

Re: Letter to the Curators

Singapore

September 2019

Dear George, Thijs, Robbert, Rianne and Jurgen,

George, thanks once again for the invitation to curate the water elements of the IABR in 2020. The mission you laid out in your letter to Thijs and me (and now our Co-Curators), based upon our ongoing three-way conversation, is both thrilling and terrifying.

Thrilling, because it's an honour, especially as a non-Dutch protagonist, to take the baton in the relay the IABR has built over the past 15+ years as a biennale that aims to involve itself in urban strategies (instead of just exhibiting them). And to have the opportunity to interrogate in a public forum some of the questions we've been exploring, often in dialogue with Henk Ovink and the many partners of the Water as Leverage for Resilient Cities Asia initiative, over the past year.

Terrifying, because spending weeks at a time continuously focussed on the subject material you've chosen for us makes it harder to slip into ever-ready distractions from the scale and urgency of the challenges we collectively face. And because these aren't abstract challenges. Of course we will be wearing our professional hats as we curate this biennale, but on a personal level, we have more-than-professional interest in the outcomes of this race—Thijs, Robbert and I in the form of our families' young children, and for you George, your grandchildren.

And simultaneously thrilling *and* terrifying because we recognise that climate change is not a singular issue. It is, in fact, inextricably tied to and symptomatic of the many other "dysfunctional cultural patterns"—as Robert Gilman puts it—that form the foundation of our societies. By accepting the challenges of climate change, we accept the need to look (really look!) at the many systemic, cultural, psychological, and relational roots of these challenges. We accept the possibility that deep, wide, and fast transformation in each of these areas may be the only way forward.

So, feeling thrilled and terrified, what's my position? You already know that I am impatient (*Now!*). You also know that I care about the practicalities of exactly how, and with whom, things are implemented, and see this as the "missing link"—as posited by the curators of IABR 2018—that is too often absent from otherwise compelling design visions (*How?*). And, despite my skepticism about professional saviour syndrome, I still believe that architects and allied spatial practitioners can play an important role in building a viable future **IF** (big if) their work is sufficiently integrated with actions towards, and in service of, processes of economic, political, and social transformation.

Impatient, practical, resisting narratives of resignation, how do I propose to approach the water elements of IABR—2020, for which I'm using the working title *Flows: Water (Challenges) as Leverage*?

### Framing Partnerships

We are fortunate that the timeline of this project allows for a reasonable discovery period before rushing to final conclusions. I plan to use this time to gather and synthesise data from diverse sources, with the expectation that this may yield unanticipated insights and positive outcomes for the way the project is finally presented to the public.

As an important point of departure, the exhibition will benefit from the strong institutional partnerships within the water sector that the IABR has built over its past iterations. These include PBL (The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency), the Dutch Special Envoy for International Water Affairs, and the World Wide Fund for Nature, amongst many, many others. Taking into account the Water as Leverage for Resilient Cities Asia stakeholders, our partners also include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, World Bank, 100 Resilient Cities and OECD, alongside Dutch bodies FMO and RVO.

These partners are reputable sources for the comparative international data that can introduce the diverse nature and geographic distribution of the global water challenges, and they will help us navigate and explain the many sources, flows (and dams) within the global water-related networks of policy and governance, funding and financing. They are also themselves key players within these networks.

I look forward to engaging this community of experts, soliciting their strategic input, critical feedback, and advocacy. Beyond existing institutional relationships, I also aim to call upon relevant voices from elsewhere—including a group of International Advisors. I firmly believe that engaging a wide range of stakeholders offers exciting positive potentials, which outweigh any potential risks of relinquishing absolute curatorial control.

George, you've pointed out that we must "reckon with the fact that design cannot be both an instrument of neoliberalism and at the same time an activist force in the fights against climate change and for social justice." I can only hope that the IABR's independent status will allow us to collaborate with institutional partners whilst preserving the possibility of critique. Not least a critique of our own curatorial positions.

### Channels of Inquiry

Collaborating critically with these institutional partners, and alongside the international researchers and practitioners who we will identify during the research phase and via our autumn Open Call, some overarching questions I'd like to explore include:

- *How can spatial practitioners help to translate global goals and commitments concerning water and related challenges (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals) into local actions and impacts (e.g., “Terrestrial” practices, per Bruno Latour)?*
- *How can designers, citizens, and designer-citizens effectively intervene within political and financial systems, rather than remaining passive subjects to their processes?*
- *How can we successfully integrate strategies of climate adaptation with those of mitigation on a timescale that speaks to the urgency and scale of the challenges at hand?*
- *What systemic hindrances to success can we identify and how can we address these?*
- *How might design, interpreted broadly, contribute most effectively to these translations, interventions and transitions? For example, by:*
  - *Underpinning calls to political action with an integrated systems analysis and planning approach;*
  - *Drawing connections across scales of space and time, and amongst the varied interests of different stakeholders; and*
  - *Raising aspirations in savvy way that connects with real possibilities, including making the choices it presents politically visible and actionable.*

I’m also curious about how the ways we talk about water-related challenges may influence the ways we act towards them. As Donna Haraway writes, “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with”. How far can we take the concept of ‘leverage’, and what additional narratives should we explore?

