war, the separation and reconciliation: As I could already observe from the MSc 2 studio in Sarajevo, the war narrative is still - more than 20 years after the end of the war - the main narrative of Sarajevo, Bosnia Hercegovina and also of Mostar; Since the war Neretva had been more and more described as the separation line between the Muslim and the catholic community of the city, which in fact wasn't and isn't the case. (see map). In the same way the mainly internationally backed up reconstruction of the old bridge – Stari Most – became place and symbol of reunification and enjoyment of the river while several surveys and also the muddled political situation of Mostar (no city-government since 2012) prove the opposite.

I do believe that the retelling and understanding of these stories is crucial to a possible reunification, but without a common ground to build a collective future upon am afraid that this would only result in a deepening of the trenches between the conflicting parties. As it is happening already in the “Museum of War and Genocide Victims 1992-1995” which is only perpetually renarrating the idea of self-victimization and of blaming the other warring party.

For P2 I thus tried to use these small stories and memories of the river as guideline for designing and reactivating the riverscape to allow these old stories to continue to be told, while also allowing new stories, new encounters by new inhabitants to happen. My proposal of a series of small-scale interventions cleaned and opened up spaces on the river, such as swimming, diving and fishing spots, recreating bridges and other material memories of a place, making the memories manifest and solid.

But exactly that solidification, maybe even petrification is equally imposing and restricting as the war-narrative. Instead of really enabling new stories to arise I tried to create an alternative *major* narrative of Neretva and the river that dealt mainly with remediating and restoring the impacts of human interventions on the river. The person in my perspective in this way is happy that the pool is back in use **again**(!) even though the majority of Mostar's population now has never experienced the pool in its former condition. Instead of designing, giving my own contribution to the encountered conflicts I became a mere **re**-narrator of existing stories I might agree, but might also not agree with. Possibly because of the lack of other tangible material to start designing with.

In retrospect the approach to a location via narratives, tales and stories makes in my opinion a lot of sense. Especially when engaging in an un-known context. It is of big importance though to be aware of the subjectivity and situatedness of this knowledge; of being based in very personal experiences and opinions that when engaging with a design with societal issues in the public realm need to be examined critically.

This question whether the stories were a valid design tool by my mentor Ferry Adema during P2, made me question this approach and try to not re-create the old stories, but rather create opportunities to new stories to arise; Introduce words that can be put together in sentences, eventually stories.

As P2 was the first time to have a proper design proposal I also started to discuss with colleagues, friends and family about the design which helped me a lot to clarify my thoughts and ideas. At a w0rk0ut session I could discuss my ideas extensively with my colleague Freya Spencer-Wood, who deals with a similar situation on the Clyde in Glasgow. We discussed the constantly changing conditions of the

riverscape and especially the water level, be it in form of tides in Scotland, or dictated by the flow regime of the energy production of the hydroelectric power plant upstream of Mostar. Similarly to embracing vagueness in design to allow for different stories, I realized that the focus on the ever changing boundary between water and land, between city and river, allows me to design with precision in the changing conditions of the river. To think of the river not in terms of physical dimensions, that I will never know precisely anyways, but in methods and strategies that are adaptive to the imprecise and changing riverscape. Instead of fighting the river, fighting nature, it becomes appreciated part of the design. This embracing of vagueness, of imprecision is one of the main lessons I took from the graduation process. Instead of indulging in the precision of the digital drawing, Neretva forced me to stick to reality, to make educated guesses, to think space in an open way whose quality does not depend on the exact position of a line, a wall, but of a space that gains quality from the openness to change, to different opinions, to different physical situations, to being dry and wet at the same time. Focussing overly on the existing stories and the material problematic of environmental pollution I forgot my own ambitions to the project I took down at a very early stage of the graduation. So that when I revisited all my notes for P3 I realized that I hoped for the design to be:

Something that...

- ... isn't just teaching and exposing what is going wrong*
- ... creates something anew, repairs, (re-) creates*
- ... helps Neretva reduce the amount of anorganic, inert material in it and on its shores*
- ... makes the different actors in Mostar - human, floral, faunal and geological - understand each other's concerns*
- ... involves citizens of Mostar actively, or moreover creates opportunities, affordances to become active*
- ... involves the different citizen groups equally as the consequences of certain actions have feedback to the other groups*

These ideas partially got lost in the design process even though they reflect core values to me, that can if not present even render a design intervention obsolete. Being mostly based in my intuition and believes they didn't withstand the scrutiny of scientific, technological research and slowly vanished into the pages of my notebook while parallelly my motivation and enthusiasm for the project disappeared. I realized that this balancing act between intuitive meaning and interpretation and the technical possibilities, is crucial to arrive to a wholesome working process and a for me satisfying project that does not only respond to the requirements set by university, or in later moment the brief.

