

Water is universal

Water is far from being just a designer's resource or a material: it begs to have its vital possibilities rediscovered. This starts at the beginning of the planning process for water projects, and involves linking up and integrating elemental themes. Knowledge of water's particular qualities as a material are needed, and often experiments need to be conducted to give a real idea of the result that will ensue.

Water is everywhere in our towns, in a labyrinthine system of concealed pipes. It is freely available, and can apparently be disposed of without difficulty. City-dwellers are usually only confronted with it at the various ends of the system in their houses or flats: coming out of the tap into the sink or wash-basin, in the bath or under the shower, with the surge of the flush or when paying the water rates.

But nowadays it is rare to experience water in the open in our towns and cities – and yet it is increasingly in demand. Aesthetically presented and decoratively displayed, from a simple fountain to a showy water installation, it is appreciated as an invigorating element in front of and between the buildings.

Of course fountains and open waterways in towns and cities are nothing new. There is impressive evidence of them even from ancient times. They give us a sense of how closely urban design has always been linked with water and its use. This functional relationship can be traced from antiquity through the Middle Ages to modern times, and has made a lasting impact on the image of cities. Waterways for goods transport and other traffic, facilities for providing drinking water and removing sewage were crucial when choosing a location and helped to shape the ground plan of a town, the squares and streets. And here water was far more than something that simply had to be supplied and disposed of, it was presented artistically in all the great cultures, emphasized aesthetically and venerated. It created the atmosphere and expressed a living relationship between a town and its surrounding area. The way water is handled in towns shows more than the mere technical ingenuity of its citizens, it reflects myth and religion and shows the spiritual constitution of people living in a water culture.

This changed fundamentally during and after the industrial revolution: water and waterways were now increasingly brought under control. They were straightened, canalized, built over, buried and even filled in. Trusting entirely to the fact that all this would be technically possible. But this trust was broken by the floods, which came more and more frequently, and with increasing fury.

Now water is one of the key questions as far as the future of our world is concerned, as we have recognized that naturally available water supplies are finite, pollution is always just round the corner, and we are aware that water plays a complex role in the stability of eco-systems.

Water is the material basis of man's relationship with his environment, and often stands as a symbol of it. It creates links and is in a state of permanent exchange in relation to warmth, climate, air, soil and gravity. Growth, metabolic change and vital functions are inconceivable without water. Water projects are perhaps so topical because they express a profound longing for life in all its vigour.

Technology and aesthetics are usually kept neatly apart in our brave new urban world as contradictions that cannot be bridged. They often seem to be as far apart as the various professions and specialist disciplines associated with them – and so the various training courses are neatly separated as well.

Unknown water

Although we could not survive from day to day without water, we are usually aware of it only superficially and at particular moments. Reduction to simple functions like cleaning, washing and waste disposal reduces the intricate interplay of water with our lives to simplified and imprecise images.

Planning and working with water seem simple at first as well – but even the first practical experiences can reveal unexpected and unfathomable depths, and other surprises. For example, water often does not flow in the way that is projected by the computer or on the drawing-board: a curtain of water falls quite differently from the way you anticipated, the desired wave patterns do not materialize, or are not as planned, and the 'reflecting pool' you hoped for reflects too rarely – or not at all. And it is also not rare to find that the quality of the water in a newly installed system leaves something to be desired, or a deposit of limescale spoils the look of the expensive natural stone basin. Other consequences of such mistaken assessments and ignorance at the planning stage are technical problems and excessively high running costs.

This is not a horror story, but unfortunately it is often the case – and there are a lot of architects, planners, artists and their clients who could tell you a tale about it, and who have foundered on one of these rocks. They then give up, following the motto 'once is enough', or are simply satisfied with going back to banal solutions that have been used all too often in the past.

And there are some places where new fountains and water sculptures can seem out of place or unnatural. This is a sign of approaches that have been worked out in theory, but have