Loom Quarterly

Wetness

practice for cultural transformation

2026 Q2

Wetness

WORLD OF WATER

In many parts of the world people are confronted with water all around them. They live, in the words of landscape architect Dilip da Cunha, in a state of ubiquitous wetness. Even in moments of drought water is never far away as it travels through the hydrological cycle from vapor to cloud formation and precipitation. Severe floods and extreme precipitation are increasing in frequency and intensity due to the man-made climate crisis. Additionally, sea-level rise and rapid urbanisation exacerbate this growing threat. Globally, hundreds of millions of people inhabit low-lying deltas, where the combination of climate-driven sea-level rise and severe land subsidence causes the land to sink faster than the sea is rising.

Being based in The Netherlands, or 'low countries', Loom is keenly aware of the threat and catastrophic consequences of rising water levels. Since almost one third of the country lies below sea level, the Netherlands has a long and rich—and at times problematic tradition—in water management and has been exporting this expertise to other parts of the world. However, not even the most robust, world-class infrastructure will be able to protect any country against the speed and scale of the climate crisis. The time has come to rethink and reimagine our relationship with water. How can we co-exist with an abundance of water? How can we live in a world of wetness?

FROM CONTROL TO COEXISTENCE

For centuries, dominant models of urbanisation and hydraulic engineering have depended on a strict separation between land and water. Rivers were straightened, floodplains constrained, wetlands drained, and cities protected through dikes, levees and concrete infrastructures. Yet the climate crisis increasingly reveals the limits of this land-centric imagination. Water refuses to remain within the lines drawn on maps. Floods are no longer isolated disasters; they are becoming structural realities within the territories we inhabit.

This changing condition demands a profound cultural and spatial shift. Rather than continuing to prioritise flood protection through higher barriers and more rigid engineering, we must learn to coexist with water and design for fluctuation, uncertainty and periodic inundation. The question is no longer how to prevent floods, but how to become friends with them, to use Beijing-based landscape design practice Turenscape's adage. In many contexts, which lack sufficient resources or political will, this is easier said than done. So what would it mean to create or restore landscapes that anticipate wetness? How can architecture, landscape design and spatial planning move from systems of control toward porosity, adaptation and coexistence?

This transformation from control to coexistence also raises urgent questions about future forms of habitation. Will we continue building in sinking deltas and flood-prone territories? Will we accept occasional flooding as part of everyday life? Or will we increasingly elevate ourselves on mounds, floating structures, and amphibious architectures that move with water changing water levels rather than work against it? Across many regions, communities are already forced to experience these futures through floating neighborhoods, seasonal flood adaptation and regenerative landscapes designed for extremely wet moments rather than idealised dry conditions.

NEW APPROACHES

Around the world, new approaches already point toward this transition from control of to co-existence with water. For example, the Dutch government's Room for the River programme, which was active from 2006 to 2015 and is still being used as the main model for spatial planning in The Netherlands, reimagined flood management by giving rivers more space instead of only strengthening dikes. In his 2021 book Floodscapes, landscape architect Frédéric Rossano explores innovative landscape strategies for living with floods in an era of climate change. And in recent years landscape architecture practice Turenscape, introduced and applied the "Sponge City" concept, a nature-based urban design model that advocates for absorbing water instead of fighting it.

All of these projects and practices demonstrate a growing recognition that rivers and other water bodies need space to move, overflow and

transform. Floodplains are increasingly being reimagined as dynamic public landscapes that combine ecology, recreation, agriculture and water retention. Wetlands, bioswales, permeable surfaces and amphibious infrastructures are replacing purely defensive systems. These interventions and artistic approaches do not simply mitigate floods; they make water visible, tangible and inhabitable again. At the same time, we should also accept the fact that nothing we can think of today can properly prepare us for the extreme circumstances we will encounter in the coming years and decades. Surrendering is maybe the hardest part of the art of survival.

