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*Dialogue on Values,  
Design, Practice and  
the Future*

*Kate Orff  
Henk Ovink*

Redesigning deltas is the theme for our 182nd anniversary week at the Delft University of Technology. Two honorary doctorates are awarded to people who have an outstanding contribution to the field of Delta Urbanism: Kate Orff and Henk Ovink.

The dialogue between Kate and Henk focused on four key aspects, each shedding light on their shared values, design philosophies, real-world projects, and their future visions. The first part delved into their commonalities, uncovering shared approaches to work, a strong commitment to making the world a better place, and advocacy efforts. Their dialogue revealed a mutual optimism and dedication to motivating people while emphasizing responsibility. The second part encompassed design and design-driven solutions. The conversation explored their perspectives on design in the context of design-based research, both in its present state and future trajectories. They deliberated on the definition of design, its role in problem-solving, and what changes might be necessary in academia. The third part centered on their real-world projects, such as the Water as Leverage program and the Living Breakwaters initiative. They shared insights gained from these endeavors, outlining lessons learned, areas for improvement, and collaborative opportunities for learning and growth. Finally, in the last part, they envisioned the future, particularly academia's role in catalyzing positive change and fostering innovation. Their dialogue encapsulated shared values, experiences, and aspirations, highlighting the potential for collaborative action within design, advocacy, and academia.

#### KATE ORFF

*Kate Orff is the Founder of SCAPE and a prominent figure in landscape architecture, urban design, and climate adaptation on a global scale. She is dedicated to reshaping landscape architecture in response to the challenges of climate change and creating spaces that enhance social life. Kate's influence extends through publications, activism, research, and collaborative projects that address environmental and social concerns. With academic credentials from the University of Virginia and Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, Kate is currently the Director of the Urban Design Program, Co-Director of the Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes (CRCL), and a Professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP). She plays key roles on the Commission on Accelerating Climate Action for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Advisory Board for Urban Ocean Lab, a policy think tank.*

#### HENK OVINK

*Henk Ovink was appointed by the Cabinet of the Netherlands as the first Special Envoy for International Water Affairs in 2015. As the Ambassador for Water, he is responsible for advocating water awareness around the world, focusing on building institutional capacity and coalitions among governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector and NGOs to address the world's pressing water needs and help initiate transformative interventions. Henk Ovink has a proven track record in water and sustainable urban development and holds several international posts like Sherpa to the High Level Panel on Water and principal for Rebuild by Design. To ensure long-term continuity, Henk Ovink plays an active role in academia. He holds a research position at the University of Groningen and teaches at the London School of Economics and at Harvard Graduate School of Design.*

Henk Ovink: I inherited my values from my parents. My mother, a true activist, became one of the first female school directors post-World War II, while my father served as an architect-engineer, more of a broker and inventor than a conventional designer. Their believe in people, leaving no-one behind and in solutions, if only we work together continues to inspire me. The key values I carry with me emphasize inclusivity — the ability to be inclusive, listen, ask questions, and refrain from starting with preconceived answers. This extends beyond the human realm to encompass the representation of all, including those unable to speak up, such as frontline communities, the vulnerable, or even natural elements like rivers, forests, and lakes.

Inclusivity, for me, goes beyond the voices of people and stakeholders in negotiations; it involves having meaningful conversations and attributing values to those who may be silenced by circumstances.

Another integral aspect of my worldview is my unwavering optimism. Even in challenging situations, such as a the last COP28 conference organized in geo-political fragmented world, battered by climate change and wars, and with fossil fuel interests steering the conversation, where conventional wisdom might declare success impossible, I maintain a belief in finding solutions. This isn't about perpetual optimism, but rather a steadfast belief in people's capacity to collaborate, develop future-oriented, sustainable, inclusive, and resilient solutions.

Reflecting on Kate, whom I met through the Rebuild by Design initiative, I see someone who not only shares this belief but actively provokes innovative solutions. Kate possesses a design capacity that is truly comprehensive, encompassing social, cultural, environmental, economic, and urban-rural equity. Her work not only offers solutions but embodies a holistic approach, combining forces across diverse values.

