INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

école d'architecture paris-malaquais

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS SCIENCES & LETTRES

école nationale supérieure d'architecture de paris-belleville

27–28 May 2027
Paris

WATERS AS MATRICES WATERS AS IMPRINTS

Coexistence between human milieus and the water environment

Open to all researchers, particularly early-career researchers and PhD candidates in architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, geography, and related disciplines.



ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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RéSOIE and Chronotopia educational and scientific networks
of the French Ministry of Culture

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

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ipraus institut parisien de recherche architecture urbanistique société

ACS Architecture Culture Société

LIAT Laboratoire Infrastructure Architecture Territoire

Studio Paola Viganò

la Biennale di Venezia di Architettura

Chaire MAGE

ARCHITECTURES DE L'EAU VILLES ET PAYSAGES

The human being is the living being separated from life by science and seeking to rejoin life through science.[1]

The contemporary city is a site of dynamic complexity, where the reciprocal relations between humans and non-humans intersect and intertwine. Faced with this growing complexity, contemporary urbanism increasingly turns to interdisciplinary approaches that take human, social and environmental interactions into account. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries onward, under the impact of the transformations unleashed by the industrialization of the previous century, which profoundly disrupted the spatial and social organization of traditional cities, many thinkers proposed a renewed perspective that helped frame the city as a place of multiple dialogues, in perpetual transformation. These traditions of thought stressed that we inhabit *milieus* that shape us as much as we shape them.

Paul Vidal de La Blache (1845–1918), a pioneer of the French school of human geography[2], laid the groundwork for what Lucien Febvre later named possibilism, in opposition to geographical determinism: the idea that human societies interact with the natural environment in order to draw from it diverse possibilities for inhabitation and spatial organization. Throughout the twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty, Canguilhem, Simondon, Deleuze and Guattari each, in their own way, rethought the relation between living beings and their *milieu* (*Umwelt*, the organism's subjective environment). In *The Three Ecologies*[3], Félix Guattari (1930–1992) introduces the concept of "ecosophy" to designate a comprehensive ecological approach linking environmental, social and mental ecology[4]. Kitarō Nishida[5] (西田 幾多郎, 1870–1945), Japanese philosopher and founder of the Kyoto School, developed a logic of place that overturned the subject-centred principle of logic and rationalism developed in Europe since Plato and Aristotle. Martin Heidegger, in his 1951 essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*[6], explores dwelling as a mode of "being-in-the-world" deeply rooted in place; he understands the act of building as an experience fundamentally bound to the individual in relation to their environment. Philippe Descola (1949–) proposes an anthropology of nature; for him, the concept of nature is a purely Western invention, while the non-human is not a system of resources external to human beings. Michel Serres[7] (1930–2019) and Bruno Latour[8] (1947–2022) likewise develop conceptions of reciprocal relations between humans and non-humans. Augustin Berque (1942–) calls this interaction *mediance*; in his view, landscape is an "imprint" because it expresses a civilization, and a "matrix" because it in turn shapes our ways of perceiving, conceiving and acting, thereby orienting a society's relation to space through an "infinite loop of co-determination"[9]. Not only do we modify the *milieus* with which we remain in constant communication, but these *milieus* simultaneously modify us through a historical process of reciprocal adaptation.

The idea of "imprint" and "matrix" therefore introduces a relation of reciprocity: societies inscribe their values, techniques and representations in the world's landscapes, while those landscapes, in return, orient our perceptions, structure our practices and shape our ways of inhabiting.

