



# **Common Waters**

**Designing Frameworks  
for Collective Exhibitions  
on the Environment**

---

Tony Kogan, Nicholas Frayne, Julia Nakanishi, Omar Ferwati

The smell of sage and tobacco filled the air of a clean, white-box gallery in Cambridge, a small riverside city in Ontario, Canada. Local Mohawk teacher Christine Lefebvre led a discussion on the centrality of water in our lives, bringing together a circle of children, architecture students, community members, and local politicians. The pieces hanging in the space contributed to the conversation in their own ways: “plastiglomerates” (mixtures of various materials held together by plastic) collected on the coast of British Columbia spoke to polluted waterways;<sup>1</sup> a video of salmon jumping at a nearby waterfall told us of the nonhuman communities sharing our waters;<sup>2</sup> and portraits of shipping workers shared a perspective on the human labor of polluting industries.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, the group left the gallery, crossed a bridge over the Grand River, and walked down the street to a roughly finished storefront. Inside, a student group had remade the space into an evolving response to the gallery: undergraduate research projects on the local river sat beside in-progress master’s theses on spatio-political elements of water from the South China Sea to Somalia. A 20-foot-long scale model of the local watershed occupied the center of the space, helping to locate the audience in a broader context. The quiet storefront was soon filled with the sounds of a student band, and lively conversation spilled into the street. This was the opening

1 See Cindy Stelmackowich’s *Plastic Tides* piece: <http://cindystelmackowich.com/>.

2 See Jane Austin’s *Salmon Run* videos: <https://sites.google.com/view/janeaustinantist/home?authuser=0>.

3 See Danny Custodio’s *Ships* series: <http://www.dannycustodio.com/>.

of *Common Waters*, a collective exhibition on community and the environment organized by a student collective at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture in collaboration with Cambridge Art Galleries, a municipal institution.

Meaningful and lasting solutions to environmental threats can only begin through widespread, community-level conversations that bring together different backgrounds, perspectives, cultures, and expertise. While many exhibitions and designers address these challenges, few consider the reciprocity of the community’s perspective, a position essential to finding and maintaining solutions. Exhibitions typically present prescriptive “expert” or “visionary” approaches to collective conditions. These ideas and experiences often stand alone to be viewed but never developed, interacted with, or challenged. *Common Waters* instead engaged visitors as active participants in its development.

*Common Waters* was a three-month-long exhibition and event series that addressed matters of environmental concern not by communicating prescribed information, but by making the community an integral part of developing new knowledge and sharing existing knowledge. The project explored artistic, scientific, cultural, and personal perspectives through a curated sequence of art installations, workshops, discussions, gatherings, and excursions. *Common Waters* was created as an exhibition in progress. It began only partially filled and grew throughout the duration of the





# DORFMAN

MUSEUM FIGURES, INC.

www.museumfigures.com  
800-634-4873



© McKinley Presidential Library



Quatrefoil, Museum of Boulder



Quatrefoil, Museum of Boulder

Dorfman Conservation Forms created exclusively with Ethafoam® brand inert polyethylene foam.

Create new perspectives.

**DELPHI** Museum experiences that inspire.  
groupdelphi.com | 800.536.4545

Eriksen Translations Inc. helps museums engage multilingual visitors in 100+ languages.

translation • multilingual typesetting • transcription  
web & multimedia localization • subtitling & voiceover

**ERIKSEN** TRANSLATIONS www.eriksen.com

Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge

**TAYLOR**™  
STUDIOS INC.  
EXHIBIT PLANNING · DESIGN · FABRICATION

We help you create exhibits that are inspiring and memorable.

# ***Common Waters***

## **offers a single unique**

## **experiment in**

## **guiding empowering**

## **environmental**

## **conversations.**

project with artifacts and reflections of its events throughout the summer of 2019. *Common Waters* was a fluid exhibition that layered diverse voices on nuanced topics within the larger question of how to strive for a positive future in our environment and community. Advertised in the press and on social media as “a discussion on the community and the environment,” the project is conceptually related to author Nina Simon’s work in participatory museum practices.<sup>4</sup> Simon describes a participatory exhibition as supporting a “multi-directional” flow of information between a set of curators, participants, and visitors.

