



The Politics of Urban Water

Changing Waterscapes in Amsterdam

Kimberley Kinder

The Politics of Urban Water

CHANGING
WATERSCAPES
IN AMSTERDAM

Kimberley Kinder

The University of Georgia Press
ATHENS AND LONDON

© 2015 by the University of Georgia Press

Athens, Georgia 30602

www.ugapress.org

All rights reserved

Designed by Kaelin Broadbuss

Set in 9.5/13 Scala by Graphic Composition, Inc.

Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Most University of Georgia Press titles are available from popular e-book vendors.

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kinder, Kimberley.

The politics of urban water : changing waterscapes in Amsterdam / Kimberley Kinder.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8203-4794-3 (hardback) — ISBN 978-0-8203-4795-0 (paperback) — ISBN 978-0-8203-4836-0 (ebook) 1. Urban renewal—Netherlands—Amsterdam—Citizen participation—History—20th century. 2. Urban renewal—Political aspects—Netherlands—Amsterdam. 3. Urban renewal—Social aspects—Netherlands—Amsterdam. 4. Waterfronts—Netherlands—Amsterdam. 5. Sociology, Urban—Netherlands—Amsterdam. I. Title.

HT178.N42A456 2015

307.3'41609492352—dc23

2014036311

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

To my mother

Acknowledgments

Several institutions provided financial support for the research and writing of this book, including the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 0903073), the Geography Department at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan Society of Fellows.

This book would not have been possible without the interviewees in Amsterdam. Their advice and insights profoundly shaped the research trajectory as it unfolded.

The faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, provided invaluable support and guidance during the research and early write-up phases for this book. Michael Watts, Richard Walker, Teresa Caldeira, and Jake Kosek contributed most heavily to this work. Other influential mentors included Gill Hart, Paul Groth, Donald Moore, and Daniel Buck.

My special thanks go to Mick Gusinde-Duffy and the rest of the editorial staff at the University of Georgia Press, as well as to their anonymous reviewers, whose comments and advice elevated the level of analysis throughout the book. Similarly, at the University of Michigan, I owe a debt of gratitude to Rebecca Sestili for her sage publishing advice and to the members of the informal Michigan Society of Fellows Humanities Writing Group.

A small portion of this book appeared as a freestanding article in *Environment and Planning A*. The anonymous reviewers for that article provided valuable feedback that strengthened the project as a whole.

I presented portions of this book to several academic audiences between 2010 and 2012. The comments and questions I received from those audiences influenced the book's development. Conference audiences included attendees at several Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers, the American Society for Environmental History Conference on History and Sustainability, the Mini-Conference on Critical Geography, and the Biennial Conference of the Urban History Association. Additional audiences at the University

of Michigan included the Michigan Society of Fellows, the Urban and Regional Planning Program, and the School of Natural Resources and Environment.

This book would not have happened without the intellectual and emotional support of my Berkeley cohort. Most notably, Jen, Greta, Sapna Alex, and Sarah: thank you.

At the most personal level, thank you to Ross, who was there through it all, Charlie, who arrived partway through, and Cora, who came in at the end.

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction The Politics of Urban Water	i
Chapter 1 Hippiess on Houseboats	16
Chapter 2 Queers on Parade	35
Chapter 3 Heritage Buffs on Canals	54
Chapter 4 Planners on Harbors	74
Chapter 5 Ecologists on Islands	94
Chapter 6 Investors on Floodplains	117
Conclusion The Everyday Politics of Urban Water	139
Notes	149
Bibliography	167
Index	195

INTRODUCTION

The Politics of Urban Water

The face of urban water has changed dramatically since the mid-twentieth century. During the transition from industrial production to service-oriented economies, waterfronts emerged as prime redevelopment sites across Europe and North America. City builders transformed defunct factories and harbors into festival marketplaces and mixed-use neighborhoods. These changes marked an important paradigm shift in the economic functionality of shorelines. On paper, this paradigm shift appeared swift and decisive, dominated by large-scale infrastructural redevelopment that integrated brownfield sites into the changing economy by creating new motifs of water-oriented living and leisure. In practice, however, reimagining water was a slow, winding process, punctuated by several small shifts and provisional appropriations that reworked the meaning of wet urban spaces. Moreover, new uses of water have continued to emerge, signaling that the spatial forms and political valence of urban water remain decidedly open-ended.