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[1] CANGUILHEM, Georges, 1952. La connaissance de la vie (Knowledge of Life). Paris: Hachette, pp. 114–115.
[2] VIDAL DE LA BLACHE, Paul, 1922. Principes de géographie humaine (Principles of Human Geography). Paris: Alcan.
[3] GUATTARI, Félix, 1989. Les Trois Écologies (The Three Ecologies). Paris: Galilée.
[4] He criticises traditional ecological approaches, often reduced to technical and environmental dimensions, and argues for a broader perspective in which the ecological crisis is inseparable from crises of human subjectivity and social relations. For Guattari, any genuine ecological transformation requires a rethinking of our ways of life, our social structures and our natural environments.
[5] Nishida sought to bring Western philosophy into dialogue with spiritual traditions from East Asia; he also introduced Husserlian phenomenology to Japan.
[6] HEIDEGGER, Martin, 1951. "Bâtir, habiter, penser" ("Building Dwelling Thinking"), in Essais et conférences. Paris: Gallimard.
[7] SERRES, Michel, 1990. Le Contrat naturel (The Natural Contract). Paris: François Bourin.
[8] LATOUR, Bruno, 2015. Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique (Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime). Paris: La Découverte.
[9] BERQUE, Augustin, 1984. "Paysage-empreinte, paysage-matrice: éléments de problématique pour une géographie culturelle" ("Imprint-landscape, matrix-landscape: elements of a problematic for cultural geography"). L'Espace géographique, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 33–34. DOI: 10.3406/spgeo.1984.3890.

More than any other element of a *milieu*, water makes this reciprocity legible. Along the former Silk Roads, water appears in many forms. It manifests itself in rivers, streams, lakes, deltas and ports; it is retained in basins and cisterns, it circulates through canals, and at times it hides underground in galleries and wells. It governs distance and halting places, crossings and hospitality; it gives rhythm to gestures, measure to forms, and conditions to human life. For a long time, it was at once what made territories and what territories made of it: matrix and imprint in one and the same movement.

For centuries, in many of the territories traversed by these routes—from China to the Mediterranean, by way of Japan, Southeast Asia, India, the Persian world, Anatolia, the Bosphorus and the Balkans[10]—water was simultaneously the matrix and the imprint of human society. It structured settlements, regulated densities, oriented urban fabrics, dictated microclimates and produced urban continuities from the watershed to the house; in return, it was patiently worked and transformed through works, infrastructures, rules, rites and forms of sharing. These hydraulic skills and water knowledges also travelled, were appropriated and reinterpreted over time through the exchanges and circulations specific to the Silk Roads[11]. Water already bore the mark of human societies, but within a logic of reciprocity that still held.

Yet our own time seems to displace this reciprocity[12]. Rapid modernization, accelerated metropolitan growth, heavy infrastructures, the standardization of hydraulic networks, but also the intensification of climatic and social events are pushing water toward a condition that is increasingly one of imprint: it is captured, pumped, stored, recalibrated, displaced and exhausted. Water remains matrix, sometimes brutally so, but the historical reciprocity is under strain. The careful relation between inhabited forms and water environment is deteriorating, and the city itself bears the symptoms.

On the basis of these premises, this conference invites us to understand water as an element within a relational environment: what societies inscribe in water, and what water inscribes, in return, in our ways of inhabiting.

The aim is to bring fundamental research, action research and teaching into dialogue to examine relations between the city and the water environment and their transformations: from reciprocity to unilateralism, and toward new attempts at cohabitation. The former Silk Roads—those historical roots of commercial exchange that define geographical areas connected by circulations of knowledge, techniques and representations—serve as the conference's geographical anchor. Contributions are therefore expected to reveal both structural convergences and cultural differences in urban ways of capturing, distributing, representing and governing water, showing how different contexts produce analogous technical responses or, conversely, singular configurations.

The conference is also open to early-career researchers, in order to welcome fresh perspectives: those of a generation that inherits the imbalances produced in particular during the second half of the twentieth century, but that also invents, through its surveys, narratives and projects, other ways of reading the environment and composing with what already exists.

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[10] UNESCO, "About the Silk Roads". Available at: https://fr.unesco.org/silkroad/propos-des-routes-de-la-soie (accessed 14 Feb. 2026).
[11] See Xavier de Planhol, Henri Goblot and Papoli Yazdi.
[12] KAIKA, Maria, 2005. City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City. New York: Routledge. — SWYNGEDOUW, Erik, 1999. "Modernity and hybridity: Nature, regeneracionismo, and the production of the Spanish waterscape, 1890–1930." Annals of the Association of American Geographers, vol. 89, no. 3, pp. 443–465. — COUTARD, Olivier, 2003. "La face cachée du service universel: différenciation technique et tarifaire dans le secteur de l'eau en Europe." In SCHNEIER-MADANES, Graciela and de GOUVELLO, Bernard, eds. Eaux et réseaux: les défis de la mondialisation. Paris: La Documentation française; Université de Paris III, pp. 111–129. — GOUBERT, Jean-Pierre, 1986. La conquête de l'eau: l'avènement de la santé à l'âge industriel. Paris: Robert Laffont.