For the last 6 weeks of the graduation I intend to refined this balance by working on the responsiveness to the site, and the values and ideas implied in this. Another aspect only marginally adressed is the openness and idea of togetherness of the project, with nature, but also with other humans, in this context other ethnicities. In this term I want to continue working on the construction (details) and how they can allow collective construction knowledge and process.

Report

Why making an architecture graduation project on rivers, landscape and nature?

The history of humanity is a story of organized action upon the land, whether that is considered as a complex ecology that includes living and non-living things or as a functionally empty surface for the imposition of efficient systems and forms. If a place teems with hidden riches then these can be extracted as valuable views and useful materials. Such organization of the natural and its opposite is one of the first and perhaps most fundamental architectural acts.¹

Our Graduation Lab “Neretva Recollection: Materiality of War, Flowing Memories and Living Archive” intends to research and develop design explorations in the post-war conditions of the Bosnian-Herzegovinan city of Mostar on the banks of the river Neretva.

During the Yugoslav wars the bridges crossing Neretva were points of major strategic importance and thus destroyed and rebuilt again and again. Thus, «the lab focuses on the river in relation to the city starting from the war because the war was violent and extraordinary spatial condition that significantly changed Neretva, Mostar, human existence and overall narrative about the city. It takes the immaterial and material residuals of the temporary bridges, other human and natural made materials located on the river banks, in the river stream and at the bottom»².

So even though relating the studio explicitly to the river Neretva, this does not mean having to focus on the territorial scale of Neretva, especially not in architecture. But still, with every piece of architecture we produce, soil is being sealed, plants, animals and other forms of life are being expelled, their habitat destroyed. This obvious but often overlooked fact has led to many fights and discussions with my father, a friend of trees and flowers, not of (most) buildings and architecture.

Continuing my studies I realised that I did inherit most of this affinity to nature from my family. Kayaking and swimming in clean rivers in the Alps; Hiking, skiing and climbing its peaks, caring not to leave traces; Watering and talking with the plants my Thai grandma Khun Yai has planted in pots on her street, Harvesting and enjoying the fruits and vegetables from our garden or wherever they grow. For me nature has always been that which surrounds us, which nurtures and gives, but can always take and destroy. By being in the world, by daring to step outside our houses into the open, we need to accept this unpredictable. This is complementary to the above mentioned, widely spread conception of architecture as that which intentionally marks traces, draws boundaries that distinguish between the natural and its opposite the cultural.

In this field of tension between the division and union of the cultural and the natural is where this graduation project is set.

Process and development

In preparation for the excursion to Mostar end of October 2018, we of course delved into all material about Mostar available in Delft. Of course, also from our main mentor Armina Pilav we heard about the close connection of the inhabitants of Mostar with Neretva, the river passing through it. She also provided us with the book *Neretva i njene obale u Mostaru* - Neretva and her River Banks in Mostar – which consists of photographs of Neretva with toponyms of all the different little spots on the river;

rocks, eddies, standing waves, river bends, diving spots and beaches as well as descriptions of each area, with swimming and diving opportunities and the name of the families who used to go there. All a sign of a very close relationship with the river, like we kayakers in Munich, have a name for all waves and eddies in which we enjoy practising each summer in the middle of the city. But as we already heard, this relationship has been weakening, unknown to what extent. I hence wanted to investigate into this relationship of the inhabitants of Mostar and Neretva. I redrew views from the river bridges to ask passers-by on that same bridge for the name of the places we can see. Or also just ask for the name of specific beaches or rocks. “Sorry, do you know where Ploča is? – What? Never heard of that place. Are you buying weed there? This is Bunur.” Similarly most of the responses so that I changed my tactic to just asked people very generally about their activities on the river and if they have some relation to specify about places they go or even know names of. In the end only two out of 15 interviewees had multiple memories and stories about the river: a lady around 65 and a 50 year old man reminiscing their happy moments on the river. The bays where they learned swimming, rocks where they jumped into the waters, or the beaches and rocks where they used to go, hang out and sunbath. But all in the past, about 40 years ago. Speaking about Neretva they regret that their children have never swam in Neretva due to the pollution. The only place where people still go to above all is the mouth of Radobolja below, where the narrative of Neretva as the separation of east and west, bridged and reunified by the finally restored Stari Most, the old bridge, is being created, retold, and sold to the tourists in the alleyways of Stari Grad, the old town. The former activities, once taking place on nearly all sections of the river have moved away to new places in and outside the city; for instance to the public baths or even to the sea, which is with the improved transportation quickly accessible. What is left from human activity on the river are some spots where access is formalized in concrete steps and platforms, and mountains of trash beneath the lush foliage of the trees on the shore.

