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Water Heritage: A View from Paris

Carola Hein and Laurence Lestel

Since the 1990s, policy making, water and heritage management and cultural activities along the Seine in Paris and in the Île-de-France region have offered exemplary models of innovative, long-term action and of the successful reactivation of historical places and practices for sustainable living. The riverbanks, quays, monuments and urban vistas of the World Heritage property, together with the imaginary of the Seine, play an important role in this context as demonstrated by the 2024 Olympic Games. In an era of climate change, there is an urgent need to rethink the relationship between people, built heritage and rivers and other bodies of water. Approaches that include socio-ecosystemic thinking and nature-based solutions can help (re)create habitable, sustainable and just spaces that draw on historical practices, while protecting and adapting heritage and learning from history. The narratives we weave, the projects we realize and the heritage we preserve to live with water, both today and in the future, require careful attention. Exploring natural and cultural heritage, as well as intangible practices, can help build new narratives for cities, including riverside World Heritage cities. In these cities, citizens' growing interest in water and aquatic activities challenges paradigms of the modern and industrial era, paving the way for better heritage protection and encouraging the design of a sustainable future.

Central Paris, with the Seine and its quays at the core, offers a valuable case study for exploring both the challenges and opportunities of living with water in a World Heritage site, as argued by Carola Hein, Professor of History of Architecture and Urban Planning at Delft University of Technology, UNESCO Chair "Water, Ports and Historic Cities" and Researcher-in-Residence at the IEA Paris (Sorbonne University Chair) in 2024–2025. In collaboration with Laurence Lestel from Sorbonne University, head of the CNRS' Zone Atelier Seine, with researchers of the PIREN-Seine program and the OPUS institute of Sorbonne University, Hein's research in Paris tested the value case approach she developed as UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities, focusing on multiple and potentially conflicting uses of the Seine. During her stay in Paris, she explored the role of different water values in the transformation of the center of Paris and explored how these different water forms and functions intersect and how a shift in values can lead to a transformation of urban forms, functions and imaginaries. Several research and educational activities complemented Hein's research at the IEA in Paris. Notably, Yvonne van Mil and Léa Kayrouz led research on the UNESCO Urban Heritage Atlas, with Kayrouz also contributing through literature review and cartographic analysis. In collaboration with van Mil and Lukas Hoeller, research for the River Port City Atlas extended the inquiry to regional and metropolitan scales, examining the Seine River as a structuring element of the wider territory. Zuzanna Sliwinska focused on mapping

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water museums, centers and cultural waterscapes across the Seine basin, while students in the Adaptive Design course developed design projects for Bercy Port.

Based on her research, with support from Sorbonne University, IEA Paris and the UNESCO World Heritage Center, Hein organized a major conference, "(Re)Connecting River and City – The Seine in Paris and the Île-de-France: A Model for Nature Positive Approaches in World Heritage Cities for Climate Resilience," at the IEA Paris in March 2025, engaging academic and professional participants from Paris and the world. The conference received support from several academic and professional partners, notably UNESCO, the IEA and the City of Paris, as well as the LDE PortCityFutures Center. This special issue of *Blue Papers* captures key arguments from the conference in revised and reviewed format. Sincere thanks to all institutions, colleagues and students who contributed their time, expertise and creativity to these research and educational activities. Their contributions enriched the research and fostered a collaborative exchange of ideas across different scales and perspectives. The goal of this issue is to share the debates and to contribute to broader discussions on multiple uses of a shared resource, the Seine.

The articles compiled in this issue of *Blue Papers* provide background information on the historical and contemporary development of Paris from various disciplinary perspectives – including anthropology, archaeology, history, planning, heritage management and more. The first group of papers explores the broader context of the Seine and its multiple uses and the second speaks to the four themes selected for the conference: Swimming, Sewage, Shipping and Safety.

Carola Hein begins by setting the context in Part I, describing various coexisting values associated with water in Paris and how these values can be used to improve river governance in Paris. Laurence Lestel shows how Parisians' relationship with the Seine has evolved since the nineteenth century and why drawing on this historical perspective can restore meaning to that relationship. Hélène Noizet describes the evolution of the Seine in Paris since the Middle Ages, breathing new life into its ancient channels, which must regain their rightful place in shaping the relationship between the Seine and Parisians. Raphaël Morera reminds us how the bond between Paris and its river has shaped both the river and the city. Emmanuelle Lallement explores three initiatives to reclaim the banks of the Seine since the 1990s (Paris-Plage, the Voies sur Berge and the redevelopment of the area around Notre-Dame de Paris), each reflecting a different approach, thereby illustrating the potential diversity of efforts to rebuild the connection between residents and their river. Olivier Aïm takes us into the world of the guinguettes, once places of leisure outside the city limits (beyond the city toll gates) and today a symbol of a joyful approach to the riverbanks. Sahima Hamlaoui and Maria Cellamare remind us that the Seine is not merely a backdrop that enhances Paris, but is also the setting for a rich ecosystem, observed here through its phytoplankton.

All decision-makers must take different spatial scales and functions into account. Yvonne van Mil, Carola Hein and Lukas Höller broaden the perspective with a study of the Parisian port city territory, which situates Paris within its river basin and connects the city to international trade.

Olivier Burel illustrates this international dimension of the Seine in Paris using the example of energy, and Jean Debrie explains in detail what this port dimension means for the City of Paris. From a public health perspective, Anita Ravlic reminds us that the Seine, like so many other rivers, once served as an outlet for Paris's sewers and explains how the management of this wastewater has led to a reclaiming of the Seine by city residents. Thomas Thiebault, Catherine Carré and Jérémy Jacob examine the wastewater in greater detail and what it reveals about Parisians' dietary habits and health. Jean-Pierre Tabuchi, Catherine Carré and Jean-Claude Deutsch draw conclusions from this regarding the system's ability to adapt to future global changes. Bruno Gouyette emphasizes that three approaches are necessary for a sustainable river: considering the entire Seine basin, viewing the Seine as a system to be considered as a whole and granting rights to the Seine to make it a visible issue in political debates. Finally, Clément Brun, Léonard Bertrand and Annabelle Nantier explore how the public health challenges associated with swimming have transformed the City of Paris's vision and management of the river.