A critical step in attempting participatory exhibitions is framing success criteria and analyzing the results of the project through that lens.<sup>5</sup> As *Common Waters* was unprecedented for the organizing parties in terms of the scale and scope of collaboration and engagement, we had simple goals for the exhibition. One priority for this experiment was to include a meaningful cross-section of our community in its development and presentation to produce a discussion that would engage the plurality of our city.<sup>6</sup> We also focused on fostering a sense of dynamism and adaptability to allow

for participatory engagement and outcomes. This flexibility invited visitors to draw independent connections between pieces, and add new elements to the exhibition even after its opening.

The climate crisis and environmental change seem like complex political problems for most of us. Not only has this perception created misconceptions and misinformation, it has also meant that most of us feel too helpless to engage with the problem. When only 51 percent of Canadians and 45 percent of Americans agree that climate change is a “serious problem,” it is clear that we must speak about this crisis differently.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, the politicization of climate action and science harms the potential for urgently required community-wide conversation.

To have effective conversations about the environmental crisis, the issue has to transcend politics and become a cross-cultural and communal issue accessible to all to share, learn, and talk about. Cultural projects like *Common Waters* that focus on community-based content, curation, and engagement are one potential tool for bringing people from diverse backgrounds into one community conversation. It is that coalition of communities that is necessary for approaching environmental threats.

*Common Waters* offers a single unique experiment in guiding empowering environmental conversations. Using water as a medium and a guiding theme, *Common Waters* attempted to learn, collaborate, and discuss with the community the ways in which we affect each other and the environments that support us.

4 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010).

5 Ibid.

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

7 Bruce Stokes, Richard Wike, and Jill Carle, “Global Concern about Climate Change, Broad Support for Limiting Emissions,” *Pew Research Center*, November 5, 2015, accessed December 21, 2019, [www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/11/05/global-concern-about-climate-change-broad-support-for-limiting-emissions](http://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/11/05/global-concern-about-climate-change-broad-support-for-limiting-emissions).





Fig. 1. Design at Riverside Gallery.

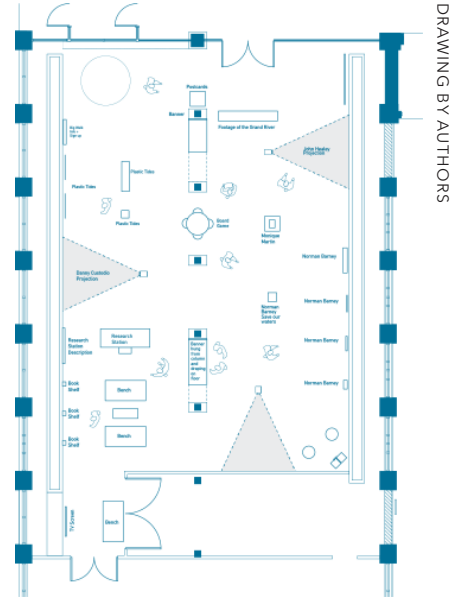


Fig. 2. Plan of the Design at Riverside Gallery.

### Expanding the “Community” in *Common Waters*

The city of Cambridge sits along the Grand River, which is widely recognized for its historical, ecological, and recreational value.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the Grand River and the ecological, industrial, Indigenous and settler heritage of its watershed form the local context for the discussions of *Common Waters*. This context includes a complex web of contemporary and historical Indigenous communities, including the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg and Neutrals,<sup>9</sup> and the Six Nations of the Grand River, the most populous First Nations reserve in Canada. We prioritized discussing this milieu, not only amid growing local and national awareness of Canada’s problematic settler colonial history and present, but

8 “Heritage River Designation,” accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.grandriver.ca/en/our-watershed/Heritage-River-Designation.aspx>.

9 Lori Campbell, “What’s with the territorial acknowledgments at public events in Waterloo Region?” *Waterloo Region Record*, therecord.com, May 15, 2019.

with respect to Indigenous people as the original stewards of these waters.