Conference aims

- To discuss, at the scale of the Silk Roads, the transformation of relations between water environment and human society.
- To identify the modes and tipping points through which water tends to shift from matrix to imprint, and to analyze their urban, territorial and social effects.
- To bring archives, fieldwork, cartography, analysis, narratives and project-based practices (architecture / urbanism / landscape) into dialogue around a common question: the reciprocity introduced by the "matrix / imprint" concept under conditions of crisis.
- To cross disciplines and methods, welcoming both theoretical papers and operational approaches (experience-based feedback) on questions of vernacular architecture and urbanism related to water.
- To open a trajectory of scholarly dissemination: publication and exhibition.

Thematic strands

(Each proposal may be rooted primarily in one strand while engaging with the others.)

Strand 1 — Waters as Matrices: Morphogenesis and Settlement Patterns

How has water made form—and how does it continue to do so—along the Silk Roads? This strand explores water as a generative principle of form, as an environment that guides settlement, calibrates densities, organizes thresholds, dictates microclimates and holds together multiple scales, from the watershed to the neighborhood and from the neighborhood to the house. The aim is to observe how hydraulic infrastructure, irrigation, water supply or drainage systems, and water-related public spaces (banks, baths, basins, gardens, etc.) have produced specific urban forms and situated architectures. Contributions may examine continuities between hydrology, topography, materials, spatial organization and social forms: what water enables, what it forbids, and what it compels societies to invent.

Research on the hydraulic cities and territories of the Iranian world, the Maghreb and the Mediterranean shows that water acts as a true matrix of settlement. From Iran's qanats[13] to Morocco's khettaras, from the oases of Tafilalt to the underground systems of Siena, human societies have been structured around hydraulic systems that jointly organize the urban fabric, irrigated lands, public spaces and forms of sociability[14]. Étienne de la Vaissière's work on the Silk Roads and the cities located along them[15] shows that, by capturing water derived from glaciers rather than direct precipitation, oasis societies constructed a human *milieu* whose stability depends on the technical and collective mastery of that flow. Water thus becomes a total planning fact governing both urban morphogenesis and social order. Silk Road caravan trade, though focused on luxury goods, relied on the robustness of these oasis infrastructures, which made it possible to connect networks at the scale of Eurasia. Drawing on one or more examples from territories along the ancient Silk Roads—from China to the Mediterranean, via Japan, Southeast Asia, India, the Persian world, Anatolia, the Bosphorus and the Balkans—we invite participants to consider the following questions.

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[13] The qanat, also known as kâriz or khettara, is a system for capturing and conveying groundwater based on a line of successive wells and a gently sloping gallery adapted to the natural topography of the terrain.

[14] PAPOLI YAZDI, M.; VOSOUGHI, F. Civilisation Karizi. Mashhad (Iran): Papoli Publishing, 2024. (Text in Persian.) — SAFINEZHAD, J. Les systèmes d'irrigation traditionnels en Iran. Mashhad (Iran): Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi, 1989. (Text in Persian.) — KOBORI, Iwao, 1996. Water System in Arid Lands: Formation and Diffusion of Qanat. Tokyo: Taimei-do. — COULAIS, Jean-François, 2022. "The space-structuring agency of kahriz." In The Kahriz as an Architectural Monument, Sustainable Source of Water and Factor of Social and Economic Development. International conference, Baku, 26–27 May 2022.

[15] DE LA VAISSIÈRE, Étienne. Asie centrale, 300–850. Des routes et des royaumes. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2024.

Questions

What, within an urban fabric, derives from a "water rule" and from a vernacular matrix?

What forms of relationship between water, society and urban and territorial planning can sustain water's matrix-forming role?

What continuities can be traced between hydraulic devices and forms of sociability?

