

WATER AS CATALYST

Int

Interventions

AR

Adaptive Reuse

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(re)MADE BY WATER

OBSOLESCENCE, URBAN NOMADISM AND
THE NEW WORLD MALL, BANGKOK

by GREGORY MARINIC

In 1997, an extension to the New World Mall in central Bangkok was ordered to cease operations by the Supreme Court of Thailand due to an unlawful addition. To conform with the court order, owners responded by demolishing the top stories of the annex and abandoning it. The deserted structure attracted vandals who set fires that further exposed the interior to the elements. Monsoon rains slowly flooded the ground floor into a pool of water which came to host tropical fish and aquatic plants. Over the next twenty years, this 'dead' mall incrementally evolved into an ecology connecting the local community to the global backpacker circuit. Here, water radically remade a conventional space of consumption into a place of rogue tourism.

This essay engages my ongoing research of retail architecture and urban obsolescence. It examines how corrupt development practices and partial destruction transformed an ordinary shopping mall into an extraordinary aquatic landscape. This essay acknowledges informal methods of adaptive reuse mobilized by ecology, people, and everyday actions. It begins with an overview of the historical interface of water and architecture in Southeast Asia to provide context for this blended building-landscape. The writing aims to construct a broader narrative surrounding the New World Mall in relation to the spatial theories of Walter



The New World Mall, Bangkok



Benjamin, Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, and Anthony Vidler, as well as practices of urban nomadism across time and cultures. Further, the essay frames a socio-cultural perspective on retail architecture unintentionally remade with water, adapted through everyday practices and rediscovered by global wanderers—a new flâneurie.

**Water and Architecture in Southeast Asia:
A Brief Overview**

Across the geographically and culturally diverse region of Southeast Asia, water has historically served as a primary feature in both sacred architecture and urbanism. Beginning in the third century BCE, the Hindu and Buddhist religions expanded from India into the Indochinese Peninsula via sea trading and overland migration. At the beginning of the Common Era, Indian merchants brought Hindu Brahmins and Buddhist

priests to settle in the region.¹ By the end of the first century, many of the kingdoms of Southeast Asia had adopted Hindu and Buddhist traditions suited to their needs. Since then, both faiths have imparted significant influences on social organization, literature, art, architecture, and urbanism in the region.

Water is revered in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions for its purity, cleansing powers, and spiritual properties. Ancient Sanskrit texts advise that temple sites should include water features that support the growth of lotus, water fowl, song birds, and fish.² Vedic scripture states that such characteristics were meant to engender nirvana and the idyllic realm of deities. As such, the holiest Hindu pilgrimage sites are located along rivers and lakes, while temple compounds in urban environments incorporate constructed pools used for ritual bathing. Similarly, Buddhism employs water as reflecting pools, ponds, and lakes in the landscape design

of temple complexes. Monumental Hindu temples to Vishnu and Shiva, for example, were built during the ancient Khmer empire along major bodies of water.³ Among the most impressive, Angkor Wat was conceived during the twelfth century as a Hindu temple and later converted to Buddhist use. Surrounded by ramparts and a moat teeming with lotus and koi, it demonstrates a strong connection between sacred architecture and water, as well as a spatial fluidity linking the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Today, the nations of Southeast Asia share water aesthetics informed by these hybrid influences.

In contemporary Bangkok, water is an omnipresent and atmospheric condition in the city. Known as ‘The Venice of the East’, the Thai capital was historically defined by a vast network of khlongs (canals) which connected the Chao Phraya River with districts and neighborhoods throughout the urban core. From the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, floating markets served as nodes which spawned the growth of mercantile, social, and cultural activities.⁴ Floating markets allowed farmers and merchants to sell agricultural products, prepared foods, textiles, and other goods directly from their boats. By the twentieth century, however, road and rail networks began to supplant many of the khlongs, while at the same time, others were eliminated due to public health and sanitation concerns.⁵ Today, the Chao Phraya River continues to serve as a primary commuter artery in Bangkok, while floating markets remain active in Wat Sai, Taling Chan, and Khlong Lat Mayom.