Kate's work validates my optimism. It demonstrates that optimism isn't naive or reason for cynicism but a potent force. With Kate and her team, I find a renewed sense of hope — a belief that we can achieve our goals by staying true to our values. Learning from Kate and her team gives me a double dose of hope.

The values I uphold are grounded in a robust foundation; a reality that becomes evident when we steadfastly adhere to those principles. This forms the basis of my perspective.

In terms of analytical rigor, the methodical approach of examining, engaging, and the collaborative efforts of the entire team contribute to a powerful synergy. This synergy creates a framework for generating solutions, essentially forming the crucial layer of tension needed to confront the complexity of challenges. Too often, this complexity can be overwhelming and obscuring, leading us astray. The key lies in surpassing that hurdle and embracing the intricate nature of the issue.

Embracing complexity aligns with one of my core values, and it's within this intricate space that the solution resides. This is precisely the direction we should be aiming for. Achieving this requires embracing complexity and not be overwhelmed by it, not be led by fear. Embracing complexity means hope and opportunity, progress and pathways beyond our current lock-ins and divides, and in this regard, there's a notable alignment with Kate. She exemplifies that navigating complexity is the pathway forward, demonstrating through her work that this approach is not only viable but essential for the future we need, we must dare to aspire.

Kate Orff: To expand on Henk's statement about the complexity of challenges, another significant avenue that drew our paths to intersect is water. This connection unfolded through projects like Rebuild by Design, particularly in response to Superstorm Sandy, which brought a generational catastrophe, including water and wind damage, to the New York region.

Water, for me as a landscape architect, has been a driving force, urging me to practice and think differently. It possesses an inherent radical quality; it forces you to hold complexity in your mind and action, and it resists being segmented into distinct "solutions." Instead, it demands a comprehensive and synthetic approach, connecting a gradient across land and water, linking people across political boundaries, and fostering a radically connected perspective. Water compels us to work in a way that embraces this interconnectedness.

In our dialogue, Henk and I represent different but necessary roles. Henk, as an individual working within a movement, contributes to creating the expansive cultural, political, and policy space necessary for new possibilities in the physical landscape to emerge. On the other hand, my role as a designer involves bridging diverse voices and taking a synthetic approach to problem-solving in an applied way. The essential dialogue between policy, design, and implementation, which is often lacking but crucial for instigating change, defines the mission-critical aspect of our collaboration.

I cannot carry out my work in isolation from the efforts Henk is leading, as there needs to be a receptive community and political space to make it viable and possible. With no audience there is no project! The term "approach" instead of "solution," used by Henk, resonates with our shared philosophy. For instance, the Living Breakwaters project in Staten Island aims to redefine resilience by bringing people together at the shoreline, rebuilding coastal ecosystems, and mitigating climate risk. It's not just a physical project; it's an approach to design that engages the complexity of landscapes and communities.



