

# Riverless:

## Exploring Urban Futures through Visual Collage

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# Participants

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## Riverless: Exploring Urban Futures through Visual Collage

An interdisciplinary workshop using visual collage to explore speculative urban scenarios, reimagining the Danube River's future in the face of climate change and urban transformation.

# Introduction

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This week-long interdisciplinary workshop, part of the Course Week at MOME in Fall 2024, continued the effort initiated by Balka Creative's *Riverless* project. It explored the speculative future of urban environments through visual collage, focusing on the transformation of the Danube River. Climate change, urban expansion, and ecological pressures pose growing threats to this vital waterway, raising the question: what happens when a river runs dry or changes course entirely?

The workshop was structured in three parts: speculative design, waterways and climate impact, and visual/text design narrative.

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Through research, site visits, and creative practice, participants reimagined the riverbed as a space shaped by future scenarios.

Guided by narrative architecture methodologies, students from diverse disciplines—including architecture, product design, and art management—combined storytelling and visual collage techniques.

The outcomes of the workshop will continue to be shared and published through Balka Creative's platform, with the aim of contributing to future exhibitions and publications that address local and global challenges.

The first task of the workshop divided students into three groups to conduct background research on critical themes related to water systems and urban futures. Each group tackled distinct yet interconnected topics, presenting their findings to all participants as a foundation for the design phase.

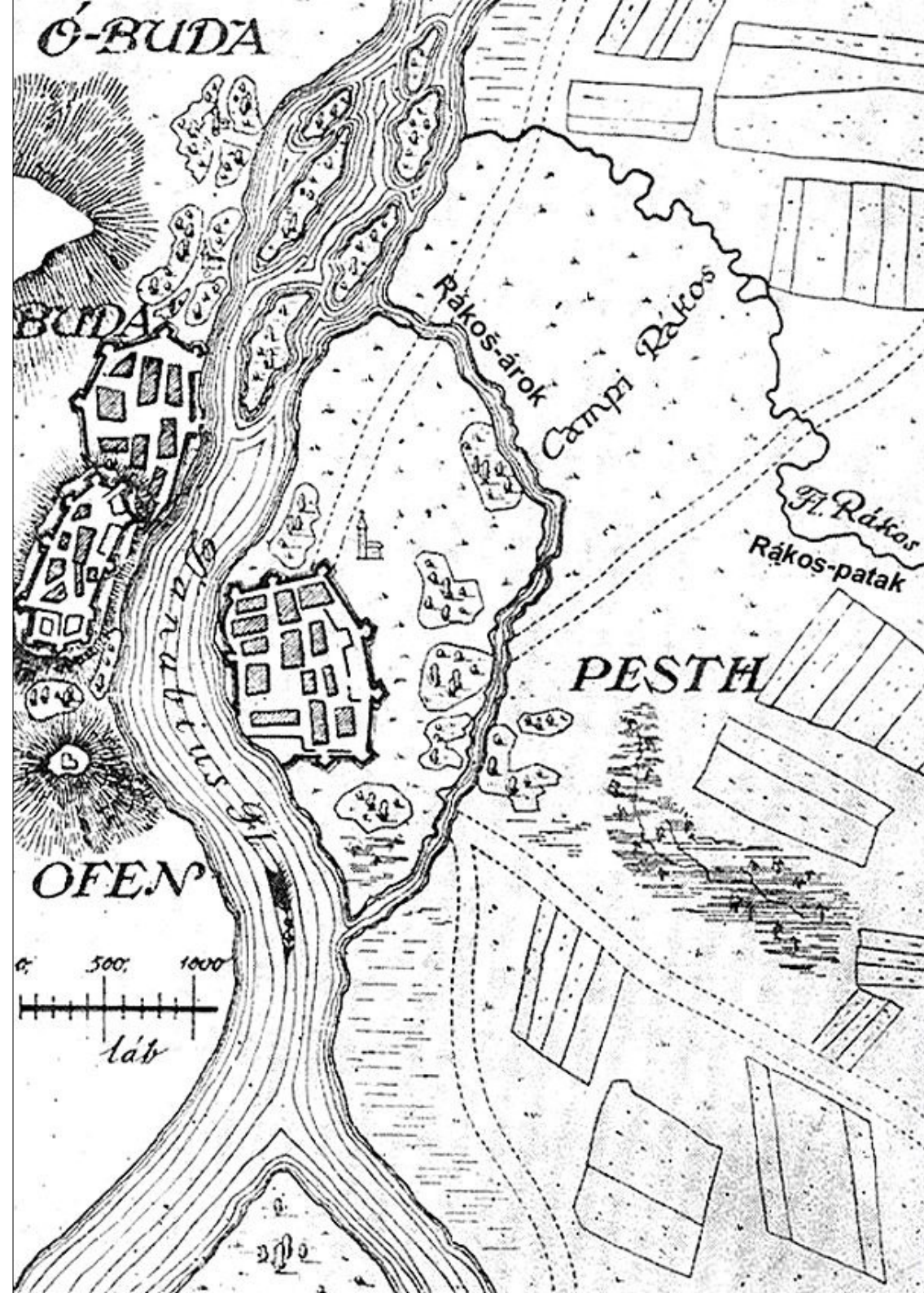
Group 1 focused on Water Scarcity, Flood Management, and Climate Change Impact. They examined the consequences of rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, and urban expansion, emphasizing sustainable strategies for water management and flood mitigation in vulnerable urban environments.