**Theoretical Framework:
Consumption, Obsolescence, and Flâneurie**

It is important to situate the lifecycle of the New World Mall within a broader social, historical, and theoretical context. Since the early twentieth century, theorists have routinely critiqued the impact of capitalism on buildings and urban space. It is widely acknowledged that the consumptive origins of contemporary society may be traced to the whims, desires, and projections of the nineteenth century. As evidenced by the twentieth century transition from arcades to department stores, and later, by twenty-first century shifts from a physical world of shopping malls to the virtual world of internet commerce, retail environments have become increasingly obsolete. Continual changes in production, communication, and connectivity have radically transformed the rules of retail, as well as the future of retail building typologies around the world.

Over the course of the twentieth century, theorists Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, and Anthony Vidler analyzed the influence of consumption on urbanism and architectural form. Beginning in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin studied the Parisian arcades to discern the social, architectural, and phenomenological

conditions of a declining nineteenth century retail typology. In his seminal work, “The Arcades Project”, Benjamin viewed the arcades as a visual device, or space frame, that provided the bourgeoisie a curated view on life. Within the confines of these interior worlds, expectations changed and contemporary consumerism emerged.⁶ Benjamin alluded to dreams and fantasies—of the simultaneity of the literal world contrasting with an alternative, controlled, and sublime one existing within the sky-lit arcades. Alongside retailing, the Parisian arcades supported an underworld of illegal and illicit activities. Vices such as gambling and prostitution were beyond direct police jurisdiction, spawning a broader bohemian culture of transients, artists, and gays which challenged racial, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries.

Benjamin’s research on the Parisian arcades was influenced by the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and his characterization of the nineteenth century flâneur as a gentleman stroller of the streets.⁷ For Baudelaire, the flâneur represented the sophisticated urban aficionado who was recast by Benjamin as both a dandy and connoisseur of the modern metropolitan experience. The flâneur was an object of significant scholarly analysis, critique, and understanding of twentieth century urbanity and social conditions. Flâneurs revealed class tensions and gender divisions of the nineteenth century city, while their behaviors shed light on to a broader sense of alienation with modernity, mass production, consumer culture, and societal expectations. In this sense, the flâneurie were not simply limited to the physical act of strolling in the Baudelairean sense, but also implied an enlightened way of thinking, living, and navigating the world.

Representing a hybrid social type, flâneurs were at once a product of the bourgeoisie and the bohème.⁸ Benjamin framed the flâneur as the definitive figure of the modern era, however, it was the habitats of the male flâneur in which he was primarily interested. As an urban stroller and loiterer, perhaps without an ostensible purpose, the flâneur was intuitively invested in the history of the city. In search of the sublime, delightful, or erotic—he wandered the boulevards, parks, cafés, and arcades. The urban forms which gave rise to flâneur culture simultaneously conveyed both aspirational largesse and zones of alienation in the city.⁹ Although the flâneurs met their demise with the triumph of consumerism, other forms of this socio-cultural phenomenon reemerged in the contemporary era. Today, urban nomads and global backpackers seek out authentic experiences in a similar manner to the flâneurs, yet on a transcontinental scale.

**Urban Nomadism and Everyday Forgotten Space
in Bangkok**

The impact of human activities on cities and within

buildings makes the study of the everyday a compelling filter for designers. Unlike the formalized rituals of design, everyday manipulations are anonymous, layered, and unstructured actions likened to social needs and cultural traditions.¹⁰ Independent from the formal hand of professional architects and designers, everyday manipulations — ranging from post-occupancy changes to ground-up adaptations — significantly shape the functional, aesthetic, and qualitative aspects of the built environment. Henri Lefebvre acknowledged the everyday impact of production, consumption, and multiplicity of authorship in the built environment. He asserted that cities, buildings, and interiors are hybrid productions authored not only by designers, but also through cultural traditions, social practices, and autonomous interventions.¹¹ As a Marxist theorist who was critical of economic structuralism, Lefebvre proposed that the everyday manipulation of space is fundamental to the growth of society and the shape of the city.¹² He posits a theoretical perspective that distrusts the heroic, formal, and fashionable, while condemning design practices that operate as agents of commodification. Reframing the design of the built environment with the inverse — the everyday impact of people reshaping space — he celebrates the ordinary actions that cities,

buildings, and interiors receive apart from the top-down hand of designers. Lefebvre fixes his gaze on the lives of designed spaces well beyond the moment of their completion.