Strand 2 — Waters as Imprints: Governance and Modernization of Networks

When the water environment becomes primarily the object of our interventions, what remains of water as *milieu* (the organism's subjective environment)? This strand focuses on situations in which water is profoundly reconfigured by human societies, to the point of becoming a pure imprint of their intentions. Water is no longer simply "mastered"; it is reconfigured, and with it the whole environment is transformed. With the progress of hydraulics in the nineteenth century, followed in the twentieth century by the generalization of supply and sanitation networks, the horizon of water available at will—wherever desired, whenever desired, in supposedly unlimited quantities—imposed itself. This promise of universality went hand in hand with deep drilling, long-distance transfers, embankments, the burying of rivers and urban networks, the separation of dry and wet, generalized channelization and soil sealing. Consequently, the modern city seeks less to compose with the water cycle than to neutralize it, accelerate it or render it invisible. In other words, water becomes the imprint of a rapid and large-scale development model.

From Mesopotamia to the Nile systems, from Syrian *norias*[16] relayed as far as Toledo and Córdoba to the aqueducts of imperial Rome, hydraulic infrastructure appears as an instrument of production, government and representation; as soon as water becomes an object of control, it simultaneously becomes a support of power, prestige and monumentalizing, from Roman baths to the scenographic devices of the Renaissance. Imprint is not a recent phenomenon; what changes with the modernisation of networks are its scale, intensity, abstraction and the growing dissociation between hydraulic network, milieu and inhabited experience[17]. Several works help us characterise this moment when water "tips" toward imprint without playing its matrix-forming role. Jamie Linton has shown how modernity produced an abstraction of water, reduced to a quantifiable resource, and how this desocialization, in turn, authorizes a broad freedom of planning and manipulation, often at the cost of a severance from *milieus*[18]. At the urban scale, Kaika and Swyngedouw have proposed a reading of modern networks in which water becomes the emblem of those infrastructures rendered invisible and naturalized, infrastructures that organize the city while masking the politics of their choices[19].

Questions

How can the human imprint be read in the forms of water and in water landscapes?

At what point do architecture, urbanism and landscape architecture cease to work with the natural milieu, instead dominating it through unilateral transformation?

How are technical and political choices translated into urban and territorial vulnerabilities?

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[16] The noria represents the most highly developed ancient hydraulic device in the history of water exploitation in Syria. It was a major invention for irrigation and for meeting the needs of riverside settlements. These hydraulic works make it possible to draw water and raise it by means of a system of wooden bucket wheels driven solely by the force of the current. The noria is a remarkable invention that can lift water some ten metres to a canal, making it possible to irrigate river terraces over fairly large surfaces, ranging from 20 to 50 hectares per noria.

[17] COULAIS, Jean-François, 2022. "Architecture de l'eau, une présence au monde." Archiscopie, no. 28, January 2022, pp. 7–19.

[18] LINTON, Jamie, 2009. What Is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

[19] KAIKA, Maria and SWYNGEDOUW, Erik, 2000. "Fetishizing the modern city: The phantasmagoria of urban technological networks." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, vol. 24, pp. 120–138.

Strand 3 — Beyond the Matrix / Imprint Opposition; Toward a Relational Understanding of Water

This strand welcomes proposals that seek theoretical, critical and operative frameworks for recomposing reciprocity between water *milieus* and human *milieus*, without idealizing older inheritances or denying the technical, political and social depth of contemporary infrastructures. The point is less to return to a time before modernization than to explore the conditions for a transformation capable of restoring to water a matrix power—that is, a capacity to reorient urban forms, maintenance practices, collective uses, decision-making processes and design cultures. Such "recomposition" may take the form of feedback from completed projects, research by design, or critical analyses of ongoing experiments. Several contemporary practices treat water as a primary material of design. They exemplify an approach in which water becomes a guiding principle of urban and architectural design, from reading the site to decisions concerning form, use and maintenance.