This extreme and quite rapid change of interrelation between a city and its river, or a river and its city was for me the starting point to focus on the relationship between Neretva and Mostar at large. I see it as paradigmatic to the relationship between nature and culture, architecture and landscape and try to rethink with this graduation what it means to build within an organically grown location and not a cleared site in the middle of a city, what it means to cross a territory, to leave traces, to.....

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The Big Story of Neretva

a panorama through time and space

The relationship of Neretva with Mostar can be roughly conceived in xx phases, each characterized by a different conception of nature and Neretva: early settlements in the higher areas of the Bijelo Polje, the Ottoman fortified town, the growing urbanizing city under Austro-Hungarian Rule, the socialist Yugoslav period which was violently halted by the Yugoslavian war that resulted after the intervention of the NATO in the current situation of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Neretva, from the celtic “nera etwa” - flowing divinity - is the main river of the Hercegovina region. It is the only river of the entire Dinaric Mountain range that breaks through the central mountain range and flows entirely overground towards the mediterranean, this way connecting inner Bosnia through Ivan Sedlo with the Adriatic Sea.

No wonder the cities along its way owe much of their identity to the river and its blue-green waters. Especially Mostar, named after the mostari – bridge keepers – guarding this old, important river crossing. Stari most and Neretva became the key elements of the city also shown in the coat of arms of Mostar.

Also for the inhabitants of Mostar Neretva became big part of the stories and tales they construct in their daily lives.

But since the disruptions and destructions of the Yugoslav Wars this close connection seems to have ceased and is under threat of disappearance.

To understand and learn about and from this process, I have researched into the history of the relationship of Mostar, its inhabitants with Neretva, the river running right through its middle.

The product of this research is this panorama of the “Big Story of Neretva”. In drawing and text it explains how the river Neretva experienced the changes, mainly induced by human activity. It is thus written from the perspective of Neretva, a territorial entity, telling her own story and how she witnessed the hi/story of Mostar that counters the anthropocentric division of temporal phases by not caring about history and counting years but only about the repetitive chronology of seasons and years.

This is conducted with a section along the river through time and space. Moving the panorama through the frame, each frame explains the story and context of this specific section of the river, relating it to the wider spatial, territorial developments around. Simultaneously each frame is located in a specific moment in time, contextualizing the geographical changes and developments in a temporal dimension.

The main drawing shows an illustrative depiction of Neretva and her surrounding. The changes and specific events or developments of each timeframe are bordered in red. In the window at the bottom of the frame flip-outs reveal more images and information on these events.

The high mountains of Gredelj. Springing up between rocks and pebbles, I am Neretva. Flowing down, more waters join me, Krupac, Pridvorica. More water. It rains, I grow. Snow melts, I grow. In me sand, pebbles, rocks. Leaves, branches, trees. They might stay in my bed, but not for long.

Skakala. Falling, swirling. Fishes jump up the rapid. Upstream, nests, hideouts. Now. Resting in an eddy, a bay. More fish of various kind, hiding and breeding in my arms of various kinds. Lipljen (grayling), Jegulja (european eel). You know them. But also Nertvanska Mekousna Pastrmka (neretva salmon trout) and Zubatak known not even to all my neighbours, such as Bosna, Zeta.

A long arched shadow below Hum. My narrow, traversed by a stone bridge. Around it stones joined to form houses for people. Ruled by the Ottoman Empire they build a stone wall around them and call it Mostar, like the Mostari, guards of the new bridge.

More little trickles. More people in Mostar, from the territories along the sea or Bosna, Sava and Danube upstream. Water from further away join me in the city as the Mostarci build systems to supply the growing city with water. Radobolja, Djevojačka, falling into me. Little trickles, distant from their main stream.

Right bank. Falling down the cliff. Radobolja water, but in a different location. They carry soil and dirt, fields, gardens and orchards along their way. Fall. Left Bank. Flowing down the slopes. More water. From pebble covered gutters, traces of human food, crafting and other activities.

Blue. Green. Blue-Green. Less sediment in me after the trees on the mountains were felled. For firearms. Or construction. Rain washed the open soil into me. Bura winds blew it into me. On the mountains is little more left than bare karst. Grey-Blue. Blue-Green.

Another bridge upstream the old bridge: Franz Joseph bridge. Different name, different people, different rulers. The Austro-Hungarians extend the city on my western bank. Sediment and soil in the streams and canals decrease with the acres and fields. Now they flow down cobblestone, streets, gardens.

