

## New urban waterscapes (NUW) as a catalyst for societal transition

### HARBORS: From citizen boatyard to River Assembly

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#### RÉSUMÉ

Pour changer notre perception des grands enjeux de notre temps, nous avons besoin de catalyseurs qui rassemblent toutes les dynamiques à embrasser pour pivoter vers un monde responsable et impliquer les citoyens dans ce mouvement. Sémaphores de nos sociétés dans le bouleversement climatique, les nouveaux paysages aquatiques urbains (rivières, canaux, fronts de mer ou lacs, etc.) peuvent jouer ce rôle et être reconsidérés comme les avant-postes d'un nouveau dialogue avec la nature. Nous devons nous interroger sur notre capacité à soutenir ce dialogue et concevoir ce à quoi pourraient ressembler ces formes d'invitation à renouer avec la rivière. HARBORS (Highlight Actions Reconnecting citizens with the Beauty Of Rivers and Seas) est un projet européen en cours visant à réexaminer et à expérimenter une relation renouvelée avec le paysage aquatique urbain en tant que catalyseur de la transition sociétale. Depuis 2022, nous expérimentons et construisons une communauté d'acteurs en France et à l'étranger pour déployer ensemble un récit diversifié pour une vision partagée. À Paris, Copenhague, Barcelone, Amsterdam, Budapest, Chişinău ou Palerme, des organisations et des citoyens se rassemblent pour retisser une relation heureuse et durable avec leur environnement aquatique.

#### ABSTRACT

To change our perception of the major issues of our time, we need catalysts that bring together all the dynamics we need to embrace in order to pivot towards a responsible world and involve citizens in this movement. Semaphores of our societies in the climate upheaval, new urban waterscapes (rivers, canals, waterfronts or lakes, etc.) can play this role and could be re-considered as outposts of a new dialogue with Nature. We need to question our ability to support this dialogue and design what these forms of invitation to renew contact with the river could look like. HARBORS (Highlight Actions Reconnecting citizens with the Beauty Of Rivers and Seas) is an on-going European project dedicated to re-examine and experiment a renewed relationship with urban water landscape as a catalysts for societal transition. Since 2022, we've been experimenting and building a community of players in France and abroad to unfold together a diverse narrative for a shared vision. In Paris, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Budapest, Chişinău or Palermo, organizations and citizens are coming together to reweave a happy, sustainable relationship with their aquatic environment. We hope that this article will provide an insight into the field of experimentation and open up the possibility of future collaboration or participation.

#### KEYWORDS

Citizens, Commitment, Design, River cities, Transitions // Citoyens, Engagement, Design, Rivières urbaines, Transitions

### 1 THE HARBOR PROJECT: A "CITIZEN" MOVEMENT TOWARDS THE RIVERBANKS FOR SOCIETAL TRANSITION

The HARBORS project is about changing the way we look at things, imagining together and sketching out the city of tomorrow as it transforms itself on, beside and with the water.

To change our perception of the major issues of our time, we need catalysts that bring together all the dynamics we need to embrace in order to pivot towards a responsible world and involve citizens in this movement. Semaphores of our societies in the climate upheaval, **new urban waterscapes** (rivers, canals, waterfronts or lakes, etc.) can play this role. They are special enclaves between man and city, between nature and culture. They are often the first visible urban witnesses of the climate change. These areas of raw, changing nature, interact with urban development and human activity. They began to become again accessible, and a space in demand by citizens, allowing us to imagine new experiments at the crossroads of disciplines, open research and citizen science.