The stereotypical narrative of urban waterfront transformation crystallized in the early 2000s. Industrial-era economic growth involved the dramatic re-engineering of hydrological landscapes for shipping and manufacturing. Subsequent deindustrialization after World War II drained waterfronts of capital and labor power, leaving abandoned brownfields in their wake. By the century's end, real estate investors working through public-private partnerships had built new, ostentatious cultural centers and mixed-use neighborhoods in scores of cities, including, for example, Baltimore, Sydney, Toronto, and London.¹ These shorelines attracted elite workers and shoppers, and they gave older cities a new global face in the competition for future economic growth.

Case histories and architectural profiles of these spatial transformations generally read as top-down affairs with investors capitalizing on self-evident rent gaps in supposedly derelict spaces. Recent scholarship describing informal occupancy and provisional uses of these spaces prior to their redevelopment has successfully dispelled notions of waterfronts as *tabula rasa* sites.² These

insights underscore the need for greater attentiveness to the formative role of cultural practices and regulatory structures—alongside market pressure—in processes of waterfront reinvention. The history of water in Amsterdam shows that shoreline sites of disinvestment only appeared as “rent-gap” spaces once alternative uses of those spaces became thinkable. Cultural movements and everyday practices that connected water to countercultural activism, heritage preservation, and ecological resiliency transformed the meaning of water and redirected the modes of waterfront development.

Amsterdam was an especially apt location to study these changes for several reasons. Amsterdam is famous as a water city. Its historic canals are a major international tourism attraction, and many prominent cultural institutions and elite neighborhoods face canals, harbors, or other water surfaces. Additionally, large-scale waterfront reconstruction in Amsterdam was proceeding rapidly during the early 2000s at the same moment that, internationally, architects and planners were heralding the imagined climax of the postindustrial water-oriented real estate development model. The ubiquity of water in the local landscape created heightened conditions of possibility for water to have especially deep and diverse cultural meanings and, by extension, for these cultural connotations to influence large-scale processes of waterfront transformation.

Using Amsterdam as an example, this book unsettles the master narrative of urban waterfront revitalization on three fronts. Beginning with a focus on the past, the book exhumes a genealogy of praxis that analyzes the most widely discussed social movements making provisional use of the city’s shorelines in the decades preceding the formal, capital-intensive, infrastructural reconstruction underway in the early 2000s.³ Next, the project foregrounds the social narratives of water that connected past cultural practices to subsequent waterfront investments, underscoring the influence of these narratives in enabling, derailing, and reorienting the process of waterfront transformation. Then the book evaluates future-oriented narratives that, since the early 2000s, have begun connecting water with a shifting set of political impulses that are replacing the site-specific focus of brownfield projects with a more generalized discourse of water-based urban growth involving larger geographic footprints and a wider range of political stakeholders.

Tracing this trajectory of Amsterdam water required looking beyond high-profile case studies of infrastructural reinvestment to foreground the diverse interaction of culture, water, and place making as it occurred in many locations, at many scales, and at many moments in time. Qualitative evidence of these entanglements came primarily from three Dutch-language data sources: local and national newspapers circulating in Amsterdam between 1960 and 2010; government-generated and government-commissioned reports from several

administrative levels, branches, and affiliates involved in water-related decision making; and self-published pamphlets, letters, magazines, and booklets from the cultural groups informally mobilizing waterscapes during that fifty-year period. Additionally, secondary publications and a few interviews with select academics, politicians, and social advocates with special ties to Amsterdam waterscapes functioned as supplemental data, helping to clarify motives, histories, and spaces of interest.