Group 2 investigated Ecological and Biodiversity Shifts in River Systems. Their work highlighted the fragility of river ecosystems, the impacts of reduced water

flow, and the broader consequences of biodiversity loss driven by climate change and human intervention.

Group 3 explored Urban Expansion and Geopolitical Implications, analyzing how river systems influence urban growth and regional politics. They examined conflicts over water resources, land use, and the sociopolitical challenges of managing shared waterways amid evolving urban territories.

These research efforts provided critical insights, grounding the workshop's speculative design proposals in real-world environmental, ecological, and geopolitical challenges.





# PEST

Városerdője

Szőlős Kertek

Város Parkja

Lóvásár Allás

Küveztó

FERENC V.

Városerdője

Szőlős Kert

JÓSEF V.

Vámháza

TERÉZ V.

BÉLV.

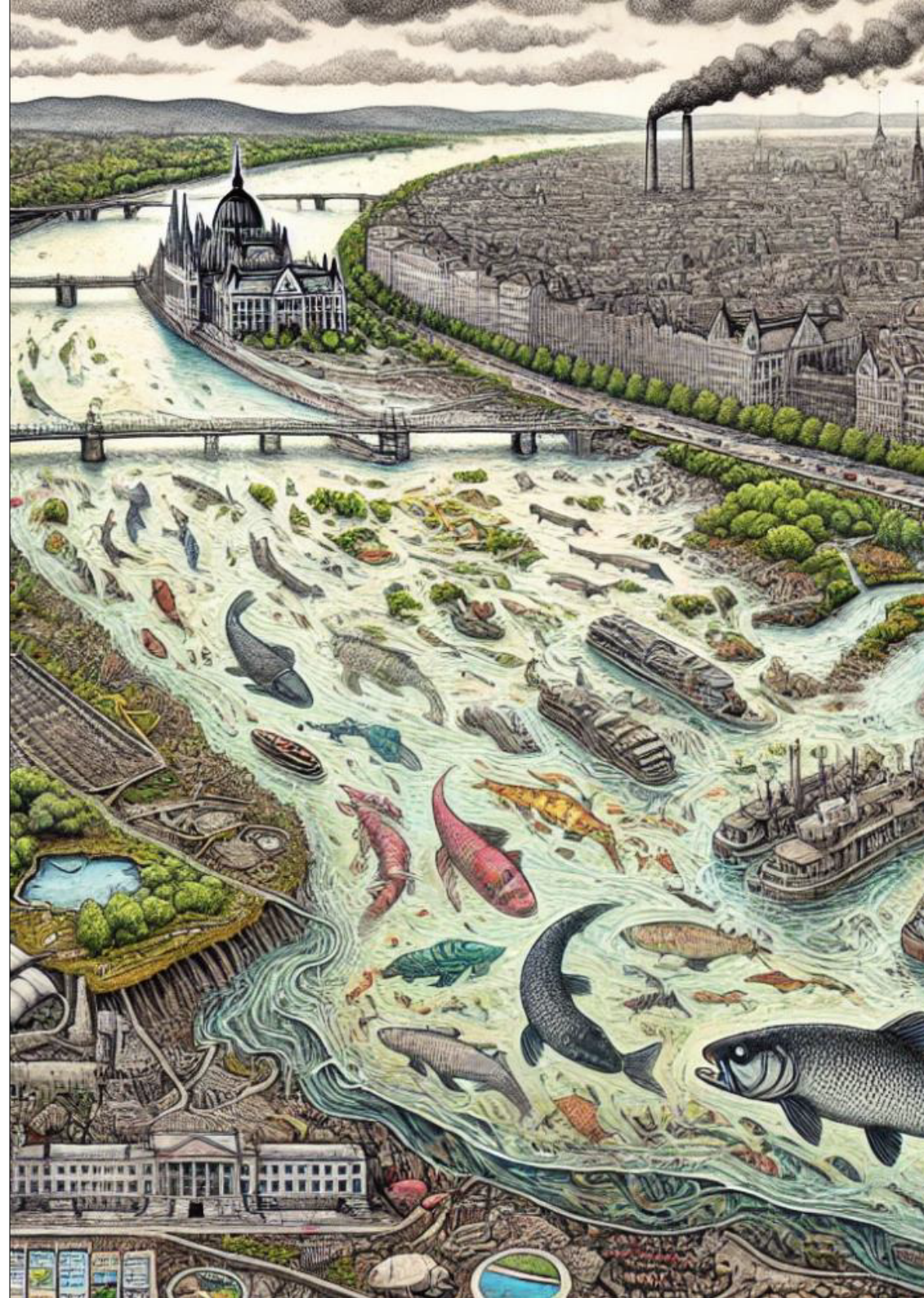
KÜB V.