In this context, these blue corridors could be re-considered as **outposts of a new dialogue with Nature**, a playground where social inclusion is the rediscovered relational system between Culture (human activity) and Nature (all living things). This new relationship could be built from the riverbanks upwards seen as a laboratory and an open stage in the heart of the city. This work of facilitating dialogue is today a blind spot for most political decision-makers, but also for citizens and creative people. We need to question our ability to support this dialogue, to develop a new approach to urban ecology and thus to explore our future, the pledge of a living world

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After two major floods on the Seine, Ars Longa was asked in 2020 to take part in a new festival on the Seine called *Odysséeseine*, a gesture between popular culture and sport four years ahead of the *Paris Olympic Games*. First conversations and actions started, like weak signals to call a stronger movement to act intentionally and preemptively. It was the start of a reflection on the possible role of creative talent in **designing what these forms of invitation to renew contact with the river could look like**. By observing similar movements in blue corridors abroad, driven by new narratives and dynamics of citizen engagement, Ars Longa initiated *HARBORS (Highlight Actions Reconnecting citizens with the Beauty Of Rivers and Seas)* an on-going European project dedicated to **re-examine and experiment a renewed relationship with urban water landscape as a catalysts for societal transition**).

It has gathered since then, in Paris and in Europe, a great diversity of partners (creative workers, fablab, local authorities, civil society organization, foundations, etc.) in a diversity of field (art, design, architecture, culture, education, public space, water, river, advocacy, public policy, etc.). And among them : Ars Longa / Odyssée / Petit Bain / Fluctuations / Bleus Paillettes / BOW Architecture / Water Family / IAAC (Barcelona, Spain) / Ecomuseo Urbano Mare Memoria Viva (Palermo, Italy) / FabLab Budapest (Budapest, Hungary) / City of Ile Saint Denis / City of Paris / [Council Departmental du 93](#) / Municipality of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, Denmark) / Danish Design Center (Copenhagen, Denmark) / Fab City Grand Paris / Vraiment Vraiment / Démocratie Ouverte / Wild Legal / Creative For Climate / Assises nationale du Fleuve / Initiative pour l'Avenir des Grands Fleuves / Fab City Foundation / Peer2Peer lab (Epirus, Greece) / Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam, Netherlands) / Research laboratory in architecture, urban planning and society / Renovation Map (Ukraine).

HARBORS was supported in 2022 & 2023 by the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) through its cluster *Climate-KIC*, Europe's largest public-private innovation partnership focused on climate innovation to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and, since 2024, by the European Union CERV program under the PENCE project (Power Europe Narrative for Civic Ecology: empowering citizens and public policy making).

## 2 THE HARBORS PROJECT: A METHODOLOGY OF CONNEXION AND DIALOGUE

The objective of Harbors was to design and build a methodology to create a new way of listening to and dialoguing with the river creating at the heart of urban blue screens, a local awareness of climate and ecology at the heart of the city. In order to do this, among the principle we used and analyzed, we can highlight:

In *HARBORS*, design is conceived **to be activators**. The methodology was structured around **three actions: LEARN, ACT and SHARE** that enable us reconnect with the rivers: collect little stories and testimonies, share histories and tell the story of our relationship with water, inspire and train citizens to reclaim the NUW by re-/unlearning skills, build boat, celebrate and bring people together, write a collective

In *HARBORS*, design is conceived as the ability of creators to **be assemblers** and to **create different types of interaction**: inviting residents to look at things through visible participatory design and construction processes that encourage a different reading of the place where they live, opening up access to the tools and methods of making things so that people can relearn how to use their hands in the service of a collective project, and stimulating learning processes and access to knowledge through very concrete projects that link research, education and creative practices while encouraging different social backgrounds to mix their global vision and local know-how on a common field.

In *HARBORS*, design is conceived to tackle ecological issues **at a local and citizen-driven level**. The action needed to be **a participatory one** engaging political commitment through practice of making things locally and Doing to understand, dialogue and react to the complexity of the present and future world. The workshop is at the heart of the *HARBORS* approach. It is the parliament of the hand, a space for learning and democracy in the service of commitment and inclusion. A place where knowledge, ideas and projects can come together, comparable to the workshops that have appeared over the last two decades, those we call “FabLab” or “MakerSpace”, seeing citizens as **inhabitant-user**.