Using these sources, this book explains how people bring urban waterscapes to life. Between 1960 and 2010, ex-hippy squatters and queer-rights advocates built makeshift homes and organized celebratory parades on water. Amateur historians and professional architects mobilized water in campaigns to define national identity and sell real estate. Environmental activists and government officials connected water to ecological resiliency and disaster capitalism. These actions put water to cultural and economic use, inspiring innovative forms of waterside living.

This rereading of water across time, space, and purposes underscored the pivotal importance of everyday social activism on a wide range of cultural fronts in enabling and shaping the transformation of urban waterscapes. The interwoven history of Amsterdam water recounted in the chapters that follow traces water's piecemeal ascent from a residual industrial space into a prime investment site through its association with alternative countercultures, heritage identities, and environmental innovations. Far from a swift, monolithic transition, the resulting water assemblage coalesced incrementally, skipping from place to place and from group to group in tangled processes of cultural activism and city building.⁴ The slow interweaving of old practices turned to new ends generated friction, both among cultural subgroups and between cultural actors and real estate interests. Throughout this history, water remained decidedly multivalent, leading to unexpected conflicts that productively expanded the physical forms and cultural import of water in processes of urban transformation.

The Urban Water Paradigm Shift

In the early 1980s, Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich opened his now-classic treatise *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* with the story of an urban development controversy over whether to construct a small lake in Dallas, Texas. Illich supported the project. In his eyes, during the industrial revolution cities across the Western world and the waterscapes that once traversed them were "man-proofed."⁵ This man-proofing occurred on an intellectual level, through the creation of scientific discourses that demarcated urban planning and hydrological engineering as the exclusive purview of professional experts. It also occurred on

a physical level, through the construction of fixed steel and concrete city forms. City building experts buried streams and drained marshes to “tame” nature and increase buildable land area. Simultaneously, regional and national governing bodies paid engineers to straighten, wall, and dredge large bodies of water, such as major rivers and estuaries. These interventions enabled large-scale shipping and manufacturing, often at the expense of other informal uses or ecological functions.⁶ The result, Illich lamented, was a dehumanized urban waterscape of engineering equations and subterranean tubes that ordinary residents could neither access nor alter. Illich’s hope was that restoring shorelines, such as by constructing a small lake near the center of Dallas, could begin to undo the industrial infrastructure that had left water and cities so sterile.⁷

Illich’s wish came true, at least in part. Scores of city building projects implemented since the 1980s have smashed the concrete walls and roads that once divorced residents from waterscapes. In cities across Europe and North America, streams have been excavated, marshes restored, and harbors revitalized. By the early 2000s, architectural and planning commentators were heralding water’s supposed metamorphosis from its former isolation in sewers and shipyards into the celebrated centerpiece of countless festival marketplaces. The figural form of the redeveloped industrial port held an especially prominent place in the international city-building literature. Luxury retail centers, flashy entertainment venues, and elite-oriented live-work districts photographed against the backdrop of glittering coastlines became icons of the imagined completion of an economic and cultural paradigm shift that brought accessible waterscapes back into city centers.

The dramatic physical changes accompanying these projects, however, concealed a significant continuity between industrial and postindustrial waterscapes. The rehydrated cityscapes remained “man-proofed,” at least in part. The financial cost of demolishing concrete embankments, remediating industrial pollution, and rebuilding the so-called naturalized shorelines and accessible promenades meant that investors with significant financial resources often monopolized redevelopment agendas. Excavated shorelines were locked in place, and their edges were lined with luxury shops and surveillance cameras. Only profitable plants and tadpoles were incorporated into development schemes, and children could only play in designated areas and in predefined ways. Environmental and civil society groups engaging with these processes often found their interests thoroughly subordinated to market-based profitability models.⁸ Although these redeveloped shorelines made water “accessible” in that recreational boaters and strolling pedestrians could see, touch, and smell the water, market dictates, rather than everyday use, environmental concerns, or creative

play, structured the modes of permissible human-water interaction and contained its possible reappropriation.