*Common Waters* came about through a collaboration between 1) Cambridge Art Galleries (CAG), a municipal art institution, and 2) BRIDGE, a collective of undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Waterloo School of Architecture, focused on community and design, that operates a website and a downtown storefront. Cambridge Art Galleries brought curatorial and logistics expertise to the project, while BRIDGE brought diverse student interests and design skills. Each group also provided distinct physical spaces to house *Common Waters*; CAG contributed the Design at Riverside Gallery and BRIDGE contributed their storefront. The Design at Riverside Gallery is a professionally-managed contemporary exhibition space (figs. 1 & 2), while the BRIDGE Storefront is a student-run, physically unfinished and more flexible space (figs. 3 & 4) with a downtown street presence.



Fig. 3. BRIDGE Storefront.

At the Design at Riverside Gallery location, visitors primarily encountered professional artists' works. These included postcards of the natural landscapes that a proposed oil pipeline would cut through;<sup>10</sup> provocative mixed-media sculptures that drew out the racism of mid-century kitsch "Native" imagery;<sup>11</sup> and hand-painted banners by Rochelle Rubenstein, used by the Wellington Water Watchers to protest environmental exploitation, such as groundwater extraction in southern Ontario by Nestlé,<sup>12</sup> the world's largest food and beverage company. At the BRIDGE Storefront, visitors interacted with an artist-in-residence and his works, speculative student design projects from the School of Architecture, research into visualizing climate change, the "Archive Wall" –

10 See Justin Langille and Jennifer Martin's *Greetings from Energy East!* series: <https://justinlangille.format.com/>.

11 See Norman Barney's paintings: <https://sites.google.com/view/normanbarney/home>.

12 Keith Leslie, "Nestlé Continues to Extract Water from Ontario Town Despite Drought: Activists," *The Globe and Mail*, August 21, 2016, [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/nestle-continues-to-extract-water-from-ontario-town-despite-severe-drought-activists/article31480345/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/nestle-continues-to-extract-water-from-ontario-town-despite-severe-drought-activists/article31480345/).

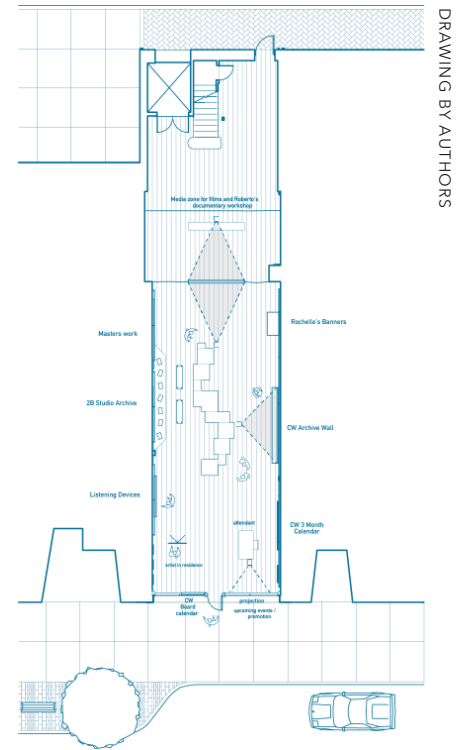


Fig. 4. Plan of the BRIDGE Storefront.

an evolving repository of artifacts from *Common Waters*' community events – and other works that often fall outside of traditional art-based exhibitions. Unlike the Design at Riverside Gallery pieces, many of these works were either created specifically for *Common Waters* or were a result of crossover events such as walks and workshops with other groups and communities that shared a theme and focus. These works included drawings produced by participants in workshops, photographs and written reflections of events, hand-bound books from a sketchbook-making workshop, and test tubes filled with mud and microbes collected from the banks of the Grand River.

In terms of the creation of artifacts and works, there was a combination of both artists executing their own existing pieces and events (performances, workshops), as well as work proposed specifically for *Common Waters*. The proposed pieces, which included the production of physical artifacts in-residence, as well as temporal



works such as lectures, discussions and walks, were organized into a structure of four broad subthemes: Unstable Environments, Collective Action, Personal Experiences, and Communal Stories.

The collaboration of Cambridge Art Galleries and BRIDGE, an independent student collective, resulted in a curation process that contrasted the typical structures of for-profit art galleries. We prioritized free association and horizontal decision-making as well as a flexible network of students weaving in and out of design and construction. As organizers, we explored how architects can be mediators between communities and their built environments. We created an alternative curation method based on crowdsourcing the efforts of an independent, all-volunteer, student community working outside of the confines of the university and gallery. Over 60 students took part throughout the design and construction process over a period of eight months, in stark contrast to the small team usually available at CAG.