The notion of the "porous city" developed by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò embodies this idea. Their work on the Grand Pari(s) of the Paris metropolitan area in 2008–2009, later published as *La ville poreuse. Un projet pour le Grand Paris et la métropole de l'après-Kyoto*, presents porosity as an analytical and projective tool for thinking about the adaptability of urban fabrics, the thickness of soils, water, vegetation and the dynamics of nature in metropolitan transformation. The concept of the "sponge city", developed by Kongjian Yu and Turenscape, together with its European extensions, notably the water squares designed by DE Urbanisten in Rotterdam, offers another way of working with water in the city: rather than seeing it solely as a risk, these approaches aim to retain, slow, infiltrate and filter water, and make it visible again in soils and public spaces. Water can thus once more become a primary material of urban design, capable of generating forms, atmospheres and continuities between humans and their environment. In Rotterdam, water squares turn ordinary public spaces into temporary rainwater retention facilities during rainfall, revealing the water cycle in the everyday experience of the city. These approaches also intersect with research frameworks describing a transition towards water-sensitive cities; Wong and Brown insist that a genuinely "water-sensitive" city cannot be reduced to technical devices alone, but rests on a joint transformation of infrastructures, practices and urban cultures, which they describe as a transition pathway rather than a model to be imposed[20]. Research on water networks and services in France likewise reminds us that sustainability depends as much on institutions, regulation and maintenance as on technology itself[21]; these works converge on the idea that water is a deeply political and social object. The water-sensitive city thus appears as a process of permanent negotiation between technology, institutions and society.

Questions

What would a city look like if it regarded water as a matrix-forming force?

How can an "ethics of *milieu*" be translated into operational forms?

Which methods can articulate water, soil, climate, uses, politics and project?

[20] WONG, T. H. F. and BROWN, R. R., 2009. "The water-sensitive city: principles for practice." Water Science and Technology, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 673–682.

[21] BOULEAU, Gabrielle and GUÉRIN-SCHNEIDER, Laetitia, eds., 2011. Des tuyaux et des hommes. Les réseaux d'eau en France. Versailles: Éditions Quæ, "Indisciplines" series. ISBN 978-2-7592-1674-1.

Participation formats

To bring together research, design and representation, the conference welcomes several formats:

- Oral paper (15 minutes + discussion)
- Thematic panel (60 minutes, 3 to 5 speakers + discussion)
- Poster / visual contribution (cartographies, drawings, etc.)

Submission requirements

Proposals for presentations must include the following information:

- First name / surname / affiliation / contact details (email address, telephone number)
- Title of the proposal
- Main thematic strand (1–3)
- Abstract: maximum 5,000 characters, including spaces (excluding the bio-bibliographical note), outlining the objectives, key issues, research question, methodology and findings, together with 5 keywords
- Short bibliography (maximum 5 references)
- Short biographical note of the author (maximum 1,000 characters)
- Preferred presentation format (oral presentation or poster submission)
- Indication of whether participation will be in person or online

Poster / visual contribution

- A0 format, landscape (PDF, 300 dpi)
- Captioned illustrations (maps)

Evaluation

Proposals will be evaluated by the scientific committee according to the following criteria:

- clarity of the research question and scholarly grounding;
- quality of the method (archives / fieldwork / data / project);
- contribution to the “matrix / imprint” theme and to a multi-scalar reading.

Important Dates

Proposals must be submitted in Word format (.docx or .odt) no later than 15 January 2027 to the following email address: av.resoie@paris-belleville.archi.fr.

The Scientific Committee will notify applicants of its decisions in 15 March 2027.

Scholarly outputs

A publication is envisaged, together with the possibility of disseminating the contributions through a poster exhibition.

Technical committee

Chair: Kasra ALIZADEH
Assisted by: Mete KUTLU (PhD), Hanlong CAO (PhD candidate), Thomas SWIERZINSKI (PhD)

Scientific committee

- **Noriko AKITA**, Dr. Eng., Professor, Planner, Landscape Designer, Chiba University, Department of Environmental Science and Landscape Architecture, Director, The City Planning Institute of Japan
- **Ayda ALEHASHEMI**, co-director of the Water Architecture Chair, ENSA Paris-Malaquais
- **Bruno BARROCA**, Director of the ED VTT Doctoral School, University Professor and researcher at Lab'Urba
- **Frédéric BERTRAND**, Associate Professor, ENSA Paris-Belleville
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