WORKING WITH WETNESS

Through our work, we explore how cities and landscapes can adapt to a future of increasing floods, rising water levels and climate uncertainty. Through artistic research, collective research walks, public performances and spatial investigations along rivers, deltas and floodplains, our practice examines ideas of “ubiquitous wetness,” porous urbanism and amphibious ways of inhabiting the environment. Our projects invite architects, planners, artists and citizens to rethink flood protection, reconnect with natural water systems and imagine new forms of coexistence between humans, rivers and changing climates.

A recent example of our engagement with the concept and consequences of wetness is the Rhine River Rehearsal, an artistic research project in collaboration with Goethe-Institut Amsterdam, Borderland Residencies and the Art & Spatial Praxis research group at the Rietveld Academie and the Sandberg Instituut. For this project we engaged with the Rhine river as a complex and ever-changing environment that is both affected by and contributing to a rapidly changing climate. During the fall of 2024, we followed and deviated from the river, while engaging with the multitude of communities occupying its (past and future) banks, its soil, water and non-human habitats. The field trip and related research resulted in a publication and an audio tour around water-related places in Amsterdam.

BEYOND WATER-LAND BINARIES

The role of arts, architecture and design is crucial in the transition from (controlled) water to (ubiquitous) wetness. Beyond technical solutions, they help develop new imaginaries, vocabularies and sensibilities for living in wet conditions. They allow us to rethink rivers and coastal areas not as controlled channels and barriers but as living, shifting systems intertwined with human and ecological life.

In a sense, designing for wetness is not simply an environmental necessity; it is a cultural project. It asks us to fundamentally reconsider how we inhabit the planet, how we share space with water, and how future floodscapes might become places not of fear, but of coexistence, resilience and collective imagination.

In our projects, we develop new methods to overcome the water-land binary. To learn to live with an abundance (or absence) of water requires a new way of speaking about and dealing with conditions of wetness. For example, by using field (sound) recordings, durational drawings and other alternative mapping and documentation tools, we can start to reveal the dynamic nature of riverine landscapes instead of presenting them as static situations. We also deploy different forms of walking and collective movement to generate a more embodied knowledge of these ever-evolving environments.

These more qualitative approaches can enrich more conventional forms of representation, such as topographical maps, and allow us to not only rationalise the shift from control to co-existence, but to make it palpable to the point where you can already start inhabiting a wet world, instead of designing for a disaster.

We invite you to join us on this journey into a world of wetness or involve us in your dealings with rising waters.

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FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

Rhine River Rehearsal, Reimagining a River in Five Acts by Katía Truijen, Mark Minkjan, Michiel van Iersel, Radna Rumping and René Boer (Loom, 2025) — This artistic research project explores the Rhine as a complex, shifting and inhabited environment, using walking, listening and collective research to challenge fixed ideas of rivers and develop new ways of relating to water. Contact us to receive a PDF or hardcopy.

Following the Bend: How to Read a River and Understand Its Nature by Ellen E. Wohl (Princeton University Press, 2025) — Offers ways of understanding rivers as dynamic ecosystems, helping us move beyond seeing them as channels towards appreciating their constantly changing physical and ecological processes.

African Water Cities by Kunlé Adeyemi and Suzanne Lettieri (nai010 publishers, 2023) — Through examples of cities confronting flooding, urbanisation and climate change, the book explores water-based forms of architecture and urbanism that make water a central condition of future urban life.

Turenscape: Bioactive Landscape Architecture by Evelyn Meynard (Actar, 2026) — The book demonstrates how landscape architecture can work with rather than against water by restoring wetlands, integrating hydrological systems and creating “bioactive” landscapes that combine climate resilience, biodiversity and public life.

Floodscapes: Contemporary Landscape Strategies in Times of Climate Change, Frédéric Rossano (nai010 publishers, 2021) — This book examines how landscape design can respond to flooding by giving water space to move, transform and inhabit territories, directly addressing the shift from flood control towards coexistence with wetness.

The Invention of Rivers by Dilip da Cunha (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) — Challenges the conventional distinction between land and water, proposing instead an understanding of rivers as colonial constructs and water as dispersed, seasonal and ubiquitous across the landscape and the water cycle.