Covered canals. Grand villas, sewage, institutions, grey water, small industries, toxins and fertilizers flow, fall, into, me. The extended city needs no irrigation but canalization, but still me, to carry them away. Cleansing, polluting.

Blue-Green in the sun. Light. Reflection. Colour. The new rulers brought a new behaviours to the city and to my banks on which more and more people,

city dwellers - not farmers - project the sublime, the pure, their lost Eden into me, they make tours along my course, sitting, admiring, dreaming in the natural landscape opposed to their growing city.

More cleansing, and more pollution. The growing city discharges large amounts of contaminated waters into me. I am oily, smelly, dirty after I leave Mostar. Down towards the sea. On my way more growing cities and industries of the Socialist Republic.

My kin is gaining more importance, not just as the sublime, rivers name the land between Danube and Adriatic, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This to counter ethnic nationalism? No Bosnia, no Croatia, no Serbia. But Drava Sava Vrbas Zeta. Do the people on my shores also think of themselves as people of Neretva?

Constructions. I'm diverted. For a while. Back to my old bed I flow with more water growing deeper, wider, longer and slower depositing stones and sediments until I stop. A wall. A dam. Four dams stopping four rivers. Between Neretvas no connection than the turbines. Not for fish. Not for flotsam. No movement. No migration. I dig my bed deeper and deeper. No rocks and pebble stop me from it

Turbines. Releasing water. Who needs electricity? More water. Suddenly. Several meters higher, I flush. Out the habitats of fish, mussels, water plants. Less hiding, less feeding, less migration the animals in me get fewer and smaller. But on my banks, tamed, I see it grow and thrive as I rise not as high anymore, making space for trees and other perennial plants.

I am under control now. Not rain and snow decide when I grow, but the need for energy. I am not as dangerous anymore. Proving their courage, men dive from the bridges, Mostarci on many rocks and beaches, swimming, diving, celebrating I become a place of leisure and enjoyment getting closer with the hearts, lives and identities.

Dead bodies. Falling over on the spot when hit by a sniper bullet or shrapnel I become dangerous, people see and know where they are under threat and avoid my open banks and beaches and especially the bridges over me.

Water scooped out of me. Never before has this happened. A war is raging in the city and I can supply water and shelter. The caves along my riverbed are deep and dark. Industries are bombed, my waters are clean enough to drink.

Bursting. Fire, Falling. Bullets. Flying. Bridges fall. Rebuild. Falling again. Building again. Penetrades. TearAPart. Debris. Shrapnell. Dams out of function. Granades. Withstanding. The war is not around me but in me. With bodies. Their pieces and fragments. From concrete. Radioactivity. Flesh. Lead and Iron. Stone. Blood.

Even though the war has passed I still bear its traces: pieces of bridges, bullets, shrapnel are still laying in my bed, my lower water levels unable to carry them away or even breaking them down.

Not just the traces of the war, more things are thrown into me from rebuilding the city. Without a system to dispose of waste and sewage a lot of it ends up in my bed. Sadly this is the easiest way for the humans to deal with this. More human traces in the waters that join me from all sides. From little streams, pipes and through the ground. Nearly as many people live around my course as 30 years ago. Many lead their waste water directly into the soil. Into me.

Also their household waste, as right after the war, still ends up in the landscape. Wind and water carry it to me.

Also the people living in Mostar have changed. 80% of the inhabitants aren't originally from here and might have never seen me before in their lives. They don't know the names of my rocks, beaches and bays, and don't come to enjoy themselves on my banks as some decades ago.

But the humans also try keeping these things out of the landscape and me. Further downstream way less polluted water is led into me, as the Mostarci have started to (re-)build their canalization and treatment system.

Also the bridges are rebuilt now. Seven of them are crossing my stream now spreading the tale of the reunified and reconciled city out into the world. I wonder if the people in Mostar feel exactly the same about this or not.

Diving into my blue. Some of the old practices of the people on my banks are brought back. Diving boards instead of bridges. I see them coming. Splashing. Some powerful strokes and a deep breath. The divers, Mostar and I are getting again more and more famous.

Especially as this story is being told on and on. People visiting Mostar now only come to the mouth of Radobolja. They admire the arch of the old bridge. Its reflection in my blue-green waters. It is not me anymore. It is just that green

piece of my surface right under the bridge. Mostar condensed into white stone
and blue water.
I am elsewhere.