IPÓTV.

Szent Gellért hegy

TÁBAN





The workshop featured guest speaker Máté Hulesch, who presented his research titled *Speculative Futures: Possibilities and Potentialities*. His lecture explored the role of architecture and design in imagining alternative futures during times of crisis. Máté emphasized that architecture goes beyond constructing buildings—it is about creating representations that influence social, cultural, and political realities.

Referencing key thinkers like Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Mark Fisher, and Tony Fry, he discussed how modern pessimism about the future has replaced earlier utopian visions. Concepts such as “capitalist realism,”

which limits our ability to imagine alternatives, and speculative design as a tool for exploring new possibilities were central to his talk. Máté introduced frameworks like Dunne & Raby’s Futures Cone, highlighting the importance of envisioning preferable, not just probable, futures.

Following the presentation, a group discussion on speculative design encouraged participants to reflect critically on design’s potential to challenge dominant narratives and shape innovative, forward-thinking responses to ecological, social, and political challenges. The session laid the groundwork for the workshop’s creative exploration of speculative urban futures.

# Speculative Design



**1977 was the year when the dystopian imagination replaced the utopian imagination... the collective imagination could no longer conceive of alternative futures. (Berardi, *After the Future*)**

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Philosophical Foundations: Franco “Bifo” Berardi



Radical futurisms offer an escape from the oppressive present and open up the possibility of radically different worlds. (Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come)

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Critical Futures: Radical Futurism