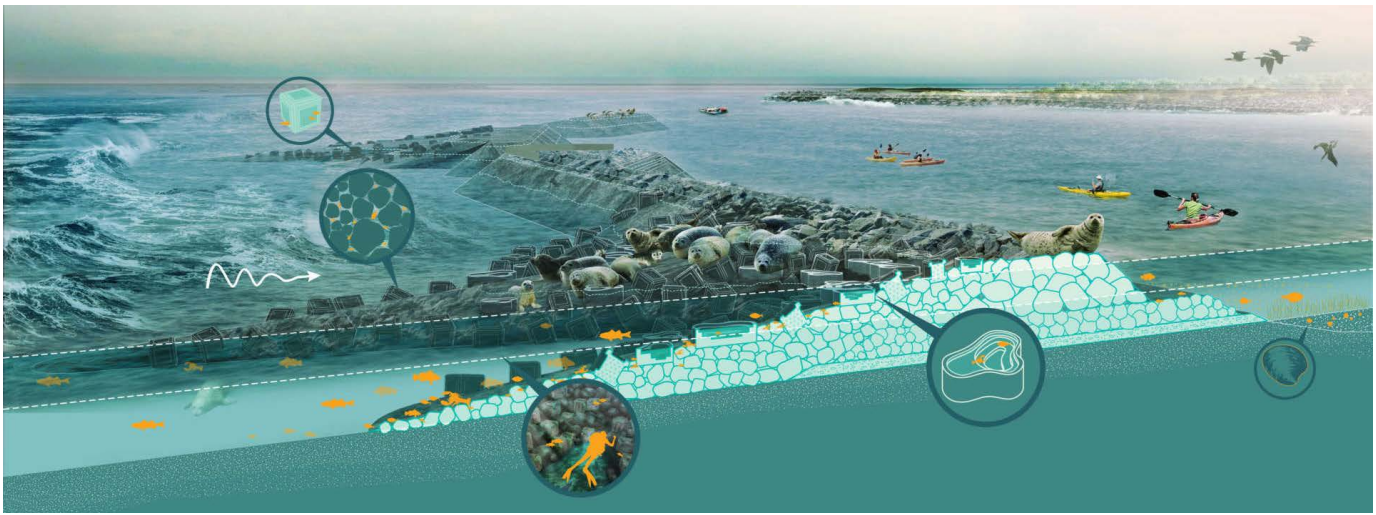


figure 1 Image from the project Living Breakwaters, off the shore of Staten Island, New York (SCAPE, 2013)

In my essay titled "Mending the Landscape" in the book *All We Can Save* I express a different metaphor for the role of the designer. Rather than being an architect presenting one-off sketches independent from context, I see myself as a sort of midwife of change. To me design means folding in new possibilities to existing places, gathering voices, combining community input with scientific insights, and linking it to a policy context. I'm trying to give form to the co-created visions in the places we work. It's a distinct approach to design, contingent upon a political, social, and cultural context ready to receive and engage with it. This is where Henk's gifts come into play — his ability to lead, inspire, coalesce, build, and create dialogue is crucial for navigating the space of change.

## PART II — DESIGN

Kate Orff: I perceive design as fundamentally propositional, creative, iterative, and collaborative thinking. It involves a comprehensive understanding of a set of challenges and the bold proposition of alternative paths forward. Unfortunately, over the past few decades, design has been somewhat pigeonholed, and associated with consumerism. This is partly due to our own actions—architects, planners, and others—have been portrayed as individuals simply creating drawings or objects easily dismissed as consumer-driven experiences. In the U.S., especially, design has been relegated to the realm of consumption, focusing on superficial features like a stylish bench or an ergonomic product.

This narrow view has led to the loss of the core notion that design is a process-driven, collaborative endeavor that sets a vision, shares a direction, and engages people in that direction. In academic settings, like at Columbia, design often exists in silos, separated by disciplinary assumptions, making it challenging for different fields to effectively communicate.

At Columbia, we are working to address this gap by initiating a joint program between the Climate School and the Urban Design program. The aim is to emphasize that,



figure 2 Image from Living Breakwaters, (SCAPE, 2013)

even in the policy space, there is a design element—a creative problem-solving approach applied to challenges. Bridging the notion of design away from a mere object and towards a process is crucial. It's about recognizing that design isn't exclusive to architects; it's a societal challenge that requires a collective effort. Water is really a tool to accelerate this change in perspective.

In the face of the climate emergency, relying solely on scientific expertise is insufficient. This challenge involves everyone, across various applied disciplines such as architecture, engineering, planning, law, and business. We all need to adopt a design-oriented mindset, emphasizing collaboration and the use of design tools like visualization, iteration, and sharing. It's a call to think differently and work together to build processes that address the complexities of the world we face.

Henk Ovink: Water stands at the core of our current challenges, and there exists a pervasive lack of understanding and misunderstanding regarding its true values. Water is intricately connected to everything we strive to achieve, underpinning or undermining every facet of our system, including equity, finance, culture, and politics, food, energy, climate, urbanization, and landscapes.

The urgency of addressing our water situation becomes evident when we realize that our efforts, whether for today or tomorrow, are interwoven with water security or jeopardized by its insecurity.