Mostar-Neretva = Culture-Nature

Asked about his relationship to nature, Mr K. said: Now and then I would like to see a couple of trees when I step out of the house. Particularly because - thanks to their different appearance, according to the time of day and the season - they attain such a special degree of reality. Also, in the cities, in the course of time we become confused because we always see only commodities, houses, and railways, which would be empty and pointless if they were uninhabited and unused. In our peculiar social order, after all, human beings, too, are counted among such commodities, and so, at least to me, since I am not a joiner, there is something reassuringly self-sufficient about trees, something that is indifferent to me.³

After having researched about the historical changes in the relationship between Neretva and Mostar and vice versa I contextualized these findings, and especially the tangible, material findings from the field trip into different understandings of nature and culture of which I see Neretva and Mostar as paradigmatic example. And as Donata Valentien puts it: “Water is both friend and foe. An ambivalent relationship: people daydream by the shores of lakes, love the wild sea, celebrate Father Rhine in song, and yet struggle with the river. We can regard the relationship to water as representative of our culture's relationship to nature and the landscape”⁴

The following pages thus compile these different ideas and concepts about how we as humans act and especially interact with nature, and are in return also act upon by it.

Central to this is the opposition of nature and culture in the rational and Christian western tradition, which draws the line clearly between sentient humans and non-sentient non-humans. Different to other societies that this distinction is either made elsewhere or doesn't even exist.

The first concept of nature derives from the fact that human life depends on the natural environment to supply us with food, resources, energy, space. Following the biblical order to subdue nature this culminates in the neoliberal claims that “consumers must believe not only that they should transform nature to meet their needs, but also that their needs are potentially unlimited and are worth satisfying at all costs”⁵ We stake our claim and dig for riches, cultivate for overproduction and exploit for profit. Now humans managed to tame even the flowing divinity Neretva. Four dams have been constructed in its course managing the flow of its waters. Instead of flooding in spring and autumn, Neretva now floods every day when the electricity demand peaks. Flushing out the habitat of aquatic animals, this flow regime takes no nature into account than the alleged human nature of consumption.

In a middle ground between this concept and the following depiction of nature as wilderness is the earlier more agricultural society where nearly all of the houses, outside the city walls of Mostar lived from their fields and gardens. Back then Neretva was described as “downright hostile”⁶ towards humans This reflects also in the earlier understanding of the word wilderness. To be a wilderness then was to be “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren”—in short, a “waste,”⁷ (figure)

I continue with an especially for us, mostly urbanites, important understanding of nature: The conception of nature as the untouched wilderness. Nature in its purest form becomes the lost Eden, materialization of the sacred and sublime. This has its origins in the romantic movement as opposition to the beginning industrialization in Europe. Facing growing cities and urbanization that are seen as alienating of the human from their natural state, and also from the sacred. A utopian state which the modern human often seems to yearn for but cannot reach as their presence would put an end to that ideal. But it can be experienced in the majestic landscapes of mountains, forests, and of course rivers. Entering these spaces human gets closer to the divine purity and sanctity of nature. This “romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.”⁸ It is a concept that oversees the longtime impact of human activity on the natural environment. Such as the deforestation of the very region of Mostar and the Adriatic Coast of the Balkan. Nature in its purity is seen a self-sustaining system able to cope in its ideal state with any intrusion, human or non-human.

This new concept of nature was introduced to Mostar with the Austro-Hungarian occupation in 1878. The new rulers introduce a new form of urban culture that was more related to industrial labour on the plantations and mines around the city. A labour which didn't include actual engagement with the natural environment but a more abstracted manual working of its material, while the products of this industrial production could be consumed in the controlled environment of the city, in cafés or smoking parlours while simultaneously time the wild nature retreated into the distance, and to the emerald river on whose shores the upper class of Mostar spent their idle days in parties and appreciation of the sublime and pure colour of Neretva.

The idealization of nature and its sublimity is in Neretva especially present in the mere visual perception of the river. Either from the bridges, or from the rocks accessible via concrete stairs Neretva serves as backdrop for photos, picnics or other gatherings. Where people penetrate into the wilderness of the riverscape they have to cleave a path into the thicket, walking on muddy paths between the rocks and trunks. The plastic bottles and other things left behind don't seem to harm the blue purity of Neretva and are simply forgotten and ignored. Especially as from the bridges they are hidden underneath the green foliage of the lush trees.

This somehow self-purifying quality of nature can be attributed to the use of rivers and other currents as natural cleaning and disposal system. The old irrigation canals of the western side of the valley nurtured the gardens and orchards but also discharged all the organic waste from the farms into Neretva. Cleansing the city from its waste without ever being affected in its blue-green purity as the city had way less inhabitants than now.