While recognizing that the expense of building large-scale infrastructure constrains waterfront investment goals during peak construction periods, stories from Amsterdam demonstrate that these processes, while important, constitute only one moment within an ongoing process of waterscape metamorphosis. Similarly, these narratives show that cultural actors have historically exerted significant influence over the timing, shape, and meaning of urban waterside living and that evolving water associations continue to emerge today. This interpretation builds on recent work in the field of urban political ecology that unsettles the dominant master narrative of urban waterfront revitalization by shifting attention from large-scale port redevelopments to smaller-scale, community-instigated initiatives.⁹ These accounts recognize the heavy-handedness of market constraints, yet they also provisionally create room to see the cultural mediations that give water meaning. Using Amsterdam as an example, this book builds on these themes, analyzing the political plurality of water to illuminate the underlying kaleidoscopic interplay among culture, water, and real estate that has given rise to pluralized and unfinished postindustrial urban forms.

Learning from Amsterdam

Amsterdam, for several reasons, emerged as an especially potent location to observe the unplanned influence of everyday cultural practices on urban waterfront transformations. The ubiquity of water in Amsterdam was one important factor. Water in that city was never so thoroughly “man-proofed” as it was in other contexts. Dutch city builders attempted to modernize Amsterdam using many of the same water elimination techniques at work elsewhere in Europe and North America. Between 1828 and 1970, municipal officials filled seventy-eight canals in older sections of the city. Simultaneously, as the city’s footprint expanded, builders used new technologies, such as hidden pumps and subterranean pipes, to reduce the need for surface drainage systems. Those practices reduced the city’s land-to-water ratio compared to its preindustrial form. However, unlike in the United States, where most urban water disappeared behind concrete walls and into subterranean sewers, in the Netherlands, the regional preponderance of water, combined with the country’s more limited economic resources, meant that water remained prominent in the everyday surface topography of Dutch cities. Canals, ponds, and small harbors never dipped below 24 percent of Amsterdam’s total surface area, resulting in an astoundingly wet cityscape by mid-twentieth-century international standards.¹⁰



Waterfront housing, terraces, houseboats, and pleasure boats in Amsterdam, ca. 2013. ©iStock.com/badahos.

The ubiquity of water in Amsterdam amplified opportunities for people to have everyday encounters with waterscapes. In contrast to other cities where streams and coastlines had to be physically exhumed from their concrete tubes and embankment walls using capital-intensive demolition and reconstruction methods, interacting with water in Amsterdam only required a boat, a set of eyes, the ability to swim, or a moment of inattention when a driver or cyclist might accidentally fall in. Moreover, water was a privileged, if also commercialized, element in local folklore and artistic traditions. This physical arrangement, combined with the cultural circulation of water-based symbolism, reduced barriers to entry. Anyone wishing to interact with water could do so—at least to some degree—without having to physically transform infrastructure in deference to market pressures.

These encounters increased opportunities for cultural actors to make provisional uses of wet city spaces and turn them to new ends. Squatters made water habitable. Queers made it performative. Historians added narrative content. Architects encased it in iconic edging. Environmentalists naturalized its flows, and governments popularized its climate-related functions. These engagements added complexity to urban water debates while simultaneously revealing the lingering influence of earlier socio-spatial frameworks. Water was not a neutral surface. Amsterdam's canals, harbors, and lakes were enmeshed within an ar-

ray of long-standing regulatory structures, social policies, and environmental attitudes that did not easily relinquish their hold on wet city spaces either to cultural actors or to real estate interests. Even so, provisional mobilizations loosened water both from its iconic industrial forms and from the emerging postindustrial paradigm shift by inviting onlookers to rethink the identity, significance, and potential of shorelines.¹¹ This lengthy and unscripted process, involving many digressions and spanning several decades, functioned as a rich period of agonistic reinvention with many social groups mobilizing water in pursuit of cultural agendas that diversified water as a cultural landscape and put it to new uses.