In 1956, Guy Debord defined the term *dérive* as “a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” As a founding member of Situationist International, he contributed to shaping a mid-twentieth century discourse of urban drifting which embraced playfulness, constructive exploration, and awareness of psycho-geographical effects.¹³ The *dérive*, a form of urban exploration, demonstrated a significantly alternative engagement with the city than the typical journey or stroll. More akin to the studied encounters of the *flâneur*, Debord and his Situationist collaborators sought to identify fissures in cities, distinct neighborhoods with no correlation to administrative boundaries, the role of urban micro-climates, and the character of places of attraction. As political revolutionaries and provocateurs of the 1960s counter-culture, Situationists proposed a different way to read, analyze, and critique cities. They acknowledged the inherent value of marginalized urban spaces.

The counterculture of the 1960s emerged from the earlier Beat Generation as an anti-establishment social, cultural, and political movement. Its origins may be traced to European bohemianism and a rising awareness of Eastern religions and spirituality.¹⁴ The “hippie” subculture found significant inspiration in non-western cultural traditions and was defined by an ethos of communal living, creative experimentation, ecological balance, and recreational drug usage. From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, young people from North America and Europe incrementally forged an overland route to the East.¹⁵ The “hippie trail” began in London, moved across continental Europe to Istanbul, and then traversed the Middle East and Indian subcontinent to Bangkok. This alternative, modest, and interactive form of tourism contrasted sharply with the bourgeois tastes of the jet set. The trail was defined by hostels, cafés, and shops that catered almost exclusively to Westerners as they journeyed both east and west.¹⁶ Much like the nineteenth century *flâneurs*, these global wanderers sought out the sublime, delightful, and erotic by wandering the bazaars, temples, and markets of the East. Although the hippie trail ended by the late 1970s due to political upheaval in Iran and Afghanistan, its influence on contemporary backpacker culture endures along fragments of the original route.

As Westerners migrated east in pursuit of authentic experiences, the East was developmentally moving west in pursuit of urban modernization and economic expansion. By the early 1970s, a first generation of shopping malls were built in the national capitals of Southeast Asia, joining a retail landscape historically



defined by shophouses, open-air markets, hawker stalls, and department stores.¹⁷ Traditional commercial types were violently displaced in a wave of urban renewal that forged broader streets, infrastructure, and office towers.¹⁸ Retail activities were increasingly relocated and encapsulated within the earliest shopping malls. In 1973, Siam Center opened as the first climate-controlled mall in Bangkok achieving an international standard. Housing sixty shops and the offices of Pan American World Airways and Chase Manhattan Bank, it set a new precedent for retailing in the central business district.¹⁹ By the early 1980s, enclosed shopping malls became increasingly common place, and later, overbuilding throughout the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in notable levels of underuse and abandonment.²⁰ Today, many of the oldest malls in Bangkok have migrated toward remarkably alternative uses.

Located in the Bang Lamphu district, the New World Mall opened in 1982 during the second wave of shopping mall construction. In 1997, a court order filed by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration claimed that an extension to the mall had been built seven stories taller than approved.²¹ In response to the court order, the owners of New World Mall haphazardly demolished its

outlawed floors. The compromised structure attracted arsonists who attempted to burn it down in retaliation for being taller than the Grand Palace.²² Meanwhile, the abandoned mall filled with rainwater, while the exposed floor plates slowly came to host vegetation. Since its closure, litigation between municipal authorities and the owners has focused on who should fully demolish the building or rebuild its roof.