Over time, the project expanded to include an extensive group of contributors. The art pieces and events were created and planned by students, professional artists, scientists, engineers, local historians, Indigenous leaders and local activists. A portion of the content on display is what was also generated by the visitors to the exhibition, what Nina Simon calls “joiners.”<sup>13</sup> Simon differentiates between “creators” and “joiners” as either producing content or engaging in different levels of participatory action.<sup>14</sup>

While *Common Waters* addressed a series of pressing and global matters, such as climate change and decolonization, the

exhibition maintained a local focus through opening and closing events that were led by Indigenous leaders from the community, as well as walks and workshops that took place outdoors on the banks of the Grand River. One of our closing events, called the “Harvest Ceremony,” took place at *rare* Charitable Reserve, a nature conservation area in Cambridge, and we were joined by participants from multiple communities in Cambridge. There was a large focus on appreciating the growth of the plants of *Minjimendan*,<sup>15</sup> an Indigenous food garden at *rare* cultivated by Dr. Andrew Judge, an Indigenous professor and community leader.

Much of the feedback we received from the exhibition highlighted new connections between students, faculty, and staff of the University of Waterloo School of Architecture and the local Cambridge context. As a satellite campus, the school is often regarded as an “island” in Cambridge and often socially disconnected from the surrounding community. The feedback expressed that *Common Waters* created numerous opportunities for the school community to meet Cambridge residents, artists, and activists, and engage physically with the local landscape. We provided a number of opportunities to obtain informal visitor feedback for *Common Waters*. We had a comment box in both exhibition spaces, as well as a collection of written reflections on events by volunteers and visitors. These reflections were published on the *Common Waters* website, and are an integral part of the evolving nature of the exhibition. The community reflections emphasized the main goal of *Common Waters*: to be an accessible, public discussion on a number of environmental and cultural matters.

<sup>13</sup> Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Learn more about Minjimendan: <http://minjimendan.com/>.

### Working Towards Inclusivity and Unpredictability

Our goal was to engage diverse communities in *Common Waters* from the earliest stages of design through to the execution of the exhibition. Moving between large, public calls and our smaller group of student leaders and municipal curators, *Common Waters* was a process of collective brainstorming, distillation, selection, planning, and execution. At each “stage,” different groups came together (see [fig. 3](#)), resulting in a varied, dynamic, and adaptable exhibition that addressed a variety of interrelated local concerns on our physical, historical, social, and potential environments.

When we first started the *Common Waters* project, BRIDGE organized several meetings open to the student body to collectively discuss what topics they felt were most relevant today. These brainstorming sessions brought up questions of identity, history, postcolonial narratives, politics, biodiversity, ecological turmoil, and more. From these discussions, “common waters” emerged as a unifying term that gave a clear overarching theme of the relationship between community and environment without imposing predetermined topics.

We kept the call for ideas as open as possible, trusting that the ambiguity of the term “common waters” would result in a variety of responses from a range of submitters. Both BRIDGE and CAG disseminated the call as widely as possible, reaching out to the university community, art networks, and local groups and businesses. We made it clear in the call that we were looking for not just finished pieces but ideas about events and conversations we should have as a community. When proposals of events overlapped, we connected the submitters

**We kept the call for ideas as open as possible, trusting that the ambiguity of the term “common waters” would result in a variety of responses from a range of submitters.**

and reached out to others to make the event richer. In one instance, for example, three proposals suggested a community group walk – two led by community members as a tour and one by a student artist pair who created listening devices to place around the river. We worked with those individuals to create a larger, single walk event that would include diverse knowledge and stories of the neighborhood and landscape. In addition to artists, we received proposals from engineers, educators, students, professors, community members, historians, and researchers. The formats proposed ranged from gatherings and lectures to sculpture and film – an interdisciplinary response to a community-generated focus. Within these varied mediums, creators dealt with the nature of our environment through historical, political, aesthetic, cultural, and speculative lenses. Several creators addressed the history of the local waters, focusing on Indigenous peoples’ long history of stewardship; others sought to highlight the unseen political forces that can both protect and endanger our natural environments; other work looked at the intersections of natural forces and human design.



