



# Muddying the waters: What urban waterways reveal about bluespaces and wellbeing

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## ABSTRACT

This paper urges geographies of waterscapes beyond the blue to consider brown, grey and green waters, demonstrating the value of remembering water is not everywhere always the same. Inland urban waterways are introduced as places which might enhance wellbeing, broadening the variety of places and experiences considered as therapeutic bluespaces. This challenges assumptions that bluespaces are strongly salutogenic, and highlights the importance of a relational perspective. The relationship between bluespaces and wellbeing is revealed as less straightforward than previously suggested, muddying the waters. Qualitative research including participants not currently using them for health raises questions about waterscapes' enabling potential and demonstrates varied ways people experience them. Qualities associated with blueness - freshness, fluidity, luminescence, rippling - seem particularly therapeutic, but are not inherent to water, nor its only properties. Rather than assuming water is always everywhere the same, I propose the term wateriness helps attend to what is distinct about places with water, whilst recognising this varies across space, time and through interaction with other materials. Through such attention this study highlights elements of wateriness which can be highly disabling, including submersion, slipperiness and wetness. Considering urban waterways as potentially therapeutic bluespaces highlights the need to acknowledge the diversity, ambiguity and complexity of water experiences in relation to wellbeing. Waterways therefore takes geographers beyond the blue to consider a wider palette of water experiences and variations in their enabling potential. They are emblematic of waterscapes more brown than blue, offering deep waters for human geographers to wade into.

## 1. Introducing waterways: therapeutic bluespaces?

Canals can mean all sorts of things, can't they? They can mean holidays, peace, tranquillity, depends on the time of year, doesn't it? Exercise, peace of mind, I mean obviously if you've got kids, a bit dang- it's a little bit more stressful. So yeah it can mean all sorts of things, can't it? I mean obviously, they might be seedy, kind of sinister, depends where they are (adult male, Milton Keynes).

This comment suggests the ambiguous, often contradictory perceptions of the UK's inland waterways. Whether they are dangerous or tranquil depends on time, place and person because an environment's affects depend on how it is experienced (Conradson, 2005; Duff, 2011). Yet certain types of place have long been suggested more likely to have therapeutic effects, with natural environments at the fore (Gesler, 2005). A wealth of research considers greenspace's role in promoting health and wellbeing (Rosenberg, 2017); in comparison waterscapes are relatively neglected. Health geographers recently put bluespaces - those including visible surface waters - under the spotlight, considering how water enhances wellbeing (Foley and Kistemann, 2015; Völker and

Kistemann, 2011). Categorising spaces as blue identifies them as sharing something distinctive: the presence of water. But what water is and does in these places has not been thoroughly considered, with a tendency to assume it has similar traits everywhere (Strang, 2005, 2014). If water's properties exist through relations it is not everywhere always the same (Alberti, 2014), suggesting a category like bluespace masks diversity. Here I propose thinking in terms of wateriness accounts for this variety, and the relational nature of encounters with water which always depend on person, place and context. Combined with attention to previously neglected waterscapes this highlights the complexity of interactions between watery places and wellbeing, revealing how water's affects can be simultaneously enabling and disabling.

This research contributes insight into variable experiences of bluespaces, including perspectives from people not currently using them, whilst considering environments under-represented in health and human geographies. Inland waterways, navigable rivers or canals, represent engineered and designed water environments rather than 'natural' watercourses. In the UK these were pre-dominantly built for

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transport to support industrialisation during the 18th century. This role was soon taken by railways, prompting the network's steady decline. Neglect left late 20th century waterways as remnants of de-industrialisation associated with blight and dereliction. Many have since featured in urban regeneration schemes, and been re-developed as leisure resources. Since 2012, most waterways in England and Wales are managed by a charity created for the purpose. The Canal and River Trust (CRT) oversees 2000 km of waterway, associated buildings, museums and nature reserves. These waterscapes are significant public resources, freely accessible for physical recreation, relaxation and travel. In the UK 15% of the population live within 1 km of a waterway, a figure rising to 100% in some city-regions (CRT, 2017). The network is centred on former industrial heartlands where urban populations and health needs concentrate. Yet accessibility is uneven, with only 31% of people in England and Wales stating they visited a waterway in the last year, and regular users unlikely to be younger or from minority ethnic groups (CRT 2017).

Similar human-designed and neglected urban watercourses flow through European cities (Bonetti et al., 2016; Hijdra et al., 2015; Völker et al., 2016) north America (Buckman, 2016; Haeffner et al., 2017; Tang and Jang, 2010) and beyond (Findlay and Taylor, 2006; Yamashita, 2002). But human geographers have done little to explore current use and value of these networks. The discipline increasingly redresses past neglect of wet places (Anderson and Peters, 2014; Bear and Bull, 2011; Fonstad, 2013), but inland waterways have received little attention (Kaaristo and Rhoden, 2017). In health geography, research into bluespaces is dominated by coastal waters, leaving the wellbeing effects of inland and urban waters unknown. This paper introduces experiences and perceptions of inland waterways to understanding of therapeutic bluespaces, signalling the importance of acknowledging the complex variety of places considered as such. Focusing on urban waterscapes responds to calls for consideration of the full palette of watery-spaces – not blue but brown, grey and green (Foley and Kistemann, 2015). More than expanding the range of places considered, waterways and wateriness raise questions for those concerned with bluespaces' wellbeing potential. Murky, more brown than blue watery environments demonstrate a complexity and ambiguity of relationships to water, finding it attractive and repellent, risky and relaxing. Wateriness celebrated for offering escape and refreshment, might make waterscapes intimidating, deter use, or lessen therapeutic potential.

