

A word...

Source

BY TIM WATERMAN

Water features large in my life. It's in my name, it's in my upbringing as a Navy child living in ports, it's a huge part of my chosen profession and I've even lived on two streets named 'Wells'.

Recently, I went on an organised walk that followed the path of one of London's subterranean rivers, the Hackney Brook. Ordinarily, I very much enjoy this sort of stroll, but this particular walk suffered from being led by guides who were half drunk and sleep deprived. Further, they lacked a fundamental understanding of hydrology, topography and sewerage that might allow them to interpret the landscape adequately. It would have been a shameful waste of a day had I not seen many things that I'd like to return to have a proper look at.

During the walk, our guides encouraged us to contemplate how what was once a river was now a foul sewer and tried to give everyone a good laugh about the authorities trying to convince us of a drought during the wettest June on record. This was symptomatic of much public harrumphing about the hosepipe ban. Thames Water had patiently, but fruitlessly, tried to explain the dynamics of groundwater, but an ignorant majority simply assumed the authorities couldn't see it was raining.

Hackney Brook, out of sight and out of mind below the city streets, is an apt metaphor for our modern relationship with water. We take it for granted that it flows



from the tap, we don't know from whence it comes, nor are we appropriately grateful for the fresh potable water we enjoy.

Communities once gathered at the well or the pump: places of special meaning, magic, conviviality, and celebration. Look, for example, at the magnificent stepwells of India. They show how eloquently built landscapes can make water visible and meaningful at its source. Stepwells were not just places where people met, but where they would escape the heat of the day. At the most prosaic level, they simply ensured a dependable supply of groundwater, but in reality they were essential public spaces for community, aesthetics and recreation.

The provision of fountains in public spaces is a nod to the essential place water

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has in public life. However, a traditional recirculating fountain is a pale imitation of a well where magic happens and wishes are made. Water-sensitive design can regain that magic. It helps make water visible and meaningful in public spaces; from the simple swale to elaborate spaces that merge landscape and edifice with the same degree of majesty seen in the stepwell. A good example are the wonderful scuppers that shoot rainwater in arcs off the Water Pollution Control Laboratory building in Portland, Oregon.

Water-sensitive design proposes new ways to educate and elevate. It provides us once more with the chance to celebrate and value the life-giving waters that rain from the sky and gush up from the rich depths of the ground. ●