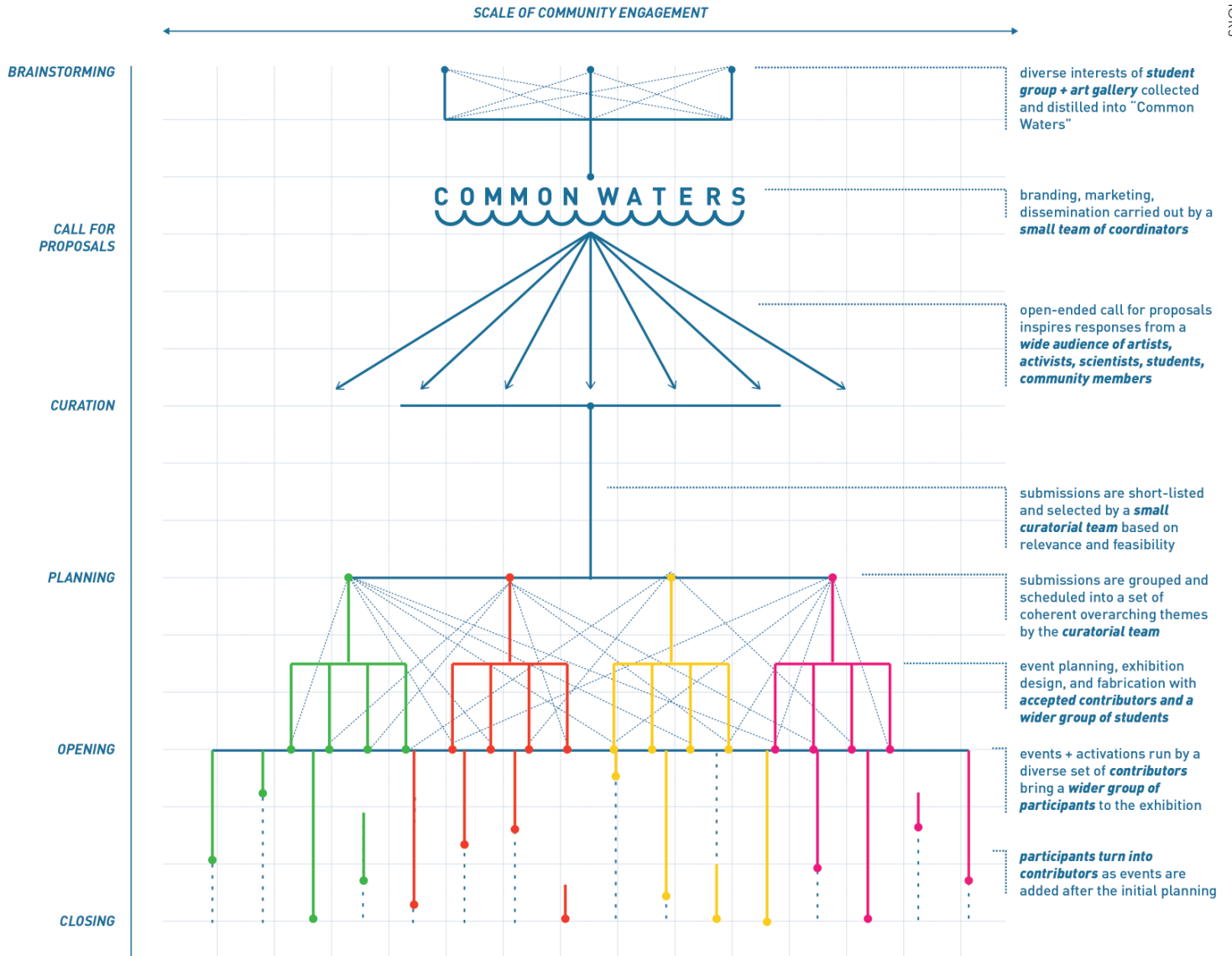


Fig. 5. Common Waters community-curation process diagram.