# Sustainable Water Management

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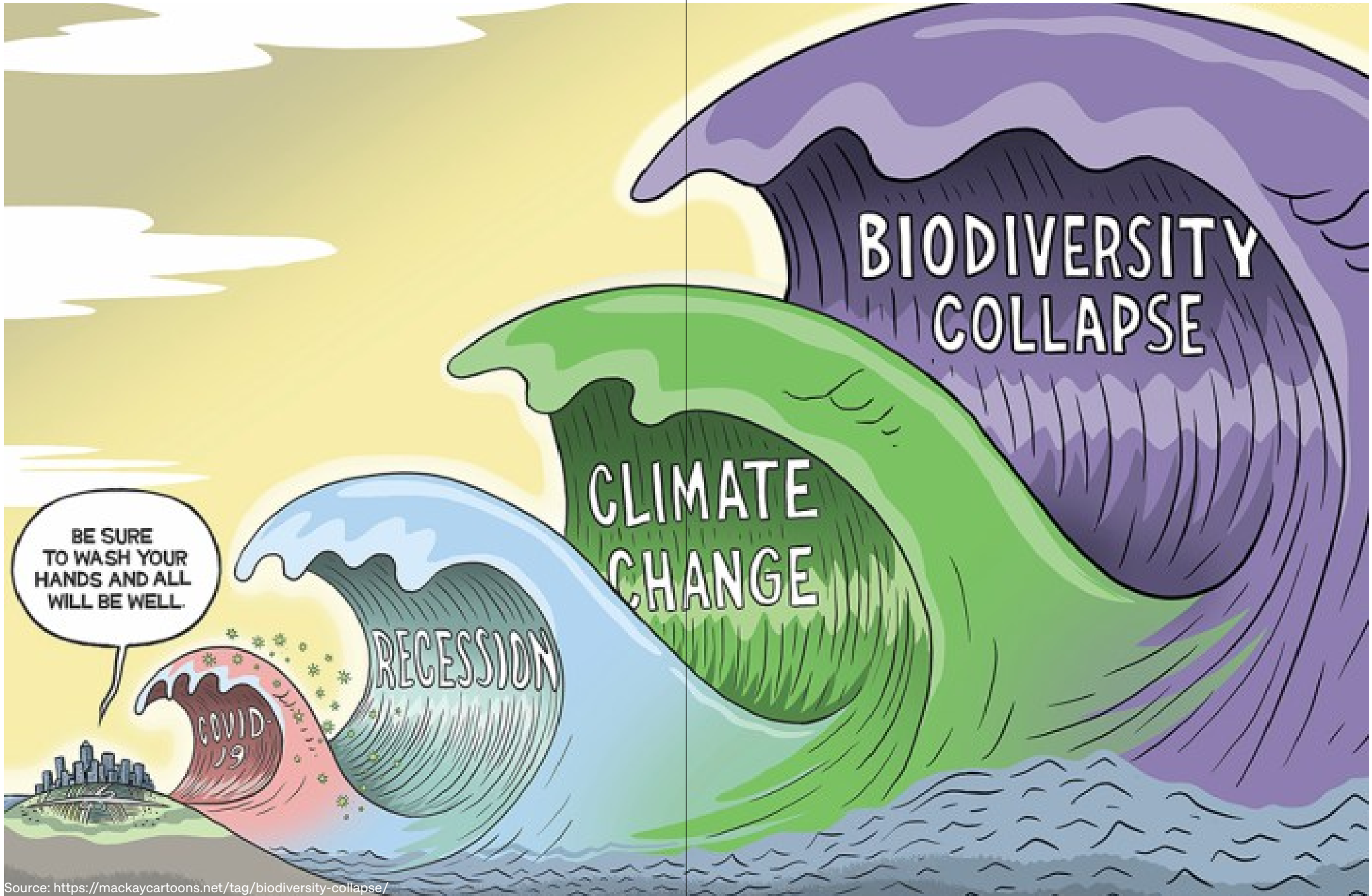
The workshop included a guest presentation by Réder Ferenc, an expert on urban stream restoration and environmental hydrology. His lecture focused on the critical role of water systems in urban and natural landscapes, highlighting innovative restoration projects and sustainable water management practices.

