POND LIFE

Words Shumi Bose

This summer, visitors to the King's Cross Pond Club will be able to take a dip in Britain's first naturally filtered bathing pond, located squarely in the middle of one of London's busiest construction sites. Aquatic plants will purify the water, even as the neighbouring diggers and cranes busy themselves with concrete and dirt. Shumi Bose speaks to artist Marjetica Potrč and Ooze architects, whose collaborative projects allow a glimpse of alternative ways of living

London's King Cross has experienced phenomenal changes in the past decade. When I moved to the city at the turn of the millennium, the area behind the dual tramsheds of King's Cross and St Pancras train stations was an unsavoury wasteland, home to not much more than a karting track, a couple of rave clubs and a smattering of prostitutes. Today, it is a veritable forest of cranes and towers, residential and commercial.

Where the go-karting track once rutted the ground, now stands the House of Illustration and (under construction at the time of writing), a cookery school and a Waitrose supermarket. On an adjoining site, the Stanton Williams building for Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design lords it on the Technicolor-fountained stage-set of Granary Square, flanked by showy new towers from the likes of David Chipperfield Architects and dRMM. In fact, there will be soon be around 50 new buildings here, on a site some 67 acres in total.

Amid all the deafening construction noise, this spring the King's Cross Pond Club offers its visitors a unique opportunity – to swim in the country's first 'natural' bathing pond. Most bathers will come into closer contact with an organic, aquatic environment than ever before: the water is purified by a living filtration wetland and submerged water plants in a closed-loop process, even as the very fabric of the city rises all around. Right in the middle of the redevelopment, and surrounded by building sites, the temporary pool is an art installation designed by Holland's Ooze architects (Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hartenberg) and Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč. Surrounded by new and careful planting, it currently forms a green oasis among the hoardings and the diggers; if this summer is anything like the last one, the pond will have an eager crowd of swimmers for the few months of its duration.

But eager bathers will have to learn a sense of balance: the Pond Club operates a strict exclusivity policy by natural design. The project's full title is Of Soil and Water: King's Cross Pond Club, and it is the gradual, biological filtration system through soil, water and plants that will govern the capacity (max. 100 bathers) and limits of the Pond Club – a botanical disciplining of consumption. More than providing a photo-friendly community attraction during the summer, the Pond Club is about teaching, through a poetic experience, harmony between consumption or utility and natural, biological systems.

The commentary linking personal behaviour to larger, communal or global structures is a typical juxtaposition in the work of both Potrč and Ooze architects. 'Like everything in life, you must have a mission,' says Potrč, her fluting voice rising passionately as she discusses her trajectory from architect to artist and back again. Having studied architecture in Llubjana in the early Seventies, the younger Potrč was herself somewhat lacking in a mission, finding the system of inheriting top-down wisdom to be oppressive, and that normal architecture practice was 'boring'. A transformative visit to an early edition of Documenta, the contemporary art festival in Kassel, exposed her to minimalist art at its height: Richard Serra, Carl Andre and other giants of the field had a profound impact and encouraged her to take up further studies at the school of art. 'I realised that the ideas that civilisation works on are the same, whether for architects and for artists – but when I finished my Masters in art, architecture returned.'

