



## Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections

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3 *Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections*, edited by  
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5 **Willem J. H. Willems & Henk P. J. van Schaik**, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015,  
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7 **429 pp., £75 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-8890-278-9**  
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11 *Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections* is an edited  
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13 volume based on papers presented at the conference *Protecting Deltas, Heritage*  
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15 *Helps!* held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, between the 23 and 28 September 2013.  
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17 As Jhr Ir Diederik Six (the President of ICOMOS Netherlands) and Dr Erik  
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19 Luijendijk (ICOMOS Netherlands board member) explain in the preface, the purpose  
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21 of the conference was to ‘build bridges between the water and the culture sectors in  
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23 order to protect world’s deltas’ (p.12). The book certainly fulfils this ambition, by  
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25 including twenty-four international case studies, which present the various  
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27 (sometimes harmonious, and sometimes challenging) relationships between  
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29 communities, heritage and water.  
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35 Following two short pieces – one introducing the idea of culture as the fourth  
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37 pillar of sustainable development and the other providing a historical overview of  
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39 heritage-focused conventions – the book addresses different issues and strategies  
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41 relating to heritage and water, in different contexts and cultures. Three main themes  
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43 (*Material connections; Organisational connections; and Spatial, social, cultural and*  
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45 *spiritual connections*, which should have been made more obvious in the table of  
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47 contents) seem to run throughout the contributions, and demonstrate how complex,  
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49 and yet inspirational, the relationship between humans and water can be.  
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53 From India to Italy, from Cambodia to the US, from Jordan to South Korea,  
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55 each chapter presents a story about ‘water heritage in all its diversity’ (p.9). We are  
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57 confronted with stories of resilient communities, stories of challenges successfully  
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3 overcome and stories of empowering collaborations. Furthermore, the aesthetic,  
4 technical, social and economical importance of the relationship between heritage and  
5 water is, case study after case study, reiterated. Some examples are discussed in more  
6 detail than others, though they all offer a snapshot of how much water can shape (or  
7 has shaped) the heritage and lives of those who live close to it. For example, in the  
8 chapter titled 'Water and Heritage in Angkor, Cambodia', Peou Hang highlights the  
9 need for rehabilitating the twelfth-century Angkor hydraulic system, not only for the  
10 benefit of the local and cultural environment, but also for the preservation of the  
11 historical monuments and temples. The effectiveness of this ancient hydraulic  
12 structure is a testament to human intelligence: throughout the centuries, this structure  
13 has prevented floods and provided local communities with water availability and new  
14 economic opportunities.

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30 In the initial chapters, the inclusion of further considerations (on the  
31 relationship between local identity and heritage infrastructure) would have opened up  
32 further reflections on the importance that the sense of place has in safeguarding  
33 heritage and its authenticity. This could have led on more smoothly to the next section  
34 of the book, where some contributors place particular emphasis on the difficulty in  
35 striking the balance between authentic preservation (of the heritage site or structure)  
36 and effective protection (of the community). This is especially the case for cultural  
37 heritage and local communities that are affected by the devastating effects of climate  
38 change. There is indeed a tension between preventive mitigation strategies (which  
39 primarily aim to protect the population and its 'material assets') and the risks that  
40 these strategies may pose to often-fragile heritage structures. This idea (protection  
41 versus preservation) is clearly discussed by Heiko Lieske *et al.* through a comparative  
42 study conducted in Germany on heritage conservation, urban development and large-

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3 scale flood protection schemes. The study concluded that integrative planning  
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5 procedures offer ‘opportunities to combine up-to-date flood protection with the  
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7 preservation of urban heritage as well as a general upgrading and stabilization of  
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9 historic river cities’ (p. 211). Certainly, the collaboration between different  
10  
11 organisations is pivotal in developing sustainable and resilient systems that protect  
12  
13 communities and preserve heritage. Hence, it is imperative to understand (as pointed  
14  
15 out by Katko *et al.*) the institutional, administrative and legal frameworks specific to  
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17 each country, so that targeted water and heritage management systems can be  
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19 implemented according to the local natural and social conditions.  
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23 Undoubtedly, this book offers an interesting read. It is, first and foremost, a  
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25 significant compendium of case studies about resilience: the resilience of ancient  
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27 structures that have survived the ravages of time and natural disasters; and the  
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29 resilience of communities, across the globe, that have learnt how to live with water.  
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31 At the same time, the book is a practical resource of examples and concrete actions  
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33 required to ensure both an effective management of heritage sites as well as the  
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35 sustainable development of water infrastructure. Therefore, the main merit of the  
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37 book is that it sends a clear message to policy makers, managers and heritage  
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39 professionals on the pressing need for the preservation of heritage and the protection  
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41 of communities in areas where water does not bear only a positive impact.  
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46 However, the main strength of the book (a strong collection of international  
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48 examples), also becomes its weakness: the book ends quite abruptly, with an  
49  
50 informative but rather brief document (*The Statement of Amsterdam*) on the  
51  
52 conference itself and its key themes. Instead, a closing chapter, highlighting the  
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54 editors’ critical reflections and connecting the core points discussed throughout the  
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56 420-odd pages, would have been very useful. This is, in my view, where the book  
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3 needed further attention, so that it offered both a practical and theoretical exploration  
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5 into the global concerns relating to heritage and water. In this way, the volume would  
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7 have also provided a more solid and critical platform for further academic work on  
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9 the subject.  
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16 Dr Anna Catalani

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18 *School of Architecture & Design, University of Lincoln, United Kingdom*  
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21 Email: [acatalani@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:acatalani@lincoln.ac.uk)  
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