

City Springs – artists’ interventions in re-visioning our cities

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Cities are built on a sophisticated infrastructure of water and waste water conduit systems. The impetus of this paper is the vision of a future in which the buried watercourses are brought back to the surface to deliver beauty and fresh clean water. A future in which we will understand and respect the vital nature of water, and in which we will work with the natural flow of the water cycle to provide our needs, sourcing more water locally, and using it not once but many times for different purposes.

Water will be processed and cleaned throughout the watercourses, using a variety of technologies from rhizofiltration and phytoremediation to flowforms and other water flow methods. This paper examines the technologies currently available and discusses their suitability for local use.

The paper proposes the creation of a pilot project : a water feature, using naturally occurring springs on the Parkland Walk, an abandoned railway line that is now a nature reserve. Channels of water, creating a spiralling pattern, will connect wildlife pools being constructed at the sites of the springs. The use of technology designed by Viktor Schauburger in the 1930s is discussed in the context of this project. This creates the cycloid-spiral vortex in the water that Schauburger believed would prevent silting and erosion of the water channels, and improve the quality of the water. The work of Theodor Schwenk is also explored.

The water feature will provide several beneficial uses. The pools will provide habitats for wildlife. The channels will take the water away from the footpath where it regularly causes flooding. The spring water would also be used to water the Naturewise forest garden on Crouch Hill. If the water is of good enough quality, a drinking fountain could be installed. All of these benefits would provide people with the chance to reflect on the existence of fresh running water throughout the city landscape.

Workshops in the local community will produce artworks and texts about the concept of using springs in the city to source water. This will raise awareness of the existence of these springs and many others like them, and awareness of the city as a natural area of resources. The living landscape around us is a blind spot for most city dwellers – unless we ride a bike we are usually barely aware of hills and valleys.

The paper briefly examines the history of London’s water systems, and the problems that led to the rivers being buried and relegated to use as storm runoff drains and sewerage conduits. It looks at the current problems of rising water table, flash flooding, flooding of underground installations and depleted aquifers. This project is a pilot to show what might be done on a wider scale to address these problems.

The potential benefits of using local water in the city, for wildlife, for water cycling, for alleviating environmental problems, for watering plants, are phenomenal. The benefits are both practical and emotional/psychological. Water connects people and places, gives identity to places, has amazing beneficial qualities of helping people to relax and take pleasure in their environment. Using local springs like these is just a step in the direction of bringing some of the underground rivers of the metropolis to light.

When the rivers of London were buried, the infrastructure was in its infancy. We now have the technology to enjoy the benefits of our waterways, and envision a city of the future in which clean, healthy, life-giving water is seen everywhere in abundance.