



# Wetness Is Everywhere

Why Do We See Water Somewhere?

Anuradha Mathur & Dilip da Cunha

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# Wetness Is Everywhere

## Why Do We See Water Somewhere?

Anuradha Mathur  
University of Pennsylvania

Dilip da Cunha  
Harvard University

There is a general acceptance that we inhabit a planetary surface divided into a part that is drained and another part by which it is drained. This surface features in maps, histories, habitat studies, politics, policies, and design. Maps label the two parts “land” and “water.” This water, however, is appreciated on the terms of land, ever-ready to give up its place for the land beneath it to be “reclaimed,” ever-ready to provide land with moisture, a waste disposal route, transportation, energy, and popularly today, waterfronts for real estate development and consumption. If this water is polluted, exploited, and endangered, it is not just because it is violated; it is because water is set up to be dominated by land. And if this water threatens land with rising seas, melting glaciers, increasing floods, and scarcity, it is as an “other” that has been placed across a line that we subject to artistic representations, scientific inquiry, infrastructural engineering, and landscape design with little attention to the act of separation and the geographic imagination that drew it into being.

Is it time for a new imagination—a hydrologic one—that says that we do not inhabit a surface but rather a ubiquitous wetness? Rain and other forms of precipitation are not assumed to fall to a surface as water that forms rivers that run to a sea. It rather deepens a wetness that is already everywhere, in the air, earth, flora, and fauna. This wetness does not flow as water does; it holds, soaks, blows, seeps, osmotes, and



transpires, moving in nonlinear and emergent ways to ever-extending holdings of wetness, holdings that eventually become an ocean, an all-encompassing wetness in which there is no such thing as dryness. There is only wetness of varying degrees. The sea is very wet, the desert less so.

If water separated to be *somewhere* is in crisis today, wetness negotiated *everywhere* holds the way forward.

### Author Biographies

Anuradha Mathur is an architect, landscape architect, and professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Stuart Weitzman

**Figure 1.** (continued on next page) Details from a drawing series (in progress) of Varanasi Ghats in fog (photo-works, photo-extracts, and staining-works). The series, one of several from our exhibition *Ocean of Rain*, begins from a photo-work of a place experienced (center). It moves in two directions: on the left, via the act of separation, moving toward inhabiting a landscape of elements with a geographic imagination; on the right, via the act of negotiation, moving toward inhabiting ubiquitous wetness with a hydrologic imagination. The more each is pursued, the more it diverges from the other.

School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Mathur is author with Dilip da Cunha of *Mississippi Floods: Designing a Shifting Landscape* (Yale University Press, 2001), *Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore's Terrain* (Rupa, 2006), and *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary* (National



Gallery of Modern Art, 2009). She is also coeditor of *Design in the Terrain of Water* (AR+D, 2014). In 2013–14, she led a PennDesign Team with da Cunha for *Structures of Coastal Resilience*, a research project focused on Norfolk in Tidewater, Virginia, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Dilip da Cunha is an architect and planner, codirector of the Risk and Resilience program at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, and adjunct professor at the GSAPP, Columbia University. Da Cunha is author with Anuradha Mathur of *Mississippi Floods: Designing a Shifting Landscape* (Yale University Press, 2001), *Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore's Terrain* (Rupa, 2006), and *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary* (National Gallery of Modern Art, 2009). He is also coeditor of *Design in the Terrain of Water* (AR+D, 2014). His most recent book, *The Invention of Rivers: Alexander's Eye and Ganga's Descent* (2019), University of Pennsylvania Press, draws attention to rivers as a consequence of one of the most fundamental acts in the design of human habitation—namely, the separation of land from water.