Now many sewage pipes, either the old irrigation canals converted into canalization or self-build pipes after the war still discharge their more or less contaminating content into the riverbed. But due to the larger number of people living along Neretva, in summers the city council issues contamination warnings and advise against swimming in the river. Still better than in the Jablaničko Lake upstream that suffers regularly from eutrophic algal blooms due to the high amount of nutrients brought into Neretva without being able to remediate through oxygenation.

This of course translates into a semiotic meaning, where water and rivers obtain the function of spiritual cleaning. While in Christian culture water was limited to the baptism, in the Muslim town of Mostar the first public fountains in the city, were located at the mosques, where they supply water for everyday life as well as the spiritual washing before the prayer.⁹ It is no wonder that the mihrab, the prayer niche of the imam, of the Tabhana Mosque is located right above a canal of Radobolja. (figure)

These differences in the different religious traditions take us to the next perspective onto nature which is also closely related to the sublimity of (wild) nature. Parallely with the glorification of the wild nature, folk and fairy tales were seen as source of national myths. They became sources for narratives on ethnogenesis and national identities. Nature was then not only the origin of human, the lost eden, but the spring of collectives and even entire societies.

After the Austro-Hungarian Rule brought an increased interest in the Slavic folk tales, like the “Vila of Narenta”¹⁰, founding myths of the 1918 independent Kingdom of Yugoslavia centred around pan-yugo(south)slavic ethnicity and continuity with the natural territory while abandoning the concept of race and religious differences. This linkage of nation to the idealized territory was a mean to counter rising ethnic segmentation reflecting in the naming of the Yugoslav Banates after rivers crossing these territories. In the socialist period of Yugoslavia too, the monuments to commemorate the national heroes and partisans were often located in remote areas of pristine landscapes. (figure)

In a similar way Neretva has been depicted as the division line between the Catholic and the Muslim communities since the war, even though within the city centre the frontline ran actually further west. (figure)

Instead of being the everyday place where we make our living, “hills and rivers and woods cease to be merely familiar; they become ideological’ as sites of national battles and birthplaces.” Neretva as the alleged separation, embodies the traumas of the war, the anger between the ethnic groups, even though these haven’t necessarily having taken place in the river. This idea of Neretva as space of trauma and the old bridge as remediator and reunification had been repeatedly told internationally and nationally¹¹. Most inhabitants of Mostar thus replied to the question which places on the river they frequent with the de-traumatized zone below Stari Most, while the other zones are not being taken care of and littered in waste.

It seems like this major narrative imposed onto the river leaves no space for other, more personal and more subjective perspectives onto the riverscape that “reflect what’s trusted as the locus of everyday life”¹². A nature that is base of our everyday life and survival, an understanding of nature that stems from “productive labor and the very concrete knowledge that comes from working the land with one’s own hands”¹³; a nature that can also just be the place where we go sit in the sun, drinking a beer; a nature that Bachelard describes with the “with-me, with us’ of fields and meadows” in contrast to the sublime nature of the romantic project.

These subjective tales about Neretva was precisely what I was looking for during my research. Stories of the man who decided to build concrete walls between rocks to catch warmer water from Radobolja and make a pool where kids learned to swim and the kayakers practiced the eskimo roll. Or the older

people who told me about their favourite swimming or sunbathing spots. Small stories of imminent interaction with Neretva, reflected in the toponyms for every little rock. (figure)

Project Intention

In between this field of tension of different and partially contradicting ideas about nature and how we interact with it, I tried to step by step, through reading and also through designing, to define my own position in this discussion and the design of the project.

Coming actually from that very idea of “wilderness experience” as getaway as contrast to the distant relations in the city. I tried to develop design ideas that allowed Neretva to stay the most ‘natural’ possible, without actually realizing how much the inhabitants of Mostar already had interfered in the riverscape and the entire landscape all around, realizing that that there is no way of living without leaving traces. It just depends what kind of traces. (figure)

This means that engaging with nature in a productive relationship doesn’t necessarily mean exploitation. The dichotomy in wilderness and city there is the wide middle ground that Cronon calls Home, a place that can integrate city and wilderness; “the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.”¹⁴ Still from a more romantic, but also more social perspective children do not just consist of “human kind in general” but the “whole sensitive creation.”¹⁵ One could go even further with this, like Donna Haraway with her call to “Make Kin, Not Babies!”¹⁶ Translated to architecture, the drawing of a line, the construction of a differential, making a distinction, a building cannot allow “only the chosen few who decide to live there”¹⁷ into its interior. Instead of building a controlled interior “in the heart” of something (nature), architecture has to rather be “alongside” something, making the area of contact soft, “minimizing the membrane which, from aggressive, insuperable frontier, goes on to become a benign, discreet demarcation.”¹⁸ Instead of taking this line as the central point of demarcation we could rather see the spheres in between. Spheres that are distinguishable by gradients of local, fragile, and complex “atmospheric conditions”¹⁹