The silver lining is that initiating a mending process around water brings everyone together, creating a link that unites diverse worlds. This unique opportunity, born from a design approach, serves as a safe space, not just as a solution but as a platform for brokering, creating, and connecting. In a society increasingly marked by contention, we yearn for simplicity, often adopting black-and-white perspectives. Creating the opportunity means delineating a space within political, societal, academic, and environmental debates where diverse voices, even those we may distrust, can converge and elevate our collective ambition through connections, understanding, and the creation of pathways.

Kate emphasizes the critical need for this safe space in our current societal landscape, and preserving it becomes paramount. Yet, it is not enough to safeguard it; we must also capitalize on it. Design plays a pivotal role in this endeavor, acting as a bridge across divides and connecting values—cultural, environmental, historical, indigenous, ecological, economic, financial, urban, rural, large, and small.

Design serves as a mentor and connector, organizing relationships and unraveling complexity across various scales, from the neighborhood to river basins, coastlines, and even atmospheric rivers. It is solution-oriented, not in simplistic fixes, but in unraveling complex problems systematically. Beyond bringing together and mending, design provides opportunities, sparking optimism, and hope.

Design is provocative, ambitious, aspirational, and has the capacity to bridge horizons, offering a pathway toward a feasible transition through a process driven and organized by design. This makes design political, societal, a common practice to uphold.

I underscore here the exploitation of safe spaces through this approach, exemplified by projects like Rebuild by Design and Water as Leverage. These initiatives bring together diverse worlds in a safe space, driven by the urgency, need, and ambition, shaping a collective future.

### PART III — PROJECTS

Henk Ovink: Let's be candid—the world is currently on a disastrous trajectory. Amid this reality, a constant struggle unfolds between vested interests that hold each other hostage. Society, at large, seems unable to overcome these challenges, propelling us toward a future that is uncomfortably uncertain. Maintaining the status quo, doing nothing, might be perceived as comfortable but is in fact an untenable situation.

Breaking through the entangled web of vested interests and exploring alternatives is an immensely complex task. Both the process itself and the outcomes challenge existing structures. This endeavor involves a struggle against

how we organize, what we propose, the validation and evaluation mechanisms in place, and the very opportunity to lead.

It's a fight against the norms that currently govern, resisting the conventional and striving to offer an alternative vision. This battle is particularly intense at the forefront, where the most fragile contexts demand inspired leadership. Figuring out what this alternative looks like requires navigating a maze of complexities, challenging our ingrained ways, and forging a path toward a more sustainable and equitable future.

The discussions at the Climate COP's over the past years, particularly on loss and damage, have immediate applications that are essential for our survival. The urgency to address these issues is evident, and even though the challenges persist, the imperative to act remains.

In the context of Water as Leverage, our approach involves comprehensive research and assessments to identify hotspots of fragility. We explore the collective intelligence spanning environmental, economic, demographic, geopolitical, climate-related, and urban finance aspects. Focusing initially on Southeast Asia, we identified over 30 locations grappling with these challenges, offering potential solutions and opportunities if properly understood and embraced.

Selecting three diverse cities—Chennai in India, Semarang in Indonesia, and Khulna in Bangladesh—we tailored the process to create a safe space. This inclusive space brought together local communities, indigenous groups, NGOs, government entities, private sector partners, and international organizations. Applying a design approach, we aimed to comprehend the complexity of these cultures and geographies, mapping out the intricacies and unraveling them to discern opportunities for intervention. The process involved collaboration, experimentation, and education, seeking to develop interventions that could act as catalysts for systemic change.



figure 3 Conceptual design of the climate resilience proposals developed in the Water as Leverage program in Semarang (Water as Leverage, 2019)

Recognizing that addressing risks, be they climate, urban, financial, or equity-related, requires a transformational approach, we identified catalytic interventions and worked on creating an enabling environment. Water as Leverage has transitioned from understanding complexity to building coalitions around catalytic projects, emphasizing implementation, scalability, and replication.