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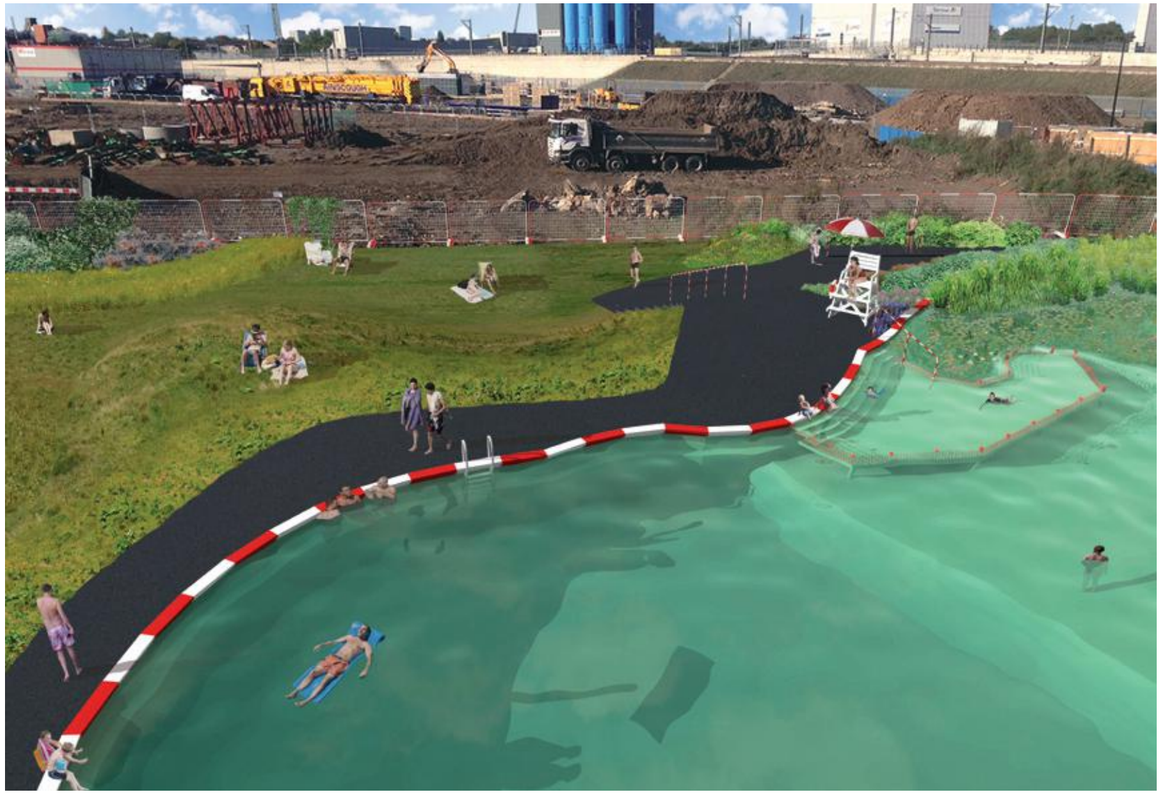

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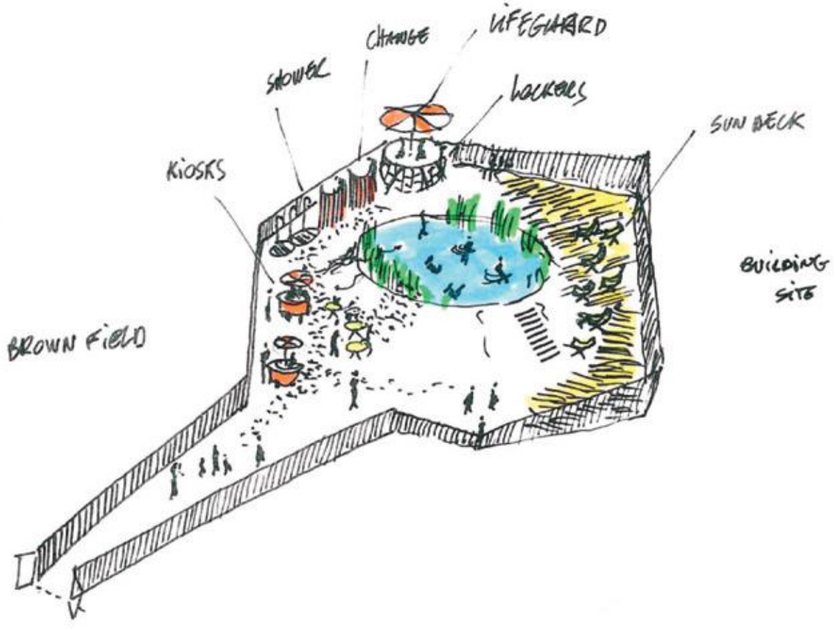