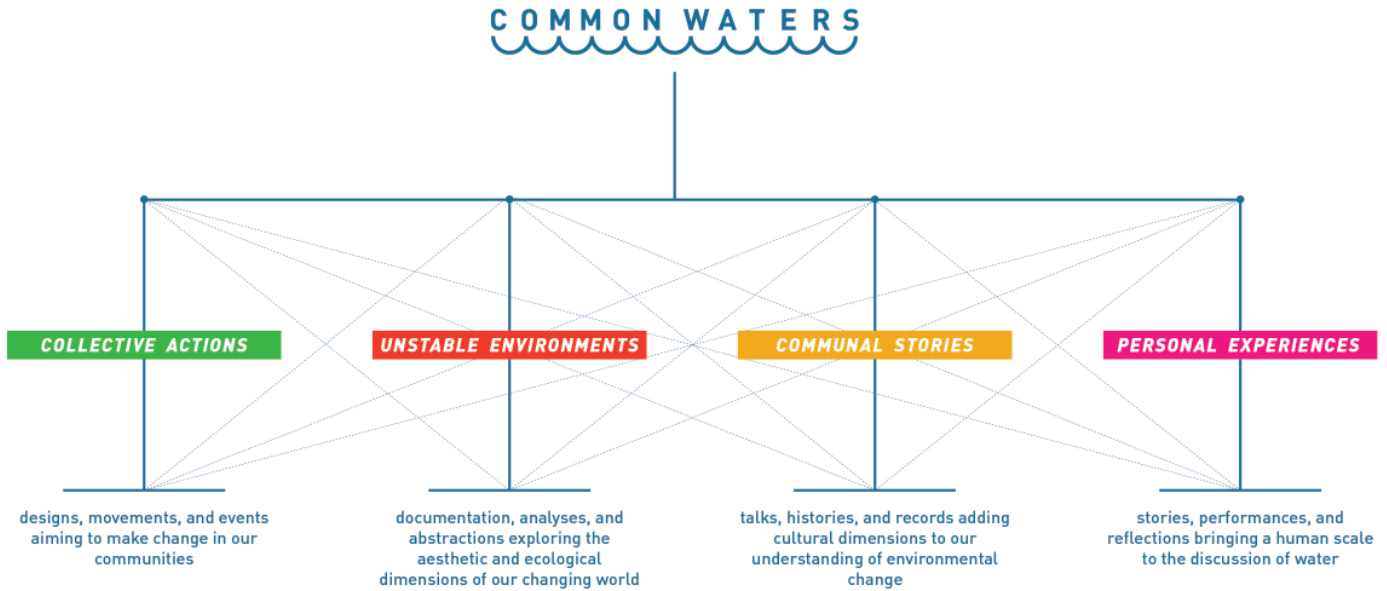


Fig. 6. Diagram of thematic structure of *Common Waters*.

The curatorial team worked through more than 75 proposals, deciding which works best fit the criteria of the call, including relevance to the theme, the level of creativity, diversity of perspective and mediums, and viability. From these submissions, we filtered down to 30, cutting out the submissions that were either underdeveloped, irrelevant, or far beyond our means of executing. The curatorial team was a small group of eight people: four representatives of CAG and us, the four BRIDGE students. This team worked closely with the creators to develop each submission in tandem with the others, leading to four thematic groups that clustered the accepted submissions (fig. 5). From this larger curator-creator group, the exhibition community expanded to include the marketing and organizational team, and the volunteer-based student body that worked to design, fabricate and install *Common Waters*. By the opening event, the *Common Waters* “community” encompassed not only those involved with curation, but a broader public forged through an extensive open call.

### Understanding Our Progress: Results and Evaluation

The success of *Common Waters* depends on three key results: on the diversity of submissions received; on being able to create a physical space that could evolve; and on having a program that could adapt to include unplanned and short-notice events.

Our first indication of success was the wide range of submissions and perspectives represented. We programmed them into two formats: artifacts and events. Considering events and artifacts in concert helped us to guide timely discussions informed by the provocations of the artworks. Ranging from gatherings and lectures to projections and sculptures, the submissions each addressed our overarching theme – common waters – from a unique angle. By grouping them into four subthemes, we organized the events and artifacts to complement one another (fig. 6). One major way that we could improve our submissions process would be by expanding our curatorial team to include a wider range of voices.