Rivers, riverbanks, seashores and lakes are not an easy obvious playground for designers, because these environments are often difficult to access or constrained, starting with their banks. *HARBORS* needed to favour action on **a hyper-local scale and prototyping spaces for small forms of dialogue that are accessible to all and replicable**.

In *HARBORS*, design is conceived as a way to **produce a new social and political narrative** including non-human inspirations in the face of the challenges that lie ahead. Each creative intervention needed to be thought of as a language tool, a 'semaphore' capable of producing the signs that will engage a broad public towards this reconnection and a new vision of the blue corridor.

### 3 THE HARBORS PROJECT: EXPERIMENT A PROCESS

The second objective, based on this methodology, was to define and experiment an initial crucible of writing and prototyping to welcome diverse experiments by designers and artist. In this context, we experimented a diversity and complementary of practices dealing with Learn – Act - Share. Among them, we can for instance highlight:

Reconnecting with heritage. HARBORS organized 2 *Seine heritage* workshop sessions during an event called l'Assemblée du Fleuve, which took place on Thursday 14 September 2023 at Les Amarres (a former industrial site on the river that has become a social and cultural venue for migrants). The methodology was inspired by the Reinwardt Academy work methods and analysis named Emotion Networking, an exercise allowing to understand the complex interactions between emotions, interests and different types of knowledge by using complex dynamics of heritage research fields.

Sharing a passion for waterways and discover the people who work on them. Since 2021, this lever has taken several forms. The first has been for instance learning visits along the Seine and canal to meet professionals working on the Seine and canals. Aimed at participants in shipbuilding workshops, the *Tour de Fab* proposal brought together young people who had dropped out of school, the unemployed and migrant associations. During a bike tour, participants discover the trades, skills and passion that drive river professionals: construction, freight, sport, ecology, history and culture.

The micro-shipyard, a weaving place between Culture and Nature. At the heart of the project is a small wooden dinghy called PRAM, designed to be built using the sew-and-glue technique. The boat was designed by the young naval architecture agency BOW (Youri Guedj and Alan Le Calvez) and tested in a participatory workshop by the architects and designers collective *Bleus Paillettes* (Charles Herrou and Tristan Fernandois). Inspired by old Parisian dinghies and DIY construction techniques, the PRAM is designed as an object of desire and sharing. Its aim: to make you proud of your hands and inspire you to sail together in the same direction, in dialogue with the river. In our initial experiments, the workshop is a micro shipyard. Since 2020, ten participative micro-shipyards have been organised, providing an opportunity to experiment different ways of building.

Folk procession. The procession from the shipyards to the river bank. Led by participants in the construction of the PRAM, the public is invited to join in the procession, singing and dancing in honour of the river and the neighbourhood's participation in the solidarity regatta. As it leaves the building site, the boat leads the procession, followed by banners symbolising the spirit of the river. This parade, inspired by certain pagan, festive and sporting practices, has a number of functions that we think are worth activating with a public that is often downtrodden and vulnerable: reinforcing the feeling of belonging to the City of Light and its river, and team spirit.

Social Regatta. Inspired by the *Palio di Siena*, a horse race where different neighbourhoods participate twice a year on the central place "Piazza del Campo", we manage each year a *Social regatta*. It brings together all the PRAM built in the various neighbourhood workshops. Each boat has its own name and the colours chosen when it was built. The skippers taking part in the race are seasoned sportspeople, along with newcomers who are often new to the sport. It's a moment that brings festival-goers together around the values of sport and culture. It's a real regatta that takes place over a 3-hour period to the sound of brass bands and chants on the quayside and banks of the Seine, opposite the race. It is essential to encourage cultural diversity and social relations.

Building community, the River Assembly. The River Assembly, is another original form of peer-to-peer learning. It was tested for the first time in September 2023 in collaboration with several other organizations (in Palermo, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Budapest and Barcelona). By setting up projects in the heart of cities with very different social, political and ecological contexts, we were able to initiate a series of conversations on the history of each city with its blue corridor and explore the common ground, the opportunities for dialogue and the learning spaces that each situation offers to facilitate 'living' together. The second step took place in June 2024.