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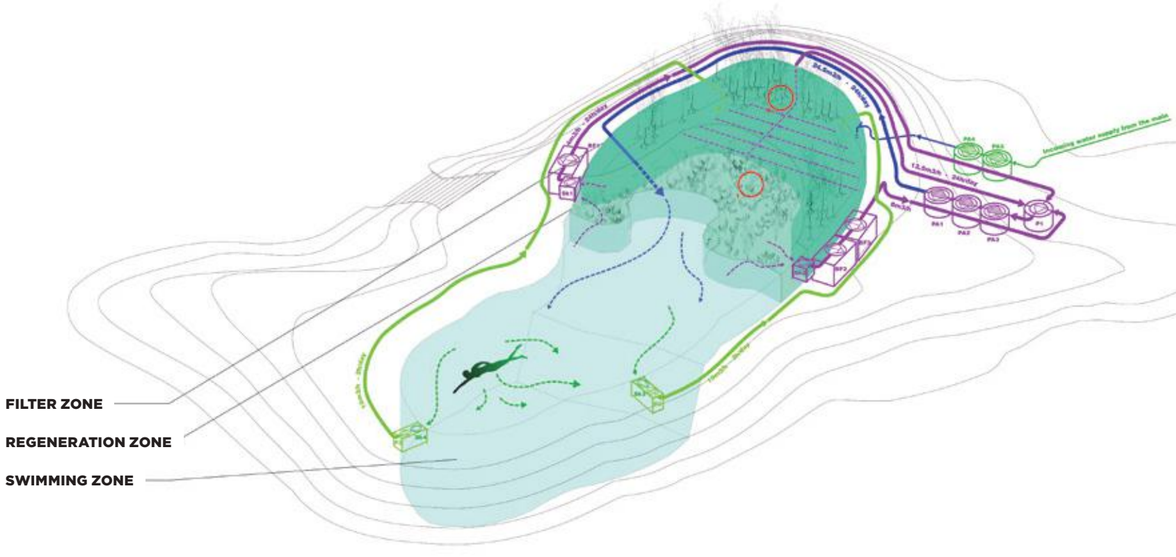
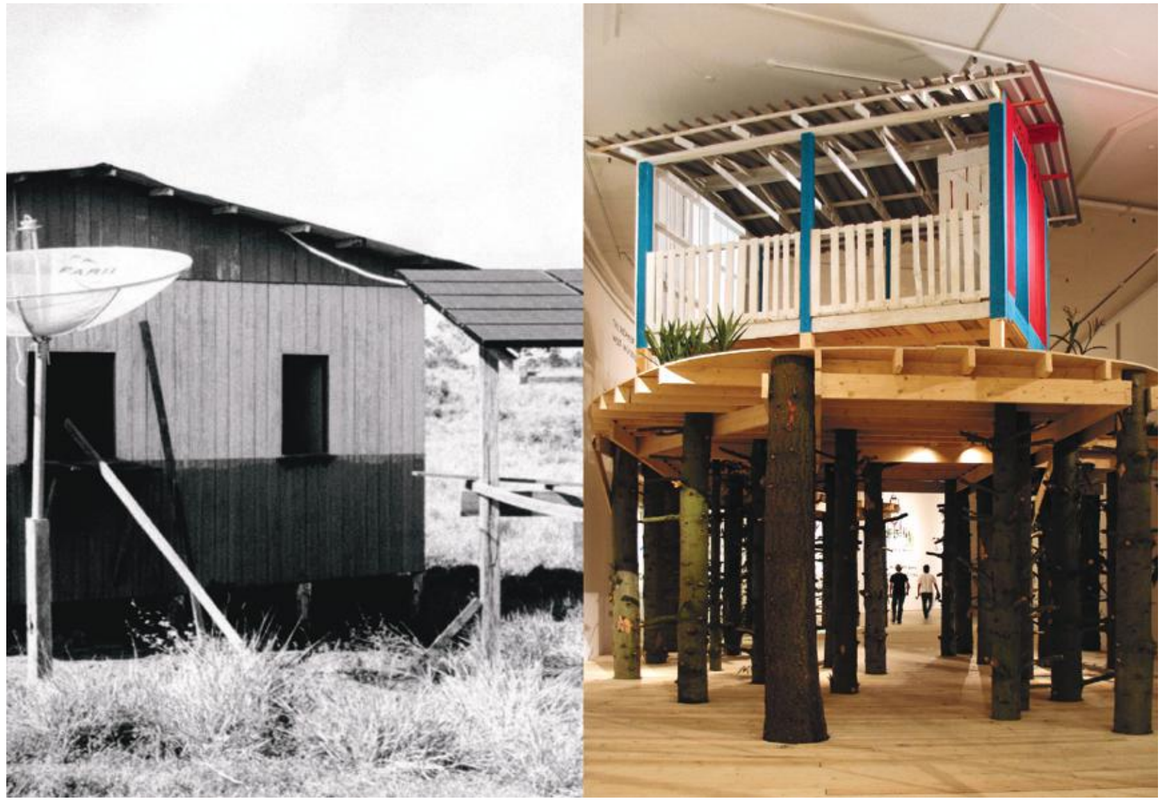