PHOTO BY AUTHORS

Fig. 7. Design at Riverside Gallery Research Desk, in progress during the exhibition.



PHOTO BY AUTHORS

Fig. 8. BRIDGE Archive Wall, in progress during the exhibition.

Because our exhibition was not only physical, we had to create a space that would accommodate the format of its diverse events, many of which took place in and around the city, including the riverbank, a local park, a community garden, and a public swimming pool. Bringing these temporary events into the exhibition inspired us to design a way to record their traces as part of the exhibition and promote their future occurrence. This led us to develop two features that evolved with the exhibition: the Research Desk (fig. 7) and the Archive Wall (fig. 8).

The Archive Wall was designed and managed by BRIDGE members as a physical repository for records and remnants of each event. This physical framework displayed artifacts or images from each event, allowing our talks, workshops, and discussions to have a continued presence in the exhibition. The wall consisted of four plywood panels, one for each of the four themes. The wall began empty with just an approximate frame for what might fill each event and an information card with the name, date, place, description

and color to match its theme panel (fig. 9). The wall was both historical and anticipatory: if a visitor missed an event, they could begin to understand what happened through significant excerpts or artifacts from the event. The wall also acted as a notice board of events to come, with the empty spaces acting as holding areas for information to come about future activities. As the wall began to fill up, we received fragments of plastic from the Pacific Ocean,<sup>16</sup> water-soaked poems read in a pool,<sup>17</sup> and tubes of growing microbes from the banks of the Grand River,<sup>18</sup> to name a few. The pieces on display were both informative, highlighting the main points of the event, and evidential, tracing in physical form its participatory format. From discussions with visitors, we know that the remnants of events effectively communicated the broad spectrum of our discussions around the environment: they understood, for example, that the microbes

16 See Cindy Stelmackowich's *Plastic Tides* piece: <http://cindystelmackowich.com>.

17 See Lauren Prousky and Jordan Stewart's *Buoyancy: Poolside Performances* event: [www.laurenprousky.com/](http://www.laurenprousky.com/), [www.jordynstewart.ca/](http://www.jordynstewart.ca/).

18 See Nicole Clouston's *Grand River: Mud and Microbes* event: [www.nicoleclouston.com/](http://www.nicoleclouston.com/).

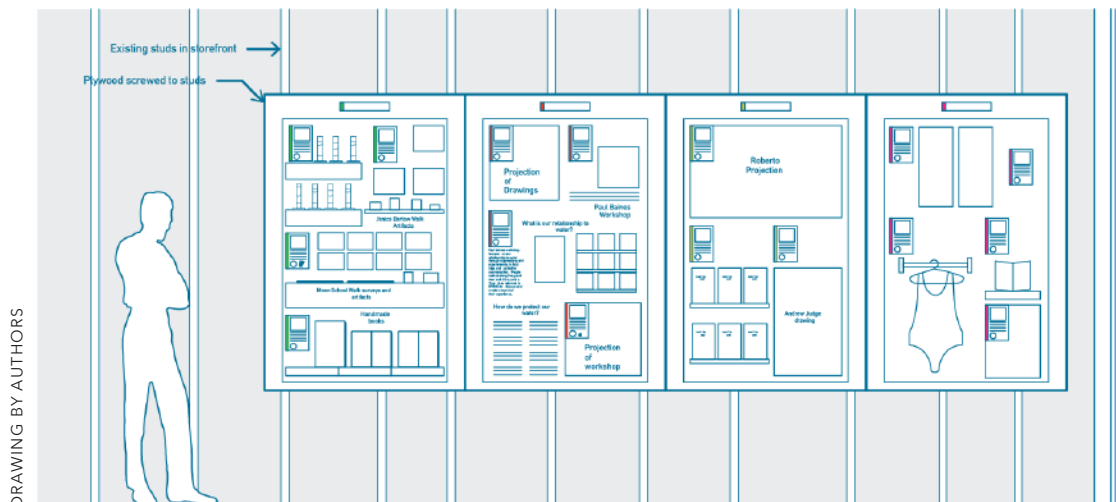


Fig. 9. Concept drawing of the BRIDGE Archive Wall.