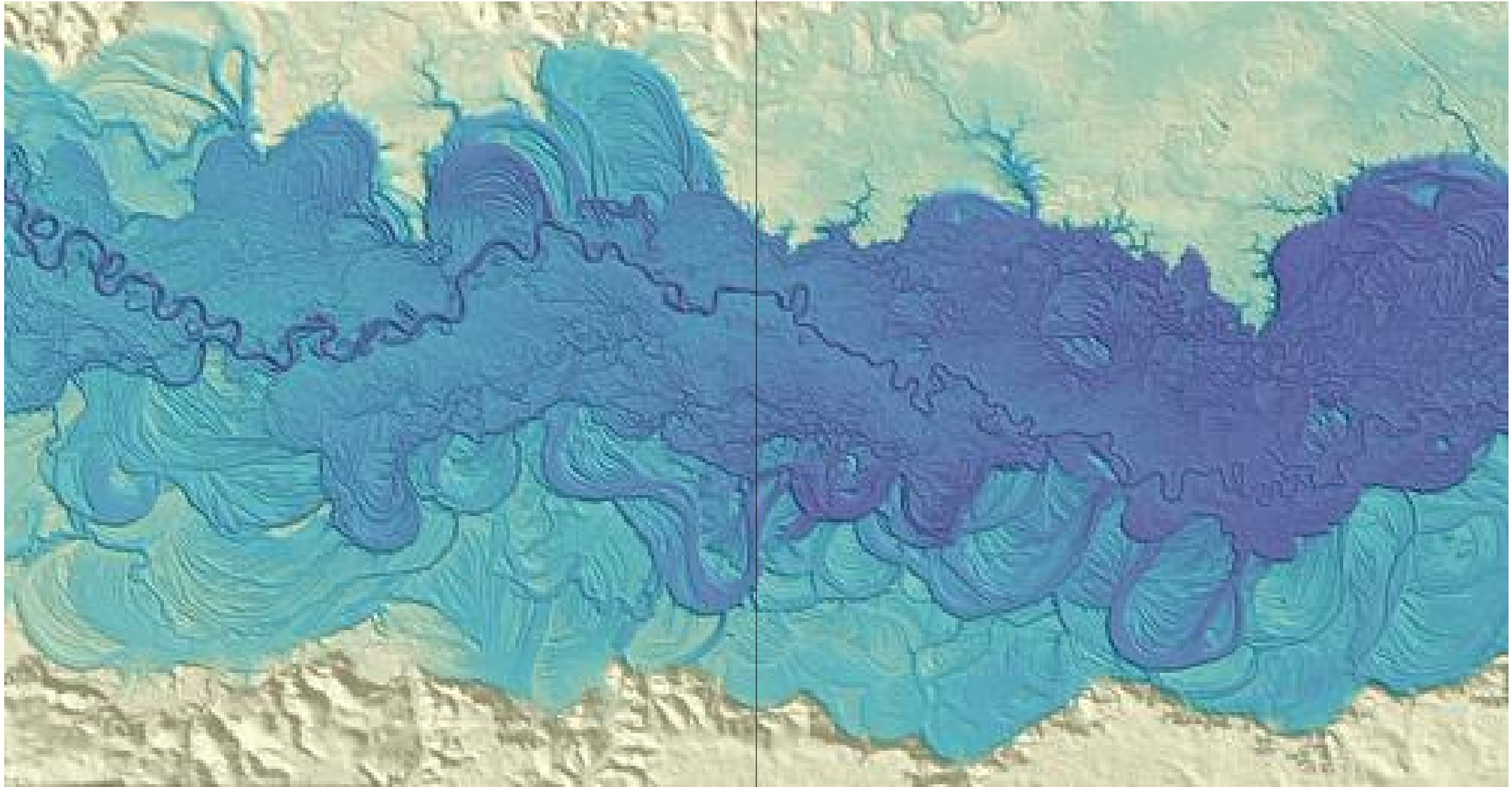
Ferenc presented international case studies, such as the South Platte River in Denver, and emphasized the importance of integrating natural processes like Stage 0 restoration and beaver rewilding to achieve resilient ecosystems.

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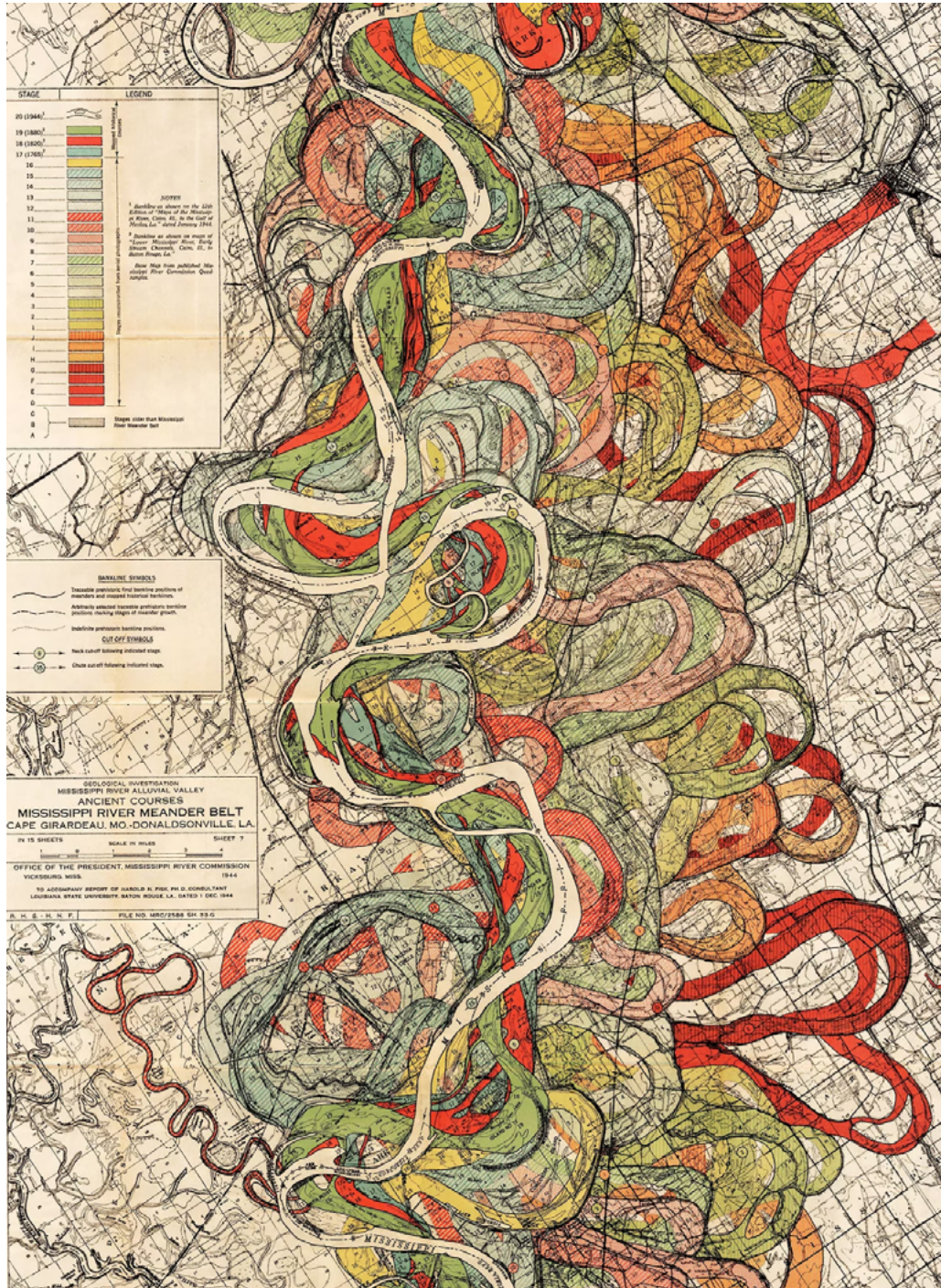
A key theme of the presentation was understanding the interplay between natural systems and human interventions, the impacts of over-engineered waterways, the benefits of natural flood protection measures, and the role of biodiversity as a stabilizing force in water management.