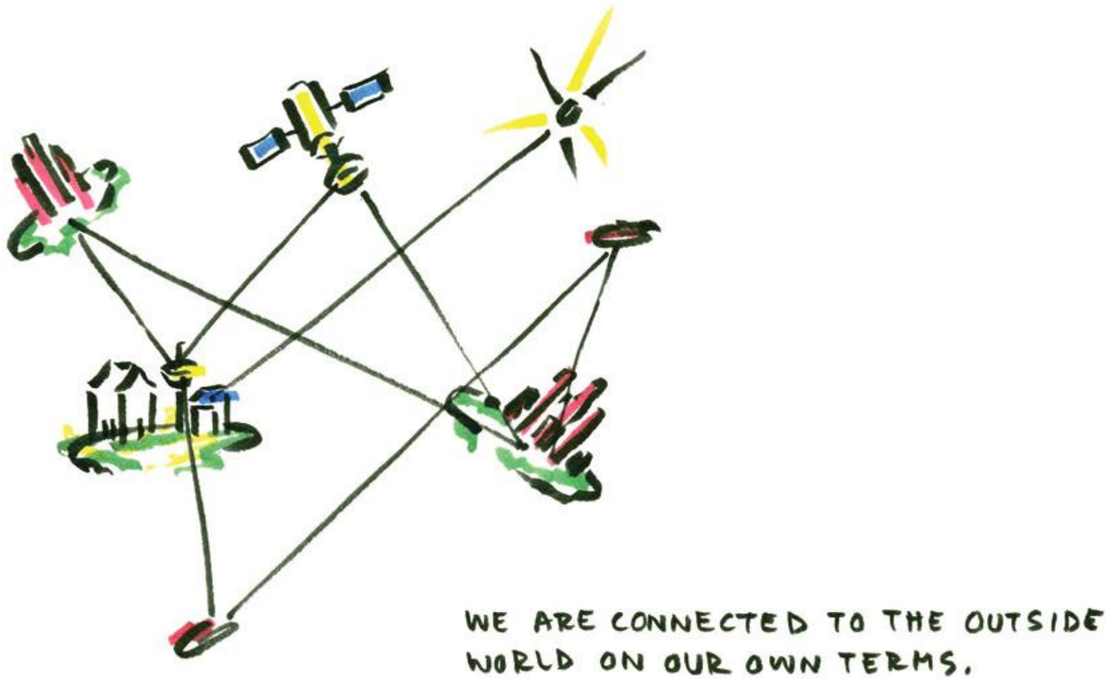
1 (previous page) – **Of Soil and Water: Kings Cross Pond Club takes shape on London's shifting ground**

2 – **Sun decks, parasols and lifeguard seats form an unlikely juxtaposition with brownfield muck and HGVs**

3 – **As this model imagines, the project will allow UK bathers their first dip in a naturally filtered pond**

4 – **The water is purified by a wetland ecosystem – a living filter – and is renewed every 24 hours**