In 2003, residents of the surrounding community released koi, tilapia, and catfish into the waterscape to combat the mosquito nuisance.²³ Locals introduced tourists to the space and began selling food to feed the fish.²⁴ In 2013, 30-year old American backpacker Jesse Rockwell stumbled across New World Mall and wrote a blog post to document his visit.²⁵ By mid-2014, Rockwell's blog was discovered by a popular website, The Verge, and interest in the New World Mall went viral.²⁶ Cyberspace has transformed the mall into a popular stop along the global backpacker trail, while proximity to the Khao San Road hostel district made it accessible to the masses. With increased foot traffic, the narrow alleys surrounding New World Mall spawned mom-and-pop shops and cafés serving a rogue tourist industry.





In an ironic twist of fate — embedded within a city known for its floating markets — the New World Mall represents a radical inversion of retail and water. Blending the vastness of a temple complex with the spatial ambiance of walled aquatic gardens, New World Mall has recast the sacred relationship of water, koi, building, and landscape. Although this unplanned “aquarium” remains extremely popular with tourists, as well as economically beneficial to its surrounding community, municipal authorities view it as a public hazard. In January 2015, fishermen were dispatched by municipal authorities to net the fish for transport to the Thai Department of Fisheries and various bodies of water throughout Thailand.²⁷ Although entering the former shopping mall remains illegal, urban explorers continue to find their way into the condemned structure. Haunted by a recent past much like the dying arcades of Benjamin’s Paris in the 1930s, the New World Mall rests in limbo between politics and the people awaiting an uncertain future.

Reflection

Urban theorist Anthony Vidler uses the term “uncanny” as a metaphor for unplanned influences. In his book, *The Architectural Uncanny*, he analyzes obsolescence in everyday buildings of the recent past — abandoned shopping malls — as the after effects of consumerism, corporate disinvestment, and post-industrial culture.²⁸ Like Benjamin’s analysis of

the arcades, Vidler considers the trajectory of buildings that lose their purposefulness and fade to host alternative uses. He proposes a future vision of retail environments built upon their advancing obsolescence. In a similar manner, the New World Mall has been detached from its intended uses and appropriated by others. It documents a recent past embedded within the dense urban fabric of central Bangkok. As both a public interior and an aquatic landscape, New World Mall exists along the undefined margins of the built environment by means of incremental, parasitic, and illegal actions. Furthermore, the appropriated mall demonstrates subtle similarities with the walled, water-oriented sacred spaces common to both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia. Here, water became a force of spatial appropriation and cultural expression that motivated communal responses. Water represents an informal occupancy that has reshaped the larger built environment, from the inside-out, via natural processes of adaptive reuse. Water became a catalyst for human actions ranging from community mobilization to mercantilism and rogue tourism.

Through an uncommon convergence of circumstances, New World Mall demonstrates how ecology and people transformed an obsolete shopping mall into a place of delight for the twenty-first century flâneurie. Intentionally destabilized by government-sanctioned demolition, this structure also offers a perspective on the transformative forces impacting retail infrastructure

worldwide. While internet-based retail threatens the worldwide viability of sustaining overbuilt physical environments, aging shopping malls also fall prey to shifting urban-suburban redevelopment strategies. In the case of New World Mall, the marriage of physical destruction and water allowed an interior urban space to organically grow within the ruins of a failed space of consumption.

From a design perspective, the temporal nature of retail buildings coupled with shifting socio-economic conditions fuels a vast interior territory of worldwide obsolescence, abandonment, and potential for regeneration. Viewed through the structuralist theoretical perspective of Lefebvre, this de-programmed mall has never been empty — it resonates with subtle traces of the past, fosters social interaction, and draws tourism with links to the Situationist *dérive*. Today, however, the mall exists within a markedly different era defined by the immediacy of social media connectivity to the masses.

It is critical that architects, landscape architects, and interior designers, as makers of the built environment, intentionally anticipate non-conforming future uses in their work. As evidenced here, disruptive and destructive forces can informally reactivate underused buildings and infrastructures. Design scholars and educators should critically engage the ways in which informal occupancies spawn adaptation and consider advocating for occupancies that organically grow and change over time. Likewise, it is important for designers to understand narratives of places and users as they seek effective ways to contextualize design problems²⁹ and embrace more nuanced, porous, and adaptive ways of intervening in the built environment. They will need to better anticipate diverse forms of appropriation that take root within the buildings and spaces that they design. By celebrating the inherent value of informal adaptations in an era of diminishing resources, designers can recalibrate their agency by supporting regenerative, emergent forms of urbanism.