Another advantage of studying water in Amsterdam was that the prevalence of water and its diversity of physical forms created opportunities to examine its cultural plurality at several locations around the city. In other places, a single large-scale port reconstruction could monopolize that city's waterfront discourse. By contrast, any such spatial, temporal, and formal singularity was impossible in Amsterdam, where scores of planned and improvised waterscape mobilizations occurred on a cluster of sites distributed citywide. These sites included canals, lakes, and floodplains, and these forms became visible in public imaginaries at different historical moments. Given their geographic proximity within the same city, as well as the continuity of jurisdictional structures and development agencies across these sites, reshaping water in Amsterdam involved sustained back-and-forth engagements across a wide array of cultural groups and waterscape typologies. These negotiations amplified opportunities for the cultural experimentation occurring in one part of the city to influence subsequent transformations occurring elsewhere.

Importantly, although Amsterdam's preponderance of accessible water allowed observers to perceive the interplay among culture, water, and real estate in a magnified form, the notion of an inherently pluralized waterscape can productively inform scholars' readings of the urban waterscape transformations occurring in many other European and North American contexts. First, the creative mobilization of waterscapes, rather than the prevalence of water itself, gave meaning to Amsterdam water. Although opportunities for provisional appropriations may have been especially prolific in Amsterdam, they were by no means wholly absent in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Toronto, and Berlin, where other scholars have tentatively begun studying similar reappropriation techniques.¹² Second, although the diversity of water-land interfaces within the single municipality of Amsterdam enriched local discussions of the many potential faces of urban water, similar if less spatially consolidated discourses connect waterfront transformations across cities internationally, bringing insights and adaptations from early mover cities to bear on later interventions

elsewhere. This book, in highlighting the diverse modes, sites, and phases of urban waterscape transformation, creates opportunities to recognize the plurality of water in general, not just in Amsterdam. The book also pushes planners, architects, and investors to recognize plurality in urban water not only as an inevitable feature but also as a desirable attribute that enhances the cultural richness and market potential of redeveloped shores.

Enabling Capital Reaccumulation

Rethinking the master narrative of urban waterfront transformation through the lens of Amsterdam creates opportunities to reevaluate the circuitous—rather than direct—influence of cultural practices on political economic processes. Within the field of urban political economy, an important and unresolved tension exists between rent-gap theories of cyclical reinvestment and cultural explanations of those same practices. On the rent-gap side, Neil Smith's foundational research on urban gentrification in New York City provides invaluable evidence of the overwhelming importance of property values and market-based logics in driving spatial cycles of devaluation and reinvestment. During these processes, disinvestment in roads and buildings that allows them to deteriorate is a rational economic practice since, once infrastructure has lost sufficient value, its total destruction and replacement with a wholly new urban form no longer registers as a capital loss. Moreover, Smith's data showed a sharp geographic line demarcating the frontlines of reinvestment, which reinforced the importance of systemic real estate values, rather than idiosyncratic cultural activities, in urban regeneration processes.¹³

On the cultural side, four years after the publication of Smith's rent-gap theory, a lesser-known study by Christopher Mele offered a counterpoint by asserting that symbols of place were central to reinvestment undertakings. Like Smith, Mele's research also focused on gentrification in New York City. Mele acknowledged the importance of real estate values and market-oriented investments, especially compared to the difficulties that passionate but otherwise ineffectual artists and countercultural groups faced when trying to make their self-generated symbols and spatial representations stimulate neighborhood-wide revitalization. However, these symbols, which had little structural consequence in the hands of local actors, gained crucial significance when real estate interests selectively mobilized them in coordinated efforts to devalue some neighborhoods and revalue others. In sum, cultural factors helped investors conceive of "better" uses for spaces, as well as to sell their redevelopment ideas to consumers.¹⁴

The relative importance of land values versus cultural practices in cycles of reinvestment remains unresolved. Recent studies from U.S. cities generally

build on both legacies, teasing out the political economic processes associated with advertising and gentrification that are neither reducible to blunt accounts of economic determinism nor simplified into idealized models of consumer sovereignty.¹⁵ In my reading, cultural interests often figure as placeholders building a neighborhood buzz and absorbing the greatest risks while testing possible redevelopment frameworks on a variety of disinvested sites. The cultural practices that gain market traction then generate conditions of possibility for rent gaps to emerge, helping some reinvestment plans advance while other equally devalued spaces continue to languish. Large real estate investors with significant financial resources and systemic working methods then selectively mobilize cultural tropes to advance the frontline of spatial reaccumulation as quickly and profitably as possible.