This research addresses noted gaps in bluespace research, including attention to barriers to accessibility and variations between types of people (Foley and Kistemann, 2015). Perspectives from people not currently accessing waterways illustrate the multiplicity of experiences of bluespaces, and highlight the importance of understanding exclusion from enabling places (Bell et al., 2018). I conclude that the relationship between bluespaces and wellbeing is less straightforward than previously suggested, muddying the waters. To reduce this turbidity and pursue clarity I argue for closer attention to variations between waterscapes, recommending wateriness is used to attend to how water is experienced and becomes disabling. The next section considers existing knowledge of bluespaces and wellbeing. The empirical study of UK waterways is then introduced, presenting data focused on attitudes to water; enabling and disabling experiences are explored in relation to watery properties. The conclusion reflects on what the wateriness of waterways suggests for future investigations of bluespaces.

## 2. The relationship between bluespaces and wellbeing

Terminology around health and place is notoriously fluid and overlapping (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007), as environment and wellbeing interact in complex ways (Atkinson et al., 2012). My focus is places' salutogenic effects, how they enhance or promote wellbeing in the broad sense of "healthiness and happiness" (Kearns and Andrews, 2010). Environments with positive health benefits have been described

as therapeutic (Williams, 2007), enabling (Duff, 2011), restorative (Milligan and Bingley, 2007) and health-affirming (Wakefield and McMullan, 2005). Foley and Kistemann propose 'healthy bluespace' describes enabling waterscapes and how environments centred on water promote wellbeing (2015). They acknowledge not all water is blue, but their terminology is intentionally broad and aligned with popular imageries of water.

A popular preference for views featuring water was highlighted by Herzog's seminal study (1985). More recent research suggests these preferences continue, with aquatic views favoured in natural and built environments (White et al. 2010). But water seems to have more than aesthetic value as restoration – stress reduction and mood enhancement – are highly correlated with water (Völker and Kistemann, 2011). Water's associations with wellbeing endure across history and space (Strang, 2005), with Lourdes amongst the first place to be characterised as therapeutic (Gesler, 1996). More mundane environments associated with wellbeing include blue dimensions, for example beaches (Collins and Kearns, 2007), rivers (Völker and Kistemann, 2013), spas (Little, 2013) and island communities (Coleman and Kearns, 2015). Watery pursuits including swimming (Foley, 2017; Ward, 2017) and surfing (Anderson, 2014) are suggested to have benefits beyond 'dry' physical activity. UK census data shows coastal populations are healthier, particularly benefitting deprived communities which tend to have poorer physical and mental health (Wheeler et al., 2015).

Geography has become more interested in bluespaces and wellbeing (Bell et al., 2017; Foley and Kistemann, 2015; Gascon et al., 2017). Two recent reviews identified associations, but found evidence insufficient and lacking causal explanations (Gascon et al., 2015; Völker and Kistemann, 2011). Surveys suggest people appreciate freshwater bluespaces for their wellbeing benefits for similar reasons they value greenspace: social interaction, psychological benefits and physical activity (de Bell et al., 2017). Being able to see sea from an urban home may reduce psychological distress (Nutsford et al., 2016). A study of older city residents found they experienced beaches, rivers and lakes as relaxing and restorative (Finlay et al., 2015). Bluespaces' salutogenic effects seem to combine what people do around water – relax, socialise, physical activity – its sensory qualities, and wider symbolic and cultural significance (Völker and Kistemann, 2013). Living near the sea is suggested to enhance health through increased opportunities for physical activity and the sea's restorative effects (Wheeler et al., 2012). Whilst they have negative dimensions these seem to be outweighed by waterscapes' health enhancing qualities (Lengen, 2015; Völker and Kistemann, 2013).

### 2.1. Wellbeing as relational outcome of bluespace experiences

Despite recent attention to healthy bluespaces, evidence for associations with wellbeing remains inadequate (Gascon et al., 2015, 2017). It is not clear how water promotes wellbeing, why bluespaces seem to have greater enabling power than other greenspaces, or how they become salutogenic (de Bell et al., 2017; Foley and Kistemann, 2015; White et al., 2010). Some research fails to distinguish effects of water from other environmental features (Völker and Kistemann, 2011: 450). The four key health benefitting mechanisms attributed to greenspaces (Hartig et al., 2014), have been associated with bluespaces: stress reduction, promoting physical activity, facilitating social interaction and enhanced environmental quality (de Bell et al., 2017; Völker and Kistemann, 2015). But associations do not indicate causality; perhaps people seek water because they want to socialise or exercise. Nor do they identify what water contributes beyond the enabling qualities of open spaces and outdoor environments generally.

Water's restorative power has been attributed to appealing aesthetic qualities and sensory experiences (Völker and Kistemann, 2011). It is associated with fascination (Nordh et al., 2009), being relatively still yet interesting because of movement and luminescence (Völker and Kistemann, 2015). Ripples and flows, particularly when combined with

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