

FLUCTUATIONS

Report

Strategies for Accessing Water
as a Creative Space

Executive Summary

June 2024



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“For Fluctuations to become a feasible model, I believe we need to look at topics that are much larger than the event itself. We need to change our understanding of rivers. Entities involved in waterway management need to rewrite their mission statements. It’s a deep transformation but it’s already being promoted by many organisations across Europe.”

- Nicolas Dhers,
SMMMILE / CEO Fluctuations
(Paris)



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“For industrial ships or leisure boating there’s policies of course, but culture on water has very specific requirements and there’s no policy framework that shows a clear and feasible path for this.”

- Shunyata Ossewaarde,
City of Amsterdam Policy
Advisor for Nightlife and Culture
(Amsterdam)



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“Reclaiming the water as a public space is a political act, especially in a city like Berlin. Real estate speculation is making spaces less and less accessible and we need to develop new spatial tactics.”

- Jule Roschlau,
member of cultural vessel LAIKA
(Berlin)



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“We always knew it’s crucial to convince cities to provide a cultural harbor - a place that has open mooring spots for boats like ours and some toilets with disability access and all these things that we cannot provide so easily. It would be a total game changer!”

- Nicolas Defawe, co-founder of
cultural vessel Urban Boat
(Compiègne)

The Urban Boat, a cultural vessel from Compiègne, France, used for Fluctuations test events in July 2024

©Urban Boat, 2021

About The Fluctuations Report

The project Fluctuations, funded by the Creative Europe program in 2024, seeks to transform a 40 meter long barge into an e-powered, floating festival built on the pillars of culture, sustainability and active citizenship, touring Europe via rivers and canals.

How can this utopian vision be put into practice?

The Fluctuations Report presents the first step on this journey: **mapping the European waterways from a cultural perspective**. Where in Europe can we find vessels that operate as cultural stages? What sort of events do they organise? Which places and infrastructures along the water do they engage with? And how do they navigate - and reimagine - the regulations of waterways?

The report, initially intended as a short feasibility study for the Fluctuations Festival, evolved into a much broader research into the transnational phenomenon of cultural vessels and their highly diverse and enchanting strategies for engaging with water as a creative space. It has thus turned into the first and most extensive study on this topic that compares initiatives from several countries in Europe.

The Fluctuations Report addresses policymakers, cultural practitioners, and city makers to radically reimagine the future of waterways.



5

focus countries: France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary



25.000

kilometres of boatable inland waterways encompassed by the focus countries



36

cultural vessels researched



34

stakeholders interviewed



4

test events planned



10

recommendations for accessing water as a creative space

Methodology

- Selection of five focus countries with the highest potential for a first tour of the Fluctuation Festival
- Employing a snowball sampling method for uncovering and databasing relevant stakeholders representing cultural vessels, events on water, waterfront venues, government institutions, and NGOs
- Semi-structured interviews with 34 stakeholders
- Desk research into a total of 36 cultural vessels and 30 potential event locations
- Site visits to locations for organising 4 test events

Objectives

- Mapping European waterways from a cultural perspective
- Identifying cultural vessels, proposing a framework for categorising different types and developing a definition
- Databasing key stakeholders
- Analysing the practices of staging cultural activities on water
- Listing and assessing potential event locations on and by the water and selecting four suitable sites for Fluctuations Festival test events
- Examining policies and governance structures relevant to cultural activities on waterways
- Summarising insights and recommendations for enhancing the use of waterways as cultural spaces

Key Findings

Water is an integral part of urban landscapes across Europe. It often covers around 5% of a city's surface, and in a place like Amsterdam, this figure can soar to as much as 35%.

At present, regulating authorities frame rivers and canals primarily as traffic routes for commercial or leisure transit. However, this status quo becomes more and more contested as civic initiatives in many cities advocate for new visions, claiming the waters as spaces for recreation, culture and creativity, and environmental regeneration. Cultural vessels are an expression of this wider reimagining of rivers.

The research on cultural vessels assessed four aspects listed below. Becoming aware of their interplay opens the view on multiple possible strategies for accessing water as a creative space in different contexts.

People & Vessels

'Cultural vessel' is a new term proposed by the Fluctuations Report to describe a phenomenon distinct from traditional forms of industrial shipping and recreational boating.

Cultural vessels encompass a wide diversity of boat types. Each boat type enables a different route of navigating creative contents, natural environments, built infrastructures, and regulations.

The report identified 36 cultural vessels, ranging from small, DIY-built boats to large, professionally managed ships.

Five aspects are highlighted to categorise different cultural vessels: construction, size and motorisation, range of motion, time of use, ownership and operation.

While most cultural vessels in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands are refurbished industrial ships, German cities like Berlin, Hamburg and Münster show a unique presence of DIY-built cultural vessels.