Despite these insights into the importance of cultural symbols in gentrification processes, rent-gap theories continue to dominate most accounts of waterfront transformation, especially those occurring in central urban cores. The history of Baltimore's HarborPlace—a quintessential embodiment of the urban water paradigm shift—provides a case in point. Redevelopment narratives emphasized a seemingly invisible market hand guiding deindustrialization that transformed the port into an insulated, derelict brownfield. Investors then filled that imagined spatial void with a newly constructed boardwalk, convention center, aquarium, marketplace, concert pavilion, theme park, and sports stadium. The revitalized harbor appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1981, and it became the first and still most popular poster child for rent-gap waterscape redevelopment.¹⁶ This type of narrative—chronicling industrial decline leading to “underutilized” infrastructure then superseded by new “higher” uses—has become a ubiquitous storyline that analysts use to make sense of—and promote—shoreline reinvestment in cities across the North Atlantic. Devaluation can take the form of regional industrial decline, as in the case of Baltimore, where port activity relocated to other cities, or it can emerge from hyper-investment, as in the case of Vancouver, where the construction of a consolidated, offshore container port rendered smaller inland facilities redundant.¹⁷ In either context, analysts all too easily conflate devaluation with an imagined rent gap premised on the assumption that alternative economic uses are readily apparent.

Although the existence of a rent gap may appear self-evident in hindsight, a genealogy of urban water in Amsterdam emphasizes the ambiguity characterizing these processes in practice. Amsterdam investors did not simply awake one day and decide that the rent gap for disused harbors and ports had reached a tipping point that justified reinvestment. Moreover, even once city builders embarked on harbor revitalization projects, investors expressed considerable anxiety about the marketability of postindustrial city spaces and the value of

water in redevelopment schemes. In other words, although devaluation was evident, the potential for revaluation remained deeply uncertain. Instead, a genealogy of praxis revealed that cultural groups making provisional, low-value use of water and water-related infrastructure generated a diverse array of symbols and practices that made a wide range of unexpected replacement uses thinkable. These cultural practices influenced the timing, form, and profitability of subsequent port revitalizations while also helping beyond-the-port models of waterside urbanism gain traction.

The Amsterdam experience, in highlighting the productive tensions that emerged among cultural actors making creative uses of waterscapes, sheds light on the role of cultural experimentation and symbolism in enabling capital accumulation. Alongside real estate investors and their engineering and planning partners, the spectrum of water-related agents in Amsterdam included hippy houseboaters, queer partiers, heritage enthusiasts, experimental artists, foreign tourists, media reporters, urban ecologists, and national cabinet officials. These groups' engagements with waterscapes over a fifty-year period brought a diverse array of cultural agendas into messy association with real estate development. When cultural actors directly challenged infrastructure investment processes at the precise, capital-intensive moment of their construction, market interests generally prevailed. However, subsequent investments bore the imprints of these cultural challenges and innovations, illustrating the influence of everyday practices in shaping shoreline living downstream. Cultural appropriations gestured toward unanticipated, unconsolidated, potential investment pathways, and these gestures enabled, redirected, and contained the investment decision making that followed. These agonisms and the generative tensions among cultural groups and market interests modulated city building processes. The resulting urban spaces bore the indelible imprint of cultural actors and created new material landscapes for ongoing, exploratory mobilization.

Putting Waterscapes to Work

In conventional accounts of urban waterfront transformations, the material medium of water gets little attention. Investors use water as a spectacle vista for outdoor terraces, fireworks displays, and marina traffic. However, real estate-centered narratives generally emphasize changes in land use and land values, saying preciously little about the changing forms and meanings of water. The few accounts that mention water directly usually emphasize technical issues, such as pollution remediation or shoreline stabilization techniques, rather than engaging in political speculations about the substantive contribution of water to