Room for the River: Safe and Attractive Landscapes by Dirk F. Sijmons, E.A.J. Luiten and Y.C. Feddes (Blauwdruk, 2017) — The Dutch Room for the River approach exemplifies the transition from controlling water through increasingly rigid infrastructure towards giving rivers space, combining flood safety with ecological restoration and spatial quality.

*A Sound Map of the Danub*e by Annea Lockwood — By recording currents, wildlife, industry, boats and voices along the Danube, Lockwood’s composition makes the river perceptible as a layered, constantly changing environment and demonstrates how listening can generate a more embodied understanding of wet landscapes. (Visit www.annealockwood.com/compositions)

The New Atlantis by Ursula K. Le Guin (1975) — This acclaimed sci-fi novella tells the story of a heavily polluted, corporate-run, future version of America that is literally sinking into the ocean due to environmental decay, while a new, utopian continent begins to rise from the sea. It contrasts the rigid, collapsing structures of the land-bound human society with the fluid, horizontal, and collective consciousness of the marine world rising to replace them.

COLOPHON

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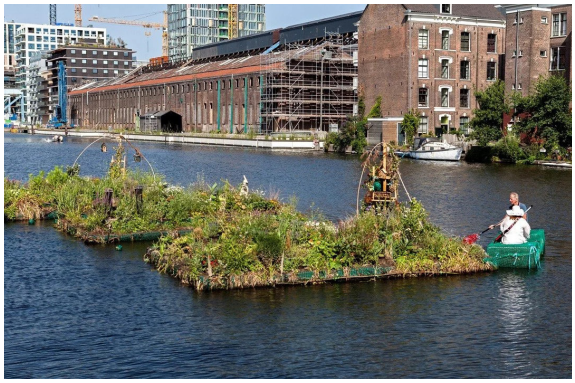
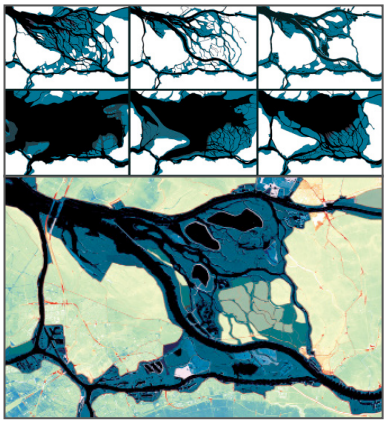


Robert Jasper Grootveld's *drijvende tuinen* are ecological floating islands in Amsterdam. Built from recycled materials like polystyrene and wood covered with soil, these rafts create urban green oases. Grootveld, an artist and Provo movement co-founder, designed them as a critique of consumer society and a return to nature. Grootveld started building these experimental rafts and other floating structures from the 1950s onward, scaling up the floating garden concept in the 1990s. Today, local volunteers still maintain the gardens in Amsterdam's Eastern Docklands. (Photo: Arcam)

Annea Lockwood recorded '*A Sound Map of the Danube*' by embarking on five field-recording trips over three years, using stereo microphones and underwater hydrophones at 59 sites from Germany to the Black Sea to capture the river's surface and aquatic sounds alongside interviews with the people living along its banks. (Photo taken from www.annealockwood.com)

Hair salon within the Makoko community in Lagos, Nigeria, often referred to as the "Venice of Africa". The community is a floating fishing village built over the Lagos Lagoon, housing an estimated 85,000 to over 150,000 residents. (Photo: Iwan Baan)



Reclamation history of the Dutch Biesbosch region, from the 1424 Saint-Elizabeth Flood to the current 'Room for the River' programme (taken from '*Floodscapes – Contemporary Landscape Strategies in Times of Climate Change*', edited by Frédéric Rossano, nai010 publishers, 2021)