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PROJECT CREDITS, INFORMATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES

EDITORIAL

Project Name_ Projecting Change

Image Credits: Neethi Abraham, Angelica Carvahales, Udeeta Jain, Mengran Jiang, Vinoti Kabara, Krishna Lingutla, Sneha Mathreja, Hana Mehta, Gloria Ramirez, Eshank Rishi, Eder Romero, Yinghua Tan, Rohit Vantaram, Ananya Vij, Plub Warnitchai, Mengyue Zhou

BREATHE, LOOK, STAND UP

Project Name 01_ DC ExchangeProject_Site_ McMillan Slow Sand Filtration site_ Location_ Washington DC_ New use 01_ Community center, marketplace, performance_ Project Name 02_ People's Liberation Army No. 1102_ Location_ Shenyang China_ Original architect_ Communist Party China_ Rehabilitation architect_ META-Project_ New use 02_ Exhibition space, mini theatre

Image Credits_ Figure 01,02, 08_ McMillan slow sand filtration site, Washington, DC, Lewis Francis; Figure 03 –07_ Public Folly, Shenyang, China, META-Project; Figure 09_ Courtesy of Lindsay Winstead

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THE TEARS OF THE U.S.S. ARIZONA

Project Name_ A tomb that lives; Location_ Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Image Credits_ Figure 01_ View of USS ARIZONA taken from Manhattan Bridge on the East River in New York City on its way back from sea trials. December 25, 1916, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print;photographer_EnriqueMuller,Jr./E.Muller;1916;Wikimedia; Figure 02_ A TOMB THAT LIVES Monument proposal, illustration by author; Figure 03_ An aerial view of the USS Arizona Memorial, U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 3rd Class Jayme Pastoric, Wikimedia

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THE EDGE OF CONDITION

Project Name 01_ Three Mills_ Bromley-by-Bow_ River Lee_ London, England_ Project Name 02_ The White Building_ Lee Navigation Canal_ Hackney Wick_ Stratford, England_ Project Name 03_ The Marine Engine House_ Walthamstow Reservoirs

Image Credits_ All images courtesy of the authors; Figure 01, 02_ Three Mills Island, London_ Figure 03_ White Building_ Hackney Centre Wick_ Stratford_ Figure 04_ The Sinking Future Post Apocalyptic Flood Survival Centre.

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

Image Credits_ Figure 01_ The Big U, Courtesy of Bjarke Ingels Group; Figure 02, 03, 05) by Julia Casol; Figure 04_ Courtesy of H+N+S Landscape Architects; Figure 06_ Dijkdoorbraak bij Bemmel, 1799, Christiaan Josi, naar Jacob Cats (1741 – 1799), 1802, source: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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THE OYSTER BLOCKS PROJECT

Project Name_ The Oyster Blocks Project

Image Credits_ Figure 01 – 07_ courtesy of the author

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THE HAMMAM OF ERBIL CITADEL

Project Name_ Hammam of Erbil; Location_ Erbil, Iraq

Image Credits_ Figure 01 – 04_ courtesy of the authors

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(re)MADE BY WATER

Project Name_ New World Mall, Bangkok, Thailand

Image Credits_ All images courtesy of the author; Figure 01_ Mall; central court, Photograph by Perfect Lazybones; Figure 02_ Floating market in Bangkok, Photograph by Georgie Pauwels; Figure 03_ Mall, escalators, Photograph by Olga Saliy; Figure 04_ Mall, koi, Photograph by Olga Saliy; Figure 05_ Mall, escalators, Photograph by Olga Saliy.

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T-HOUSE

Project Name_ T-HOUSE, theoretical project; Location_ Hains Point, Washington, D.C.