Envisioning these ideas in the territory of Neretva we come to think about the vagueness of physical dimensions, the daily and yearly changes of water level, vegetation, sediment... The fluctuating demarcation line that grows and thickens to a sphere of liminal space between water and land. It is “where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.”²⁰ This marginal space “allows us to invert the ratio by which we measure what is significant, and what has agency”²¹ A place where different forms of life can mutually live “the equitable sharing of – unfortunately not inexhaustible – resources.”²² “In dwelling in the world, we do not act upon it, or do things to it; rather we move along *with* it.”²³

When Kengo Kuma says: “I want to ‘erase’ architecture”²⁴, he speaks to a feeling that had been always present in my studies of architecture. The feeling that architecture is focussed merely on the appearance, looking inward in a somewhat self-contemplating meditation. “To prevent an object from appearing, that is to erase architecture. We must reverse our form of perception. Instead of looking at architecture from the outside, we must look at the environment from inside out.”²⁵ The aforementioned membrane separating inside and outside ceases to exist or be visible.

Neretva for me became thus not the space of the wild nature that we can only access as guest. It is our common ground from which we all, in a multi-species understanding, make a living and also gain our freedom to choose our own story and take the responsibility for our doing.

“People have their freedom in the sense that they build it by entering into the chain of life, wherein they know that they must make concessions to others by knowing how to refuse life-destroying forces. From the moment one chooses life-celebratory spaces, performs a sharing of what makes one human, one is free. The obstacle to freedom, here, is to destroy the other, nature, for life is a pact between humans and the elements.”²⁶

I try to envision a design that can make home for the non-human actors already existent in the river as well as for humans to “dwell” in Neretva’s bed. This can be done by structures resistant to the mechanical forces of the floods, but that are in its rigidity flexible or adaptable to adjust to different site conditions as well as users.

Instead of one big structure, the intervention spreads into small pieces, each self-containing itself. But in their combination, in a possible growth from a one or two sites to a network of lines of communications that make the natural environment experienceable and by on the one hand exposing critical problematics, but also by not connecting these with a bad consciousness but relating them to more bright activities, and also reversing associations with formal languages.

STORYSCAPE NERETVA tries to make Neretva part of the overall landscape of Mostar. It tries to widen the margins of the different realms to give mutual understanding and communication and give new vague and open meanings to the spaces along the course of Neretva.

A margin is a “place between Sun and death”. It guides us towards new answers to the question of “how to talk with birds, trees, fish, shells, snakes, bulls and lions.”²⁷

Design

«land also means becoming aware of the dependence on soil, the dependence on relief and water, and to enter into a productive and creative relationship that produces consideration and beauty. It is a misbelief to separate them from another. In the end, a sensitive view and consultation of the world, of the kind that art promotes, can evoke responsibility for the city and nature.»²⁸

As already mentioned above Storyscape Neretva works with solidifying and continuing existing communication lines that access the liminal space between water and land, river and city, to eventually achieve an infrastructure that creates spaces and niches for different beings while allowing humans to also partake in the endeavour of understanding the other agents in the riverscape of Neretva. Through that the spaces which embody traumatic memories or narratives can be filled with new meaning. It doesn’t mean erasing these memories, but trying to work with them and create smaller individual, subjective meanings that do not necessarily counter the dominant narrative of the traumatic war, but complement it with other dimensions, and other realities.

The structures correspond to the way the people of Mostar are still in communication with the Neretva. Mainly these are the outdoor sports associations Brodari Kayak Club, Neretva Mountaineering Club and the Diving Club Neretva.

All interventions combine the encountered problematics, for instance by collecting trash, purifying water or creating hideouts for aquatic life, with cheerful, ludic or cultural opportunities. The first ones related to the activities of the people still in contact with the river.

that are accessible during low water, that reduce to mere access during high water level.

The interventions aim at facilitating the communication between the river. The ones on the edge of the canyon thus demarcate the access points and locations where the mentioned pollution or contamination take place (figure), while interventions within the riverbed are chosen according to their spatial conditions and existing relations and meanings.

Therefore depending on their exact location within the riverbed, the interventions take different strategies. Within the flood zone, structures are made of durable material, preferably sourced from the riverbed itself, like natural stone or gravel, while structures in the higher areas of the riverbed are made of more lightweight materials, reflecting the question of what traces we want to leave in our environment. As long as there is plastic waste, this is thus recycled into structural plastic lumber. The productive use of the waste can create economic incentives to further invest in more high-tech fabrication technologies such as CNC which eventually could be also used for normal timber structures. So, the structures are later envisioned to be out of wood, as the generation of plastic waste hopefully decreases in the future.