### Thinking in Time: Past Transformations

The moment we find ourselves in is unprecedented. We need to leap like we’ve never leapt before. Can we drive transformation at the unprecedented scale and speed required *and* bring everyone along with us? The feeling of skidding towards a cliff edge can either prompt action, or overwhelm and paralyse.

I believe that to mobilise at the scale necessary, amidst a storm of seemingly unrelenting bad news, we need to find, understand and share positive examples—both from history and the present moment—of people and places that have already positively changed their relationships with water. This adds to my list of questions:

- *What can we learn from examples of successes, when water was the “leverage” to implement transformations that have dramatically improved quality of life (for humans and other species)? How did they do it? What might history teach us about unexpected connections and outcomes?*

In confluence with this, I also propose that the exhibition include an archival survey of past IABR projects related to water themes, especially *The Flood* in 2005. An analysis of the “how” of past successes will offer helpful lessons for our 2020 exhibition and help test arguments about the continued relevance of cultural agents like biennales in broader social / political / economic transformation.

I hope a brief historic survey of successful strategies and projects can also help us to recall the many positive things about water: It’s life-giving! It’s pleasurable! It’s beautiful! Water in itself is not the challenge; it is human civilisation out of balance in relation to our living planet and to principles of social equity.

#### Thinking in Time: Intergenerational Equity

Our current situation is one of generational injustice—today’s children and yet-to-be-born will inherit the world that our parents and we have ravaged. Yet through their brave acts of civil disobedience (e.g., the global School Strikes for Climate) young people—many of them below voting age—have opened up more political space for us adults to act in. Acknowledging this, I propose to introduce a stronger/more active youth component to IABR—2020 than was perhaps present in previous editions.

Let’s work together to find ways to invite and include the voices of young people, alongside professionals within the exhibition. To this end, I also propose that we partner with youth organisations that are active in water and related sectors, including both young professionals and young advocates for the related public programmes.

#### Thinking in Place: Geographic Equity

During the research phase of *Flows*, I plan to seek out additional international knowledge partners to ensure a diversity of geographic and cultural perspectives on and approaches to these topics. Thijs and Robbert, I’d also hope to discuss with you how we might draw curatorial connections between your work on the Energy Transition with the Water elements. Are there ways we can work together to raise questions of social equity in connecting conversations about spatial and behavioural changes in the some places and related environmental effects in others? The Shared Socioeconomic Pathways, raised by George, may be one useful way to frame this...

## Coming Down to Earth and Getting Down to Work in M4H and Beyond

We are beyond lucky to have a beautiful exhibition space located within Rotterdam's dynamic, ambitious M4H district, completely relevant to the themes of the exhibition. Building on previous work on the circular economy in this area on which the IABR has partnered, I see exciting potential for our internationally minded exhibition to root itself in the rich creative and entrepreneurial soil of its host neighbourhood and—as previous IABRs have done—grow some juicy fruit for our neighbours to sink their teeth into.

Possible routes (roots!) to be explored together with Rianne and Jurgen as the Co-Curators for M4H include: experiential / functional commissions that relate water to lived human experience, and draw cultural or scalar connections between M4H and other places being exhibited; and collaborations with locally based partners for the design / fabrication / animation of the exhibition.

To connect the international and Rotterdam-based narratives with water-leveraged transformations elsewhere in the Netherlands, we are fortunate to be able to showcase the work of IABR Atelier The Ark of Dordrecht, led by Adriaan Geuze who was also, fittingly, curator of *The Flood* in 2005.

I'm also delighted by the prospect of a pedestrian bridge that could link BoTu to M4H—connecting the two IABR exhibition sites (for which I understand funding is still pending). Beyond the physical connection, Thijs and I are keen to explore (together with our co-curators) how we might create programmatic links between Water as Leverage and Energy Transition as Leverage elements? The former is ostensibly international and about adaptation, whilst the latter is local and about mitigation, but of course both are actually all of these things and it will be productive to complicate this binary.

I am grateful to be embarking on this collaboration with all of you and our growing support teams, and trust that — in exercising professional judgement within our respective areas of focus — we will discover modes of strategic coordination and horizontal collaboration that are complementary and harmonious.

I look forward to continuing these conversations as we move into the research phase of *Flows* and the Open Call that invites others to join us.

With my best regards,

Sarah