One distinctive aspect of Water as Leverage is its focus on the long term. Recognizing the slow pace of change, the initiative emphasizes the need for patient capital, consistency, continuity, and commitment from partners. Securing the safe space over political cycles, both of those involved and the locations in question, becomes paramount. Water as Leverage stands out by driving the continuity of this safe space, ensuring its persistence across changing governments, politics, and negotiations. There's mounting pressure on our ambition to deliver and initiate scaling and replication. Currently active in Chennai, Khulna, and Semarang, our approach is expanding to new locations, along the Ganges, in Vietnam and in Cartagena in Colombia. This extension of our approach is not confined to international efforts alone; it also extends to Europe, the Wadden Region.

Kate Orff: The concept of "approach" becomes pivotal when we delve into the intricate complexity of water-related issues. Water, with its multifaceted challenges, necessitates a more radical and synthetic approach to design thinking. Reflecting on my work at Columbia University, where I've been involved in collaborative design studios for the past decade. Our studios, operating under the name "Water Urbanism" typically engage 50 to 60 students annually. These studios serve as an academic mirror, akin to the principles of Water as Leverage. Notably, last year, our students collaborated with Water as Leverage in Cartagena, merging academic and practical perspectives. This exposure has allowed us to witness the fragility inherent in various places globally, each unique yet sharing a common thread of vulnerability.

Over the past ten years, our studios have traveled to diverse locations like Can Tho in Vietnam, Aqaba in Jordan, and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, partnering with local universities and faculty. Through week-long workshops, students from both universities collaborate on-ground problem-solving, fostering a shared educational bubble. The students are encouraged to adopt a holistic, 360-degree perspective, tracing water-related issues wherever they lead. The resultant reports and recommendations aim not only to address specific problems but also to promote a collaborative and research-driven design approach.

I empathize with Henk's reflections on the shared privilege of experiencing diverse global contexts. Witnessing patterns of water scarcity leading to urbanization and societal stress has provided valuable insights. While the outcomes differ across locations, the breakdown of the hydrologic cycle triggers societal trauma and stress. This global lens, while enlightening, also serves as a sobering reminder of the recurring challenges and my own privilege.

Our upcoming project, Caribbean 2100, involves sixty students engaging in service-based learning and collaborative efforts with the University of West Indies and Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña. The Caribbean, often referred to as Ground Zero for the climate emergency, is also a hotspot for innovative solutions. We aim to contribute to breaking the cycle of extraction, resource depletion, and displacement, steering towards regenerative outcomes.

## PART IV — THE FUTURE

Kate Orff: Teaching becomes a crucial avenue for sowing seeds into the future. While it would be comforting to believe that the next generation will save us, the reality is that the responsibility lies squarely on our shoulders, the current generation, to act, perceive, and effect change. There's a saying about people in the world—those who are "I-shaped" individuals are deeply knowledgeable about one specific thing, whether it's hydrodynamic modeling, local law, or sustainable energy permitting. It's essential to discover what you're passionate about and dive deeply into that area. However, there comes a point where it's valuable to broaden your expertise, becoming a "T-shaped" person. This involves understanding how your specialized knowledge can connect and collaborate with others. In today's world, a combination of specific expertise and the ability to communicate across disciplines is crucial for addressing complex challenges with the aim to do it differently in the future. We also have to – full force – implement innovative coastal adaptation and nature-driven projects now, so that we have a bridge to the future.

Henk Ovink: When considering Kate's insights and reflecting on our university context, the academic setting offers a unique opportunity. Firstly, it serves as a crucial safe space, especially in the face of the immense challenges confronting us. However, this safety should not manifest in isolation; rather, it should extend beyond the university's walls. The responsibility of the university is to create a collaborative space that transcends its own domain, particularly given the gravity of the challenges at hand. Lastly, the academic environment should embrace its capacity to be provocative. With a wealth of students, researchers, faculty, partners, networks, and programs, academia possesses tremendous potential that is too often underutilized. Thus, fostering safety, collaboration, and provocation is a vital undertaking that warrants development of knowledge needed for developing the deltas of the future.

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