The network consists of three main parts: 1. The soft formalization and extension of the existing trails along and towards the river; 2. At the identified spots tree like structures bridging the height difference between the city's and the river's level; 3. In fewer locations within the river structures that become meeting and communication spots for people of Mostar, metaphorically creating their home in the river.

The existing paths down into the gorges of Neretva are, with a few exceptions of concrete paved stairs, only muddy trails that were cleaved down to the river by fishermen, finding the best spots for fishing: calmer eddies behind rocks where the fish hide from the strong current in the middle of the river. Opposite Bunur they have even cobbled a little spot with stones and build a raised path along the river. With normal water level this accesses several smaller bays in which small beautiful waterfalls cascade into the river. Getting closer you realize from the smell that they are the old irrigation canals, that serve now as sewers for the Austro-Hungarian expansion of the city.

The formalization as mentioned depends on the location within the river bed. The paths coming from the built zones and in the higher areas are raised on low stilts, allowing water and also plants and animals to pass underneath. They are covered with structural plastic lumber from the recycled plastic waste of the river and the city. They either follow the existing routes, giving account to the "The people who inhabit the territory [who] are the ones who can really create and transform them, they shape them every day by inhabiting them, going through them, perceiving them and creating them.

Where the access paths are facing the cliff of the gorges, metal trees are growing from the river bending their branches and following the paths up to the street network of the city spreading the fresh water of Neretva into the city. In the branches objects had been caught, like the trash that gets flooded into the trees closer to the river. But there objects are no trash at all, maybe they collect it, or clean sewage, but they also house platforms and rooms from which to observe the river, practice climbing or even dive into Neretva's blue.

Transforming the formal language of the trash washed ashore into a positive, productive relationship also the remediation, loses its potential guilt and trauma and is transformed into a judgment-free activity.

The tree is formed of steel pipes that together with steel beams form space frames that are supported by a base in the river and a moveable bearing on the cliff. Depending on the site then either platforms or volumes are constructed together that enable different activities to the builders. The tree in Baščine for instance is designed to resemble boulders hanging in the tree, allowing the climbers to exercise and practice outside their climbing gym, but still in the city. Another one collects the sewage from Cernica opposite Bunur and offers new diving spots for the cliff diving where they can practice their daring feats. Staring from these two three locations other groups of citizens can initiate more of these trees with their own desired function in location that require remediation or other sort of engagement with the riverscape.

But to really make Neretva home again also of humans that can spend parts of their everyday life on the river, we don't just need access, but also places to gather, to play, to discuss or to simply be. For that fewer interventions are found in some flatter and wider locations in the river. They offer seating, place to meet and celebrate, or just to contemplate. Their form stands in the way of the current in high water, to reduce the force of the waters and offer hiding spots and also collect drift objects such as trash or wood. Build from natural stone the surfaces are porous enough to be inhabited by other forms of life. When the water level is raising the area accessible to humans reduces but is always accessible to paths bridging from the trees.

The first of these interventions is the theatre below Baščine. Located on the area of the former pool it takes advantage of the existing edge as the outside of a circular theatre where a little stream with water from Neretva is flowing through. In little steps of shallow pools reed and other water plants grow, cleaning the water and also offering breeding spots for amphibians. Eventually the now cleaner and warmer water flows down. New concrete walls catch the water and form a new pool that invites to swim and gives the Kayakers from Brodari again a spot where the beginners can practice without currents or difficult whirls.

Together these smaller or bigger interventions try to unlock the entirety of the landscape as our common home. A place where we can encounter others in a true public space, in happy and joyful, sometimes serious but always meaningful way. But the other is not just the people of different religions or from different origins, but extends to everything animate and inanimate as that which we are always surrounded by and in touch with. But "If living in history means that we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then the dilemma we face is to decide what kinds of marks we wish to leave."²⁹

*Una red de mirada
mantiene unido al mundo
no lo deja caerse.
Y aunque yo no sepa qué pasa con los ciegos,
mis ojos van a apoyarse en una espalda
que puede ser de dios.
Sin embargo,
ellos buscan otra red, otro hilo,
que anda cerrando ojos con un traje prestado
y descuelga una lluvia ya sin suelo ni cielo.
Mis ojos buscan eso
que nos hace sacarnos los zapatos
para ver si hay algo más sosteniéndoles debajo
o inventar un pájaro
para averiguar si existe el aire
o crear un mundo
para saber si hay dios
o ponernos el sombrero
para comprobar que existimos.*

Roberto Juarroz: Verticale Poëzie

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