WaterLines: RiverBank, Chestertown, Maryland

RONIT EISENBACh
University of Maryland

CASSIE MEADOR
Choreographer, Dance Exchange

ALEKSANDRA VREBALOV
Composer

JENI WIGHTMAN
Visual Artist & Biologist

Ephemeral works employed as part of creative placemaking efforts can enhance and catalyze a community at critical junctures to create a sense of possibility, spark imagination and stimulate public discourse. WaterLines: RiverBank was an installation and performance that transformed a vacant bank into a “world of rippling light and sublimely meditative sound” evoking the connections, interdependency and exchange between river and town. At a moment when the historic town of Chestertown, Maryland was grappling with the potential impacts of sea level rise, ecological degradation, economic inequality and social fissures, the project sought to strengthen community by offering shared opportunities to surface and celebrate connections between residents and local identity, exploring changes that have reshaped each.

WaterLines: RiverBank was the culmination of a yearlong residency at SANDBOX, Washington College by an architect, composer, visual artist and choreographer. Public engagement events built relationships between individuals from parallel communities who shared their knowledge and shaped the final work. Connecting the vacant Chestertown Bank building and the Chester River, WaterLines fused art, science, and social history to create an immersive art experience that reflected the town’s river setting and cultural history. The work transformed a rigid, formal space originally designed to reassure investors into a place that questioned our relation to natural systems.

In place of the valuables once secured in the bank’s abandoned vault, participants encountered small bowls of river water and video interviews with residents describing their connections to their river and what they value now. In the banking hall, luminous images of the river and microbial life within its sediments were brought to life through video projections upon the banks’ walls and floor while a sonic composition made from local natural and man-made sounds infused the space. A dance performance concluded with a public procession from the bank to the river’s edge led by community members who provided stories about life along and upon the river. Water collected earlier in the day by local children was returned to the river, reinforcing the town’s deep connection to the water, encouraging a greater understanding and sense of responsibility for this natural resource and the worlds it supports.

Upon experiencing the work one participant, Andrew Case wrote of WaterLines’ impact upon the community, as it “brought people together who, although they live and work in very close proximity, rarely share cultural events... like many places with a history of segregation, most of the town’s events are divided, but this one was decidedly not.” Mary McCoy, another resident noted the impact on restoring the bond between town and river while raising the visibility of environmental concerns: “For those of us who have lived in this area for many years, WaterLines was saturated with memory and love -- memory of the buildings, businesses, people and seasons that have come and gone, and love for the river and its marshes, shorebirds, shifting tides, and halcyon days of sunlight on the water. Such feelings are warm and joyful, but also fraught with anxiety as the ecological challenges to our beloved home become more obvious.”

WaterLines was made possible through the tremendous generosity and vision of Alex Castro and Sean Meade of SandBox, Washington College. It success was only possibly by the many talented people who joined us: Leslie Raimond, Kent County Arts Council, members of the design and production team: Debra Gilmore, Lighting; Shane Meador, Projection Designer; Austin Raimond, Design Assistant; Ian McClain, Video and Lighting Systems Engineer, Margaret Campbell, Stage Manager; Performers: Dante Brown and Matthew Cumbie, Dance Exchange; Irene Moore, Gospel Singer, and the participation of Chestertown residents and Washington College faculty, students and staff.
Process: unraveling connections between community and the river

Installation: exploring the relationships, exchanges and tension between the natural and built environments

Ephemeral works employed as part of creative placemaking efforts on both a community and at a critical juncture to create a sense of possibility, spark imagination and stimulate public discourse. WaterLines: RiverBank was an installation and performance that transformed a vacant Chestertown Bank into a “world of rippling light and subtly modulating sound” evoking the connection, interdependency and exchange between river and town. As a moment when the historic towns of Chestertown, Maryland was grappling with the potential impact of sea level rise, ecological degradation, and economic inequality and social tensions, the project sought to strengthen community by offering shared opportunities to surface and develop connections between residents and local identities, exploring the changes that have reshaped each.

WaterLines: RiverBank resulted after a yearlong residency by an architect, composer, visual artist and choreographer. Public engagement events built relationships between individuals from parallel communities who shared their knowledge and shaped the final work. Connecting the vacant Chestertown bank building and the Chester River, WaterLines used art, science, and social history to create an immersive art experience that reflected the town’s river setting and cultural history. The work transformed a rigid, formal space originally designed to manage revenues into a place that questioned the future and our relation to natural systems.

In place of the undulating once-located in the bank’s abandoned vault, participants encountered small bowls of river water and video interviews with residents describing their connections to their river and what they valued today. In the banking hall, images of the river and microbial life within its sediments were brought to life by video projections upon the bank’s walls and floor while a world composition made from local natural and social partnerships and sounds from the Chester River. Members of the community attended workshops with members who provided stories about life along and within the river. Water collected earlier in the day by local children was returned to the river, reestablishing the town’s deep connection to the water and encouraging a greater understanding and sense of responsibility for this natural resource and the world it supports.

Impact: strengthening community, sustainability, and restoring the bond between town & river

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phography: Justin Remis, Remi Morlot

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Roei Eisenbach, Cassie Meador, Aleksandrs Vrebals, Jeni Wightman