



Engaging waterways: enhancing social and ecological resilience through participatory daylighting

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A small, slow-flowing brook used to dissect a field in Urmston, Manchester, before it was culverted and landscaped over during the late-1960s. According to David, who used to live adjacent to the field as a child, the stream was prone to pollution from agriculture and industry, whilst polio had instilled a fear of dirty water in the surrounding community. Nevertheless, David recalls that the stream was affectionately referred to as 'our brook', which provided a focal point for important social occasions and community events. Peppered on either side with rushes, reeds and hawthorn bushes, the brook supported a range of species that David still recalls fondly today: painted lady butterflies, water scorpions, beetles, frogs, and moorhens. Revisiting the field years later after culverting, Baz was astounded by the loss of social and ecological vibrancy that had characterised the area, which now lay dormant as a homogenous field of rye grass.*

The disappearance of Longford Brook is not an isolated case but is representative of the fate of urban waterways across the world. As rivers and streams were systematically culverted during the twentieth century, in accordance with modern design principles, communities not only lost touch with their biophysical surroundings, and the vital environmental flows that sustain urban life, but social relations that had previously bound communities together were also lost. However, as knowledge of the negative consequences of culverting has grown in recent years, concealed waterways have started to be uncovered once again in a process known as 'daylighting'. The supposed benefits of these schemes are multiple and are attracting growing levels of academic attention, yet there has been minimal research conducted on the civic potential of these initiatives for engaging communities in the deculverting process.

This project aims to investigate how a surrounding community can be materially involved in the daylighting of their 'own' waterway, to simultaneously enhance social and ecological resilience. We present the outputs from a workshop which identified and established links with professional stakeholders engaged with daylighting. This has provided an up-to-date understanding of existing daylighting schemes in Manchester, UK, the policy landscape around daylighting, and potential areas for daylighting schemes. This will feed into the second phase of the project: a participatory valuation and planning exercise with members of the local community.

(* name has been changed to preserve anonymity)