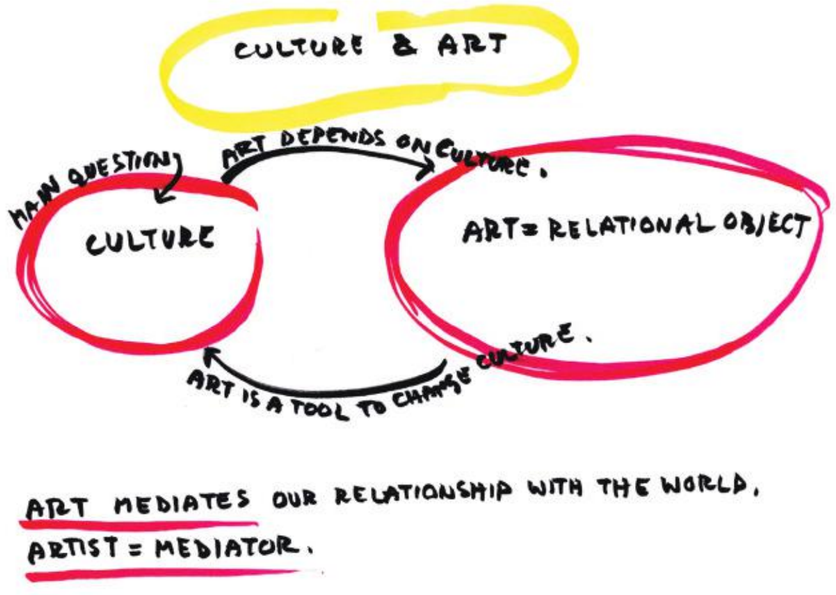


Since then, Potrč's work has divided more or less neatly into three strands, with narrative drawings, which she uses to explain complex socio-spatial predicaments, and 1:1 scale gallery installations based on field research, which she calls her 'architectural case studies'. The third strand, with the most real-world impact, includes the projects on site, which vary from permanent infrastructures to temporary installations, from early prototype houses and schools in Caracas, Amazonia and Soweto to collaborative community gardens in Amsterdam, Bordeaux and London. Often the work will reflect concerns regarding energy and technology, but always with a social concern, deriving from the on-site projects.

Potrč's first solo exhibited work in London, at the Barbican Curve gallery in 2007, was a full-scale hut transplanted from Acre, Brazil. For all its ad-hoc material quality, the intelligence it displayed was in its real-world conjunction of space, power and technology. At the time, the local government in Brazil had, in consultation with independent tribal rainforest communities, devised a strategic 'power kit', consisting of solar panels, satellite dishes, and local schools that doubled up as social hubs. Potrč's field research and subsequent gallery installation depicted how these tools allowed communities to build resilience, coexisting with contemporaneous global cultures on their own terms. Always, her works comment on the negotiation between scarcity of means and resources, and the possibility of a beneficial engagement with a community in public space. Yet, if all of these parameters sound well suited to civic architecture, Potrč certainly finds a strident freedom in producing artworks – or what she calls relational objects – rather than buildings.

Architects often like to believe, intellectually at least, that there can be some commonality with the artistic world. But as a young practitioner, Potrč found the expanded, fluid definition of roles to be not quite as prevalent as one might have thought. 'I showed my first drawing series, the narrative about the Caracas Case Study, at the Venice Biennale of Art,' she recalls – at the particularly polyphonic Dreams and Conflicts edition of 2003, directed by Francesco Bonami and a record seven co-curators. 'Some architects were actually angry, like how could I talk about the city as a sort of anthropologist?', she adds. Indeed, at the start of working on a collaborative community project in Caracas (involving the socially transformative act of installing a dry toilet for – and with – the community), Potrč was confounded by the motley team assembled there. 'There was a writer, a photographer, designers, a sociologist. I thought, "What is this?" But it was great; together, your thinking is much stronger. This was where I found the way I wanted to work.'

Although collaborative, multidisciplinary practices might seem normal now, one generation down the line the same problems of pigeonholing were faced by Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hartenberg, of the Rotterdam-based practice Ooze architects. 'We were always interested in working with other specialists, and also across different scales, so that starting from a small scale you devise an urban strategy from within. We had been trying to make collaborative work, but developers would say things like 'Are you this or that? Artist or architect? We don't understand what you're doing!' says Pfannes. Her partner Hartenberg is quick to follow up: 'Working with Marjetica, we realised the value of open-ended process, which is more



5 (previous page) – **The pond will act as pastoral neighbour to Central Saint Martins College as well as several residential and office towers**

6 – **Forest Rising, an installation at the Barbican in 2007, demonstrated Potrč's work in Acre, Brazil**

7 & 8 – **Potrč's practice of narrative drawing explains complex poetic ideas with approachable vitality**

prevalent in the art world, and which is not acceptable in a normal framework of a developer or in the production of a city – at least, before the crisis.'