# **Because of the Archive Wall, many visitors spoke to us about past events and their involvement in upcoming ones. It was clear to us from these conversations they understood the exhibition as a work in progress.**

in the local Grand River are part of the same systems that wash Pacific plastic onto Canadian shores. The open-ended design allowed us to update the wall with ease. As the wall filled up, the events came into new relationships with the other pieces. Because of the Archive Wall, many visitors spoke to us about past events and their involvement in upcoming ones. It was clear to us from these conversations they understood the exhibition as a work in progress.

Much like the Archive Wall, the Research Desk in the Design at Riverside Gallery evolved over time. Curated by two local community members and open for use and addition by any visitor, this “station” included a computer, news articles, books, and other resources that accumulated in response to the new topics and questions the exhibition raised. *Common Waters* also maintained a continuously updated website over the summer and for several months following the closing event. This website includes a “journal,” a kind of digital archive for recording events through reflections and photographs by its participants.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Find more event details and reflections at: [ideaexchange.org/search/node/Common%20waters](http://ideaexchange.org/search/node/Common%20waters).

Our flexible framework opened *Common Waters* to an audience that contributed additional perspectives to the project. At the Harvest Ceremony, visitors approached us to ask if they could contribute to the project, and we were able to organize an event for local water activists to share their experiences and use the exhibition as a platform for information and support. A collective reflection on *Common Waters* was that many of the events, and the enthusiastic community participation, would have been impossible without the existing connections that the curators at Cambridge Art Galleries have with local organizations, activists, and leaders. This stands as a lesson for architects, just as for museum practitioners, that social engagement in creative work requires long-term dedication to relationships. The most impactful events, such as the Harvest Ceremony, were a result of this coming together of multiple communities, each pulling on its own focus and network.

## **Projecting *Common Waters* Forward**

Parallel to our successes came a series of challenges, questions, and opportunities. For every stimulating artifact, event, or interactive feature we were able to mount or develop, there were proposals and ideas that we cut or left behind based on curatorial direction, limited institutional capacity, or simply unfortunate timing. As much as we attempted to create an open and inclusive “community project,” these decisions of hierarchy and priority ultimately stayed with a limited set of insiders. Although completely crowdsourcing the exhibition from development to curation was beyond our team’s capabilities, it was interesting to consider the value of opening up the process even further. Is a more radical level of collaboration worth pursuing – one in which



decision-making is even more broadly shared – or is some level of centralized planning necessary for producing coherent exhibitions?

Another critical reflection on the project was that much of the audience for each event was composed of individuals with close connections to the presenters and facilitators, and there was little crossover between these groups. We agreed that going forward, it would be important to group otherwise unlikely events together to create more diversity in each group.

*Common Waters* presents a hopeful case study in using participatory exhibition methods to discuss complex environmental questions. Using our skills as architectural designers and students to become mediators rather than visionaries, this exhibition prioritized community-generated content to address environmental changes that impact everyone. This collaborative framework is one that can be transformed for future projects that focus on our relationship with the environment we all share. Our hope is that the communal discussions that began in *Common Waters* can ripple beyond the boundaries of our project and institutions and into our community to inspire action.

Three months after the reception that opened this story, much of that same diverse group met on a Saturday afternoon at *Minjimendan* for the Harvest Ceremony, away from the gallery and the storefront. This event brought together many independent initiatives and tied together relationships that the gallery staff had worked for years to build. While our team was not at the core of this harvest, we were lucky enough to be given permission to call it our “Closing Reception.” We were a bigger audience now with many past visitors, core contributors,

and new faces joining us as we sat in a circle again to hear Christine Lefevbre speak about how water nourishes us. We walked together and heard from other voices, including a local Elder, an artist, and the garden’s progenitor. We finished the day with a feast of local foods while the moon rose, a group of strangers brought together through a shared passion for our common waters.

---

**Tony Kogan, Nicholas Frayne, Julia Nakanishi,** and **Omar Ferwati** are candidates for the Masters of Architecture at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada.

[akogan@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:akogan@uwaterloo.ca)

[nffrayne@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:nffrayne@uwaterloo.ca)

[jnakanishi@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:jnakanishi@uwaterloo.ca)

[oferwati@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:oferwati@uwaterloo.ca)