Image Credits_ Figure 01 – 08_ courtesy of the authors

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THE BLUE LINE

Project Name_ blue developments; Location_ Battir, Palestine; Qeparo, Albania

Image Credits_ Figure 01- illustration by author

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ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY

Project Name 01_ Caiaques kayaks; Location_ Pinheiros River, São Paulo, Brazil; Artist_ Eduardo Srur; Project Name 02_ Pets; Location_ Tietê River in São Paulo, Brazil; Artist_ Eduardo Srur

Image Credits_ All photos courtesy of Eduardo Srur; Figure 01_ Caiaques, kayaks, Pinheiros River, photo_ Eduardo Nicolau; Figure 02_ Caiaques, kayaks, Pinheiros River, photo_ Alexandre Schneider; Figure 03_ Pets, Tietê River, photo_ Eduardo Srur; Figure 04_ Pets, Tietê River, photo_ Almeida Rocha

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A METROPOLITAN PARK OF WATER

Project Name_ Metropolitan Water Park project, Location_ Saragossa, Spain

Image Credits_ Figure 01_ Bridge Pavilion & Third Millennium Bridge, Río Ebro, Zaragoza, España, Source_Pabellón Puente y Puente del Tercer Milenio, Author_ Juan E De Cristofaro from Zaragoza, España, CC-BY-SA-2.0; Figure 02_ Google Earth aerial view of Zaragoza, Spain; Figure 03_ Plano topográfico de la ciudad de Zaragoza del siglo XVIII, Wikimedia;

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BETWEEN RESILIENCY AND ADAPTATION

Image Credits_ All images courtesy of the author; Figure 01_ by author, background_ by Aleks Dahlberg at www.unsplash.com; Figure 02_ by author; Figure 03, 04_ graphic by author, background_ by Frantzou Fleurine; www.unsplash.com

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WATER AS MEDIUM

Project Name 01_ Water tower in Delft, Architect_ Rocha Tombal; Location_ Delft, NL; Project name 02_ Water tower in Brasschaat, Architect_ Crepain-Binst Architects; Location_ Brasschaat, Belgium; Project name 3_ Water tower Sint-Jans convent, Overijssel; Architect_ Zecc Architects; Location_ Overijssel, NL

Image Credits_ All images courtesy of the authors_ Figure 01_ typological evolution of the water tower, Source: Ingeonné; Figure 02_ Water tower in Delft (NL), photo by Christiaan Richters; Figure 03, 04, 05_ Water tower in Brasschaat (BE), Crepain-Binst Architects, photo_ Crepain Binst; Figure 06, 07_ Water tower Sint-Jans convent, Overijssel (NL), Zecc Architects, photo_ Stijn Poelstra, <http://www.stijnstijl.nl/>;

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Michael Leighton Beaman is the founding principal of Beta-field, a design/research office run with Landscape Architect and educator Zaneta Hong. Michael is also a co-founding member of the design nonprofit GA Collaborative. Michael currently teaches at the University of Virginia where he is an Assistant Professor in Architecture and at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he is a critic in the Interior Architecture Dept. In addition to teaching and practice, Michael is a writer for *Architectural Record* focusing on design technologies and techno-centric design practices.

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Dr Graeme Evans is Professor of Urban Design at Middlesex University, Department of Design and Director of the Art & Design Research Institute. He has been leading a research project in the Lee Valley as part of a 3 year Arts & Humanities Research Council-funded project: Towards Hydrocitizenship, exploring the changing relationships between people, ecosystems and urban water landscapes, and the legacy of waterside architecture and heritage. In June 2015 he curated the Hackney Wick & Fish Island Connecting Communities Festival including an exhibition of site-based design schemes including BA Interior Architecture student work, as part of the London Festival of Architecture. Graeme is also Professor

of Culture & Urban Development at Maastricht University, The Netherlands where he has been working on several industrial heritage re-use schemes.

Alexander Ford earned a B.S. in Architecture from the University of Arizona in 2014, and an M.S. in Historic Preservation from Columbia University in 2016. Ford currently works for Daniel Libeskind in New York. His architectural work has been published internationally.

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EDITORS

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