Pfannes, Hartenberg and Potrč first collaborated on a project in west Amsterdam in 2008, a former Garden City touted as the largest of Amsterdam's postwar developments. Half a century after its original intention, the area experienced much neglect and rising crime, to the point where its abundant green spaces were often fenced off. The architects were approached by a coalition between the Chamber of Commerce and several developers to renew the public spaces and give visibility to local independent entrepreneurs. But rather than allowing the architects to develop a strategy, the consortium seemed to have a foregone conclusion in mind. 'We were asked to develop some small kiosks,' recalls Pfannes. 'Some funny design structure that would give them the answer.'

Instead, the party of artists and activists adopted one of the 'kijkgroen' or looking-only garden spaces, and set themselves on a mission to open it. A disused butcher's shop was also deployed as a community kitchen, so creating another closed-loop system. 'The idea was that you would cultivate food and cook it,' Hartenberg explains, 'with people taking ownership of the running of this kitchen. At some point we had a vision for the whole of west Amsterdam across five years, with lots of micro projects, but this was a vision, and it didn't have the political will behind it.' Potrč's participation was supported by Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, then under refurbishment: 'We created a community garden that developed beautifully.' But even here, the slippage from art practice to community infrastructure gave cause for concern. Friends and sponsors of the Stedelijk would drop by and, on seeing nothing more than a happy community of gardeners, would bemusedly ask where the artwork was. This was really interesting for us. I started to understand that you really need new words for a new kind of practice. It's not enough saying it's about temporality, or process. That's when we started using the term relational object.'

Since devising that first project, The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour in Amsterdam, Potrč and Ooze have worked on several collaborations across the world. Last year, they collaborated on their Wind Lift for the Folkestone Art Triennial, a highly ambitious 'relational object' that enabled visitors to ride a wind-operated lift 25m off the ground to the top of the Foord Road Viaduct, a majestic but neglected piece of 19th-century infrastructure. Again, the Wind Lift accomplished parallel intentions: proximity and appreciation of the historic infrastructure; an unprecedented 'uplift' and engagement – in social and moral terms – for the equally attention-starved neighbourhood beside the project, and an exposure of our relationship with natural systems, in this case the wind.

Operating through a turbine that collected wind energy, the lift could only ascend if enough power had been collected; the number of rides depended entirely on climactic conditions. The co-dependency of closed-loop natural, climactic and environmental systems and hard-core engineering infrastructure is, in itself, a highly commendably feature in the work of Ooze.

Another Ooze-Potrč project, notable in terms of certain shared technologies with Of Soil and Water: King's Cross Pond Club, was Between The Waters on the Emscher tributary in the

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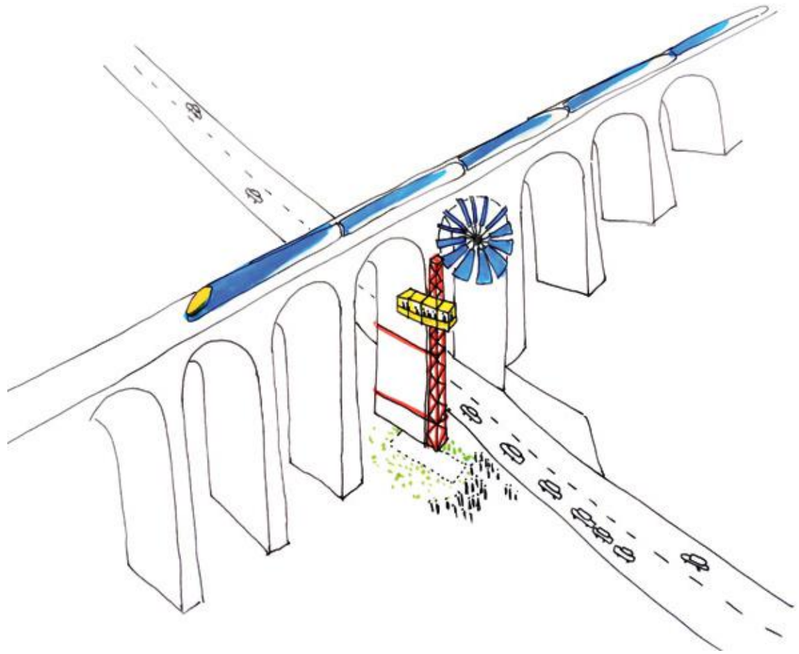