Networks between cultural vessels across cities appear little evolved and can benefit from collaborating with translocal initiatives like Fluctuations.

Operators of cultural vessels are commonly driven by active citizenship, participation in urban developments, environmentalism, social cohesion, and artistic exploration.

Practices

Practices to stage cultural activities on water are as diverse as vessels and geographic conditions.

This diversity of practices can, however, be categorised along four major distinctions: license-free activities vs. such that require authorisation, different spatial approaches of utilising waterways and banks to stage culture, for-profit vs. non-profit activities, and content-related choices. This helps to understand how different local contexts are navigated by cultural organisers on a programming level.

Places

Where and how cultural events can take place on water is largely influenced by the natural topography and built infrastructure.

The inherent diversity of European waterways - natural riverscapes and built canals, public spaces and private venues, vegetated environments and post-industrial concrete jungles - enable unique cultural activities while posing distinct challenges.

Big ship traffic is a main bottleneck - the heavier trafficked a waterway, the less it is suitable / accessible for creative initiatives.

Sound travels far over water, posing a challenge to finding suitable event locations by the water in urban centers due to noise conflicts.

'Cultural harbors' are an emerging concept of locations simultaneously suitable for mooring and events. Such locations are extremely scarce at present. They are a crucial element for strengthening the creative ecosystem on water.

Policies & Governance

The regulatory environment is complex and varies significantly across the five countries studied.

Key differences exist regarding boating licenses, waterway management, mooring, vignettes, and event licensing.

By mapping out requirements of boating licences in different European countries, the study retraced how cultural vessels are categorised from an administrative perspective at present.

Using waterways as creative spaces remains a topic that none of the cities and countries researched have developed designated strategies for.

Cultural vessels require policies specifically designed for facilitating cultural activities on waterways aligned with sustainability efforts.

A cultural vessel advocacy group exists in Berlin (Spree:publik), another one is starting to organise in Hamburg.

Defining Cultural Vessels

Waterway regulations define various vessel classes such as **recreational boats** (also known as leisure boat, pleasure boat or sport boat), **industrial ships** (also referred to as commercial or professional ships), and **houseboats**, among others.

However, the term '**cultural vessel**' is newly introduced in this study to describe a growing phenomenon where watercraft are used for cultural purposes.

In the full Fluctuations Report, several systems of categorisation are outlined. Cultural vessels can be distinguished by type of construction, motorisation and length, range of motion, time of use, and ownership and operation. Cultural events differ in terms of licensing as well as economic, spatial, and content distinctions. On an administrative level, no common European regulatory framework exists, demanding operators of cultural vessels to navigate complex, varying and often unsuited local requirements.

To provide a clear definition underlines the essential takeaway from this study that **cultural vessels are a distinct entity worthy of policy attention, advocacy, and public engagement.**

Simultaneously, the findings presented in the report univoqually stress the range and diversity of this exceptional cultural phenomenon. Connecting creatives, rivers, audiences and communities in unique and historically significant ways, **cultural vessels are pioneers in envisioning socially just, sustainability based futures, re-imagining European cities, countrysides and riverscapes.**



DIY-built cultural vessels at Rummelsburger Bucht, Berlin
© Johannes Jelinek / vakatmedia, 2015



Kulturboot Mary Jane from Aken (Elbe), Germany
© thisismywork.online & OMA

Definition:

A cultural vessel is any floating structure, such as pontoons, rafts, boats, or ships, that serves as a cultural workspace, stage, and/or canvas. These vessels facilitate artistic expressions, providing spaces for creation, presentation, and exchange on water.

Characteristics:

- Purpose: Cultural vessels are dedicated to creative activities, offering platforms for performances, exhibitions, workshops, and other cultural events.
- Diversity: The term encompasses a wide range of vessel types and practices, promoting a common discourse among various local creative communities.
- Usage: These vessels are used solely for cultural projects or regularly (at least six times a year), and they engage with the public.

Similarities:

Cultural vessels may include aspects of the following while not becoming their main purpose:

- Recreational boats: Used primarily for leisure activities such as sailing and fishing.
- Event boats: Chartered for private, exclusive events like corporate parties and weddings.
- Bar & restaurant boats: Operating commercially to provide dining experiences on water.
- Houseboats: Amenities support temporary or permanent residency on board.

Regulatory Context:

At present, cultural vessels are most often registered as recreational boats, which poses challenges due to the mismatch between regulatory definitions and vessel use. This study suggests a need for specific policies to better support cultural vessels.

Recommendations

1

Discourse

Enhancing access to the water as creative space should be understood as part of a broader shift from industrial exploitation of waterways to mixed use and environmental regeneration, turning some of today's liquid highways into tomorrow's liquid parks.