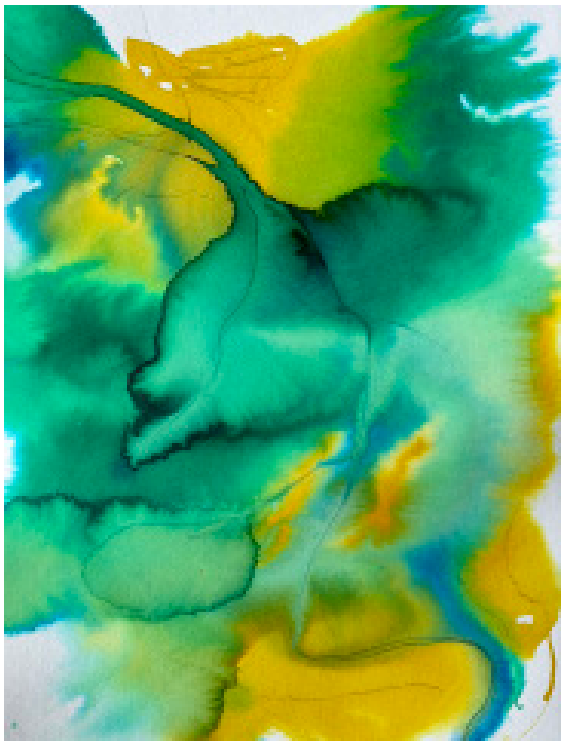
Drawing by Michiel van Iersel, made in response to the flooding of the Mississippi River during a research trip in 2019.

Listening with wetness during the audio route *Leaky Turns, Stories from Amsterdam's Waterlands*, on 30 September 2025. Commissioned by the Lectorate Art & Spatial Praxis, Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam. (Photo: Konstantin Guz)

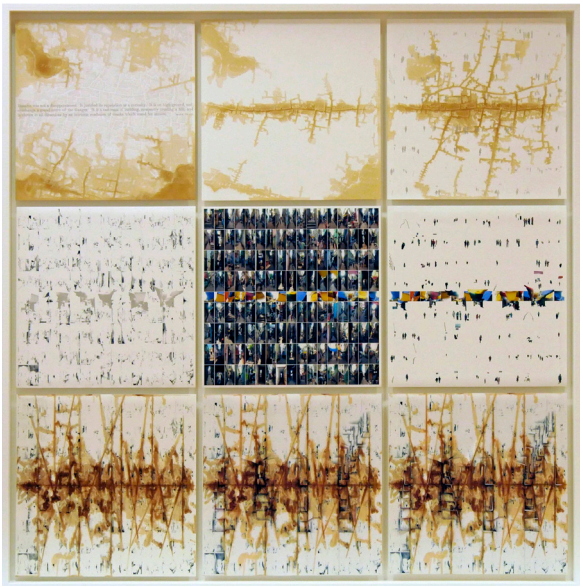
As a way of collectively engaging with ubiquitous wetness, Loom has been organsing Wetness Walks in different locations as a way to collectively experience fluid landscapes. The first Wetness Walk took over four days. Together with students from the Architecture department of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam we walked from Amsterdam to the North Sea. (Photo: Loom)

‘Room for the River’ project in Deventer, one of the most extensive flood protection programmes along the IJssel river in The Netherlands. The project around Deventer specifically focused on increasing the discharge capacity of the IJssel to minimize flood risks, while simultaneously enhancing the natural and recreational value of the area. (Photo: Witteveen+Bos)

Sponge city: Sanya Dong’an Wetland Park, Sanya, Hainan Province, China (Photo: Turenscape/Courtesy The Cultural Landscape Foundation)



Water colour drawing by Michiel van Iersel, inspired by the Rhine River Rehearsal, an artistic research project by Loom that approaches the Rhine river as a living landscape shaped by ecological, cultural and political forces. Through walks, conversations and artistic methods it questioned conventional understandings of rivers, borders and climate adaptation and offers alternative imaginaries.



This 4-foot square piece by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha —a study for Ocean of Rain—presents the people of Varanasi in India as caught in the cracks of a geographic surface, forced to operate between the absolute divides of land and water and the relative gradients of sindhu, forced to negotiate for their survival between the map and the stain. James Prinsep, an employee of the English East India Company, pursued the first, drawing the map of the city in the 1820s. It preceded his pioneering effort to drain Varanasi to the adjoining Ganges, confining water in gutters, nallahs, and ultimately the river. His vision of a dry city is however, violated each year by rain and river. We pursue the stain. It begins another nature and infrastructure, one that holds, absorbs, intercepts, and celebrates wetness in a multitude of ways.