9 – The Wind Lift at last year's Folkestone Art Triennial provided 'uplift' to the neighbouring estate as well as unprecedented views

10 – Potrč and Ooze first collaborated on a project in a former Garden City, West Amsterdam, in 2008

11 – As garden spaces were opened up, independent traders found new economic and cultural vibrancy

10

11

Ruhr valley in 2013. As the title suggests, this time the 'object' sat between two bodies of water; one a canal containing sewage and other untreated effluents, and another being the Emscher, a clear tributary of the Rhine. Again, a system of careful planting of aquatic and submerged specimens allowed natural aerobic process to filter the dirty, untreated water, rendering it pure and safe to drink, wash in or even use to brew a craft beer. The 'object' in this case was a structure spanning the active planting filter, with a conspicuous, one could even say rather theatrically, positioned toilet at one end. The proximity of the toilet viscerally demonstrated the notion of understanding and transforming waste through biology and closed-loop ecologies into a purified resource, used for recreation and leisure. Setting aside the deeper and more vital social ambitions of its projects for just a second, the technical requirements in the ambition of its projects – to render toxic water potable through plants, to lift groups of people to the height of a viaduct using the power of wind alone – these things require serious risk and expertise to create their theatrical and inspiring results.

Things have changed since the start of the new millennium, when collaborative practice had not quite found its USP within the rapid, booming engines of construction and regeneration. Now, participatory practice is seen as necessary for sustainable development, involving a range of participants and stakeholders from local community to municipal institutions. Although consultation processes are often about gaining consensus and being risk-averse, the sort of collective engagement that Potrč and Ooze are interested in fostering has deeper intentions, especially in relation to public space. As Hartenberg insists, the open-endedness of dialogue with a wide-ranging spectrum is essential. 'Nowadays, there's a lot more discussion of involving both architects and others much earlier on, so that the liability is shared,' he says, recalling the effort of dealing with landowners, developers, curators, contractors and endless peripheral parties in London, the most risk-averse city the team has ever worked in. 'You need this, actually, because the normal process has failed. You need these processes to overcome future problems. You could call it top-down or bottom-up, but it's really about the ability to integrate a lot of complexity and to work with it.'

'With the pond we have created a relational object, which has the ability to change the culture of living,' Potrč states, seriously, with no hint of overstating the project's ambition. 'It's not easy, because there are rules of engagement; the pond is open to all but it is restricted, there are limits.' This idea of understanding the boundaries between man and nature, and adapting our behaviour to enjoy the interplay, is the crux of the King's Cross Pond Club. The experience of swimming in a natural pool amid roaring construction will be thrilling and odd, but the deeper message, says Pfannes, is 'about the balance between ourselves, and what we call nature – between our human bodies or the natural water and land body. You can't take it for granted; you have to change your behaviour and understand how to live with it. The natural filtration of the pond, and understanding how the plants work to clean the effects of the water: this is at the core of it.'

'Public space is primarily a social agreement,' Potrč concludes. 'We try, especially architects try, to forget about this and just design the elements. In our projects we try to create a new social agreement, which means questioning what is public space. Today, we talk about public space in abstract ways: digital, private, or accessible… But if you try to organise a community-run public space, you see what it really means. It's about the social activation of space, as a symbol of understanding.' ■

12

12 – **Ooze & Potrč's 'relational object' at EmscherKunst: a toilet at one end and filtered, potable water at the other**