

River Cities as Method

Introducing a new working group under the umbrella of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA)

Chao Phraya river in Bangkok (Photo by Paul Rabé, 2014).



A transdisciplinary network to promote revitalization of rivers and the landscapes/riverscapes, cities, and neighbourhoods that co-exist with them

Paul Rabé

River Cities as Method (RCM) is a new working group spearheaded by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) at Leiden University, in collaboration with partners worldwide, which seeks to revitalize urban rivers and the ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems linked to these rivers. In time, RCM seeks to evolve into a transdisciplinary network in its own right. The outcomes of RCM are envisaged to be practical – culminating in concrete urban revitalization projects – as well as knowledge-based, leading to new insights about “transformational resilience” for theory and for university/school curricula.

Introducing a new network

RCM will comprise several case studies of “disrupted rivers” in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and Latin America, in comparative perspective. The “disruptions” that RCM examines are usually caused by a combination of human-induced and natural factors. Project teams comprising local scholars, scientists, and activists will

engage with a broad range of stakeholders in seeking to revitalize the stretches of river that they select as case studies. By addressing the disruption in their river-city nexus cases, each team will contribute insights about what “transformational resilience” means in their own contexts. At the same time, each team will also engage with the disruption issues in other river city teams – thus helping to ultimately build a network. This network seeks to be truly global in nature, with learning and innovation between and within the Global North and Global South.

RCM adopts a trans-disciplinary approach, bringing together knowledge of the river-city nexus from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences around three main project components, which strengthen each other: (1) river bios (histories and stories of the river), (2) spatial analysis (layer mapping of the river and its environs), and (3) transformation (activism to achieve river-city revitalization through networks of stakeholders). Each case study team is expected to implement all three components in their projects.

Transformational resilience

As a working group and later as a network, “River Cities as Method” hopes to contribute insights about resilience in both theoretical and practical terms. RCM seeks to go beyond the narrowly scientific and technical understandings of resilience that are commonplace in current theoretical and policy approaches. Through a combination of research, activism, and pedagogy, the network promotes an expanded view of resilience that is “transformational” in the sense that it acknowledges the longer-term, structural, and multi-faceted nature of disruption and recovery, encompassing climate adaptation needs as well as human, cultural, institutional, and political dimensions of resilience. Throughout, the RCM network will approach the river-city nexus with a historical lens, mapping the story of each river-city over time so that the deployed revitalization measures can be better informed by past lessons.

Real transformation also includes striving for “justice” – justice not only for the human communities adjacent to the river, but also for the plant and animal species that co-exist with the river and which are an integral part of the ecology of the river-city. Each project team is expected to come up with its own definition of, and contribution to, transformation and justice relevant to the local context. Research and action on “transformational resilience” is still in its early stages, as is the application of this budding concept – and formulations of justice – to practice. Exchanges and peer-to-peer support among the participating project teams will help to develop learning and pedagogy around the concepts of resilience, transformation, and justice for the benefit of the network partners as well as scholars and practitioners more broadly.

Invitation to join RCM

Are you interested in the scope and activities of the RCM working group? And do you think you can put together a transdisciplinary team to investigate transformational resilience in a specific river-city context in your part of the world? RCM is currently recruiting teams that wish to propose a river-city project, through a Call for Expressions of Interest. For this Call and for more information about application criteria, please visit the RCM website (see below). The Call will close on 15 August 2022.

RCM welcomes applications from project teams from all over the world. Together with the newly recruited teams, the RCM coordinators and advisors will work on a funding proposal to help build the RCM network, and which will help to fund the network’s activities. In the meantime, the RCM project teams are expected to start their work through a combination of their own funds and (where available) limited other funding.

The benefits of joining the RCM working group and network include access to a diverse and global network of professionals and scholars working on the river-city nexus; workshops to share insights on a peer-to-peer basis; and publications. The RCM partners will have considerable freedom to determine together the shape of the network and its common activities.

For more information about the RCM initiative, the pilot project on the Xingu River, or the Call for Expressions of Interest, please visit: <https://ukna.asia/river-cities>.

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RCM Pilot Project: Xingu River and City of Altamira, State of Pará, Brazil

Satya Patchineelam

What follows is an attempt to tell the story of the Xingu River from its own perspective. The narrative explores the traditional life of the river as well as the disruptions wrought by a hydropower development project. These dynamics are the subject of my Ph.D. research as well as the RCM pilot project.



Leonel Batista, a riverine man, on the Xingu River (Photo courtesy of Leonel Batista, 2020).

Tale of the Xingu: The River That Was Dammed

I was life. I would transport sediments, rocks, dead leaves, insects, animals, and others. That would be my daily routine. I flowed downstream, taking nutrients to other places, fertilizing grounds and carrying seeds to germinate in some other locations. There would be animals crossing, boats passing through. I was a leisure space for people and animals. Giving life and taking life. My cycle was constant and healthy,

I would renew myself constantly. I was always fresh, vibrant, clean, sometimes wavy, other times calm, feeding animals and the abundant vegetation around me.

Throughout half of the year the rain would fill me up, make me stronger and faster. I would create hiding spots for some animals by flooding areas filled with vegetation, this way the animals would reproduce without being exposed, securing the eggs and baby animals in these secluded and sometimes mysterious spots. During these generous and strong seasons, I would

flood through spaces that riverine people cleaned up to plant their crops and help take nutrition to the soil, helping their production. But sometimes I would also invade their houses and show my force. During that time, I could also be dangerous, and the riverine people would be scared of me, and the motors of the boats would work twice as hard to drive against my flow.

The other half of the year, the heat would force my water to evaporate, and the lack of rainfall would weaken and slow me down. I would dry up, the rocks throughout my body stretch would appear, creating small ponds, and the sunshine would pass through to the ground. The small, beautiful fish would find it hard to hide from the people.

After many years, strange people whom I had never seen before started coming by to observe me, mapping and collecting pieces of me. Suddenly one day, I felt a strong explosion. It shook the ground in such a way that animals ran away and stopped coming back, rocks fell, and that part of me became damaged.

A part of my body was connected to another part of my body and disconnected from another, which did not make much sense and affected my entire life cycle. Blocks of concrete were built up, blocking my water to feed all of the bits and pieces.

Suddenly part of my body became steady water, like a pool but with some of the water flowing down without the consistency it would naturally have. Many fishers came during that period, the fish were trapped in this reservoir, they became such an easy catch. The community of riverines that grew up around me were pushed aside, many did not come by as often as they would before. The water in this pool became so high that the trees were constantly submerged, resulting in many trees dying. I felt sick. There were no more fruits and seeds to take downstream, the fish in my waters became hungry and sick too. The riverine community that grew up here and created a livelihood of respect towards me became hungry and sad. I saw a few familiar faces coming back, mostly men, as most women stopped coming here. The kids were not around anymore either. I missed them, as it was fun to have them playing with me in years past.

I finally understood, my body was dammed, and life as I knew before was over. My web of life was disrupted.

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