We have also discovered a lot of existing practices in Europe dealing with the same issues. Last four years, we've seen a number of other inspiring projects in France and abroad that cleverly address this ability to make our relationship with urban aquatic areas visible and poetic. We can think for instance in particular to the Dodola bio-vernacular water filtration system designed and produced by the Slovenian collective Pjorkkala, the fascinating work of artist Robertina Sebanic on oceans and recently on rivers, or Yan Tomaszewski's artistic performance *Sequana*, which reconstitutes and deposits in the bed of the Seine to heal it. This artistic reverence is inspired by the age-old rituals of peoples living in Burgundy, who came to lay wooden figurations of their sick bodies at the source of the Seine, which was called Sequana at this time.

### 4 THE HARBORS PROJECT: MOVING FORWARD TO A RIVER ASSEMBLY

Based on the work and the needs we saw during the first years, we are now, for 2025, working on a new step of the project in the frame of the PENCE European project dedicated to empowering citizens, creative workers and public

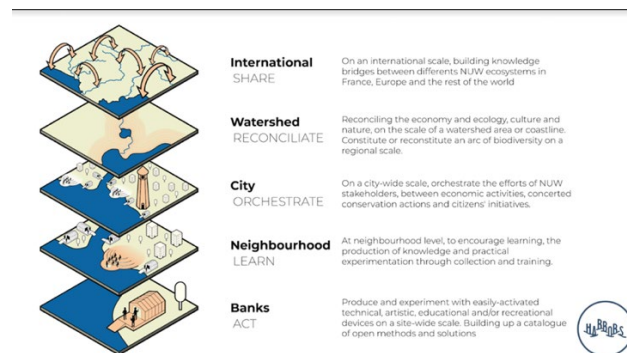
policy making to take urban climate action (Regenerative city) and to showcase a set of instruments, tools, practices and methodologies to boost community's engagement. From the first for years of the project, we were able to gather practices, knowledge, methodology, principles of action, etc. We think it is important now to share these contents.

#### 4.1 Translate into tools

The partners are currently working on a toolbox / toolkit operational: a practitioner catalogue, activable, actionable, playful to active dedicated to practitioners and stakeholders to share methodologies and valorize, visualize and recognize what is existing, new uses, sustainable ways to create commons and dialogue with the rivers.

#### 4.2 Modeling systemic change

The partners are also working on a way to propose a more systemic model of change. HARBORS favors action on a hyper-local scale and prototyping spaces for small forms of dialogue that are accessible to all. In the same time, it is the interaction of the different dimensions and possible modes of action that interests us. HARBORS wants to propose a framework for action at catchment scale that we call Pool stack, in reference to the work carried out by the Fab City Foundation with its representation of the movement's urban action framework entitled Full Stack.



*Pool Stack.* Graphical representation of the different scales and modes of design intervention for blue screens (november 2023. Vincent Guimas, open licence)

#### 4.3 Opening new fields of research action

The partners are also working on a mapping on new field of research that could be deepened. The prospect of combining knowledge, creation and celebration and updating a new model of contemporary animism is for instance an exciting and provocative vision for rethinking action in ecology, an action that must take as many forms and games as our imagination is capable of shaping. For us, the lighthouse takes on the appearance of a workshop with technical and poetic semaphores for working on a modern, citizen-driven ecology.



Mapping of research-action fields to explore

#### 4.4 Enlarge the community and structure European network

Modestly and in its own way, *HARBORS* distils drop by drop a source for understanding and sharing the challenges of the Anthropocene at the level of the citizen and re-considering the aquatic space no longer as a figurative, functional object, but as a 'being', a subject capable of communicating. We seted up a trans-disciplinary and European research group, not only specialist dedicated to river, that can share expertise and insights, propose concrete solutions and guide public policy in their work with citizens. It is important for us to follow this work, enlarge the community and share these experiments to engage future actions. We hope that this article will provide an insight into the field of experimentation and open up the possibility of future collaboration or participation.