2

Local Practice

Analyse local conditions in your area - including people, vessels, existing events, locations, and regulations - to see what creative activities you can already realise in relation to the water. Organise them, gain experience and build your community.

3

Infrastructure

Look for affordable berthing spots in your city. Without one, it's hard to operate a cultural vessel. Once you find a safe homeport, your cultural vessel can take shape and go on its excursions. City officials, on the other hand, can create designated spaces such as 'cultural harbors', temporary mooring in places suitable for events, and overall consider cultural vessels in riverbank design.

4

Partnerships and Networks

Mobilise advocacy. Build alliances with stakeholders engaged in arts and culture, recreational river use and water sports (e.g. NGOs promoting swimming in the river), environmental regeneration and sustainability, urban planning, and water tourism.

5

Advocacy

Write a shared manifesto with this alliance defining the common vision for the future of urban waterways and connected rights and responsibilities to realise and sustain it.

6

Urban Planning / Zoning

Identify zones on waterways where large vessel transit can be banned temporarily or permanently, allowing safe swimming, anchoring and mooring for recreational watercraft, thus making the space accessible for recreational use.

7

Spontaneous Practice

Many groups operating cultural vessels - especially non-profits - seek to bypass permit procedures for reasons of feasibility. Rather than pursuing bans, cities should acknowledge this need for spontaneous practice and provide public cultural infrastructure, the design of which proactively permits types of activities that elsewhere would require authorisation.

8

Environmental Sustainability

Support measures targeting to improve local water quality and environmental regeneration along shorelines. Making swimming possible is a core element in enhancing the access of residents - and their creative ideas - to the river.

9

Education

Share your knowledge and develop educational resources about sustainable river use to accompany your cultural activities and your campaigning for widening public access to the water. Help build positive habits among organisers and audiences and a shared culture of sustainability.

10

Research

Collect data and evaluate measures. How many citizens are empowered to access the river by participating in cultural vessel collectives? How many kilos of floating waste are removed from the water by a creative cleanup action? How many performances of emerging artists are enabled by floating stages? How much media attention is drawn to important social topics through creative protests organised on the river?

This document was produced by VibeLab for the Creative Europe project "Fluctuations".

VibeLab is a data-driven research, consultancy and advocacy agency dedicated to supporting creatives and preserving night-time culture. With over ten years of experience, VibeLab works with local institutions and governments to develop strategies to effectively navigate and support the nightlife industry. We specialise in making complex data clear. VibeLab's research and consultancy helps identify growth opportunities and connects individuals, businesses, governments and institutions, to boost creativity and local economies. We are passionate about the transformative power that nightlife culture and creative communities have on urban areas. Our strength lies in our connections: we bridge the gap between government authorities, nightlife creatives and local communities. VibeLab creates change with sustainable solutions, backed by data to make cities thrive at day and night.

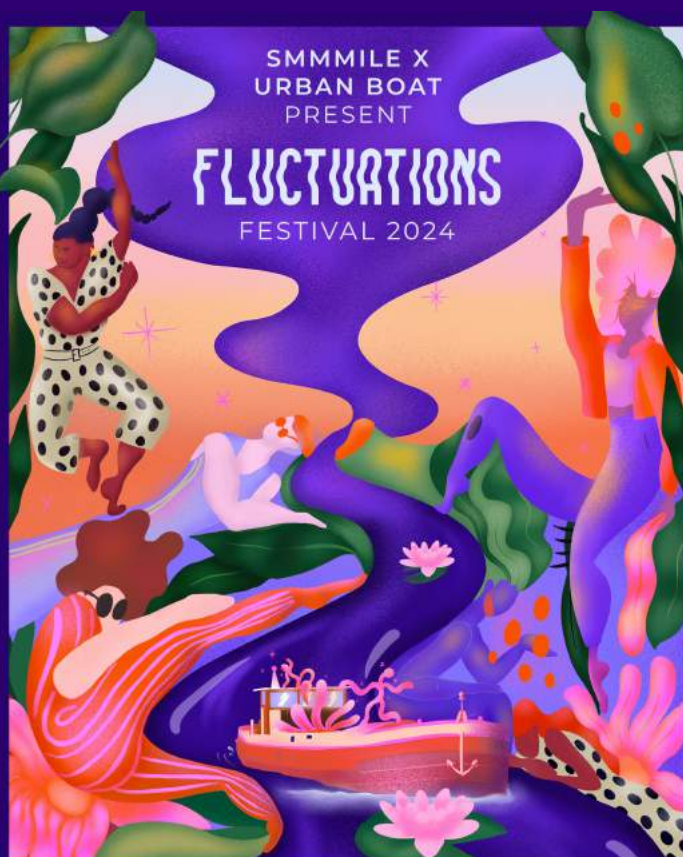
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