Following the presentation, a discussion emerged around the balance between technological approaches and low-impact, process-based solutions in urban environments. Ferenc's talk provided an essential foundation for reimagining water systems as dynamic, adaptive landscapes, offering inspiration for their speculative design proposals.

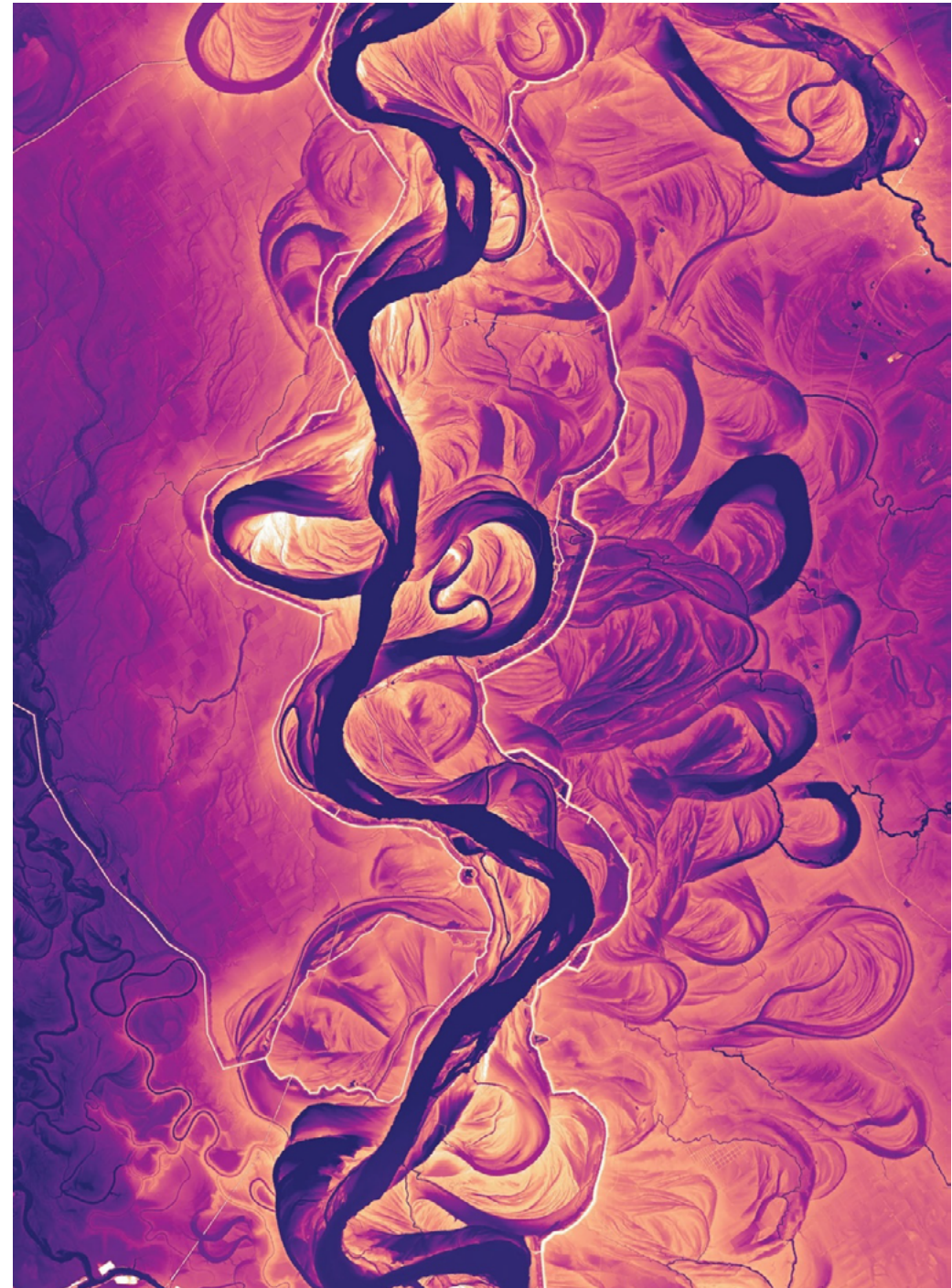




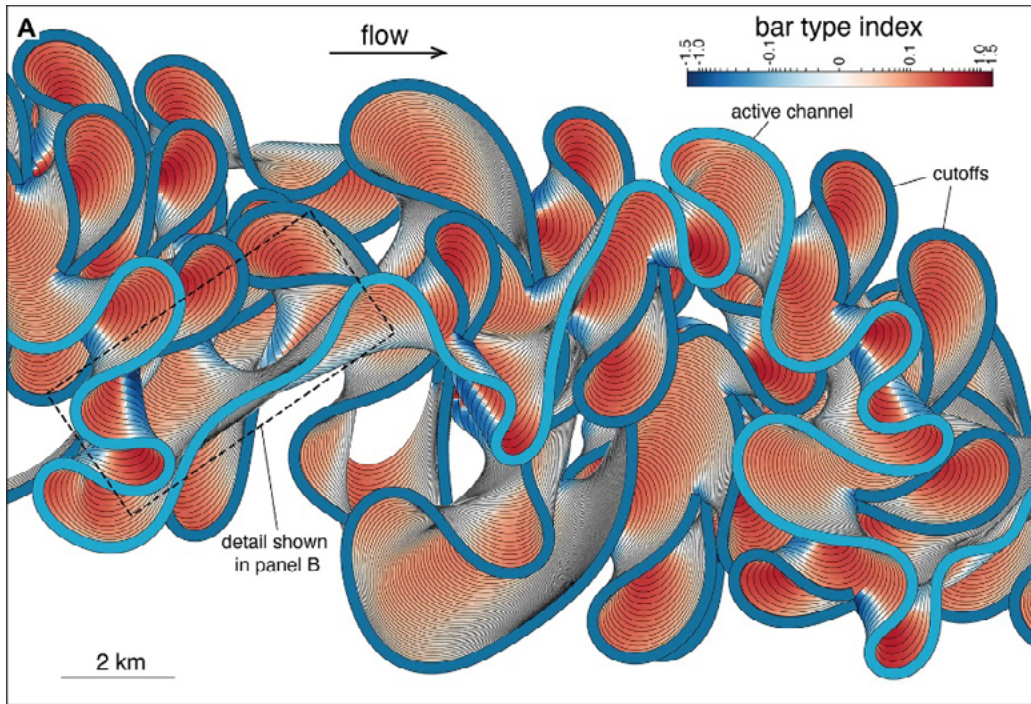
LIDAR mapping



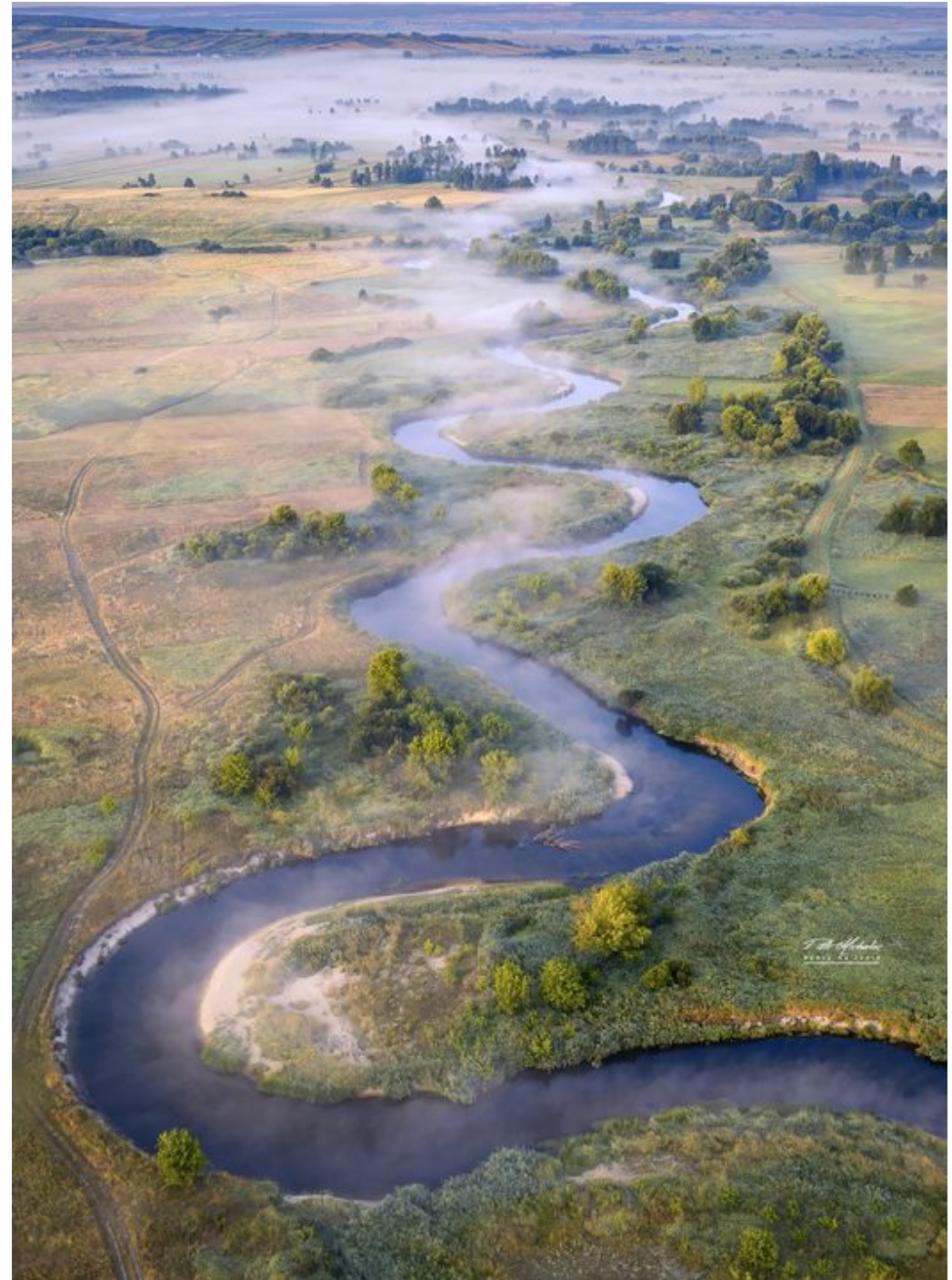
Source: Ferenc Réder, Urban Stream Restoration and Sustainable Water Management







Source: Ferenc Réder, Urban Stream Restoration and Sustainable Water Management



Following their initial research on the selected themes, students were invited to explore the spatial aspects of the Danube River—particularly its relationship with Budapest—through a guided on-foot investigation. This exercise aimed to deepen their understanding of the dynamic interactions between the river and the urban environment while encouraging a critical perspective on the use, accessibility, and transformation of this significant space.

Students were tasked with observing key elements such as infrastructure, natural and built landscapes, and social activity along the riverbanks. To document their findings, they were

required to take photographs, serving a dual purpose: first, to develop a more analytical and reflective view of the spaces they encountered; second, to build a visual archive of images that would later serve as raw material for their collage assignments.

This fieldwork emphasized the importance of direct engagement with the site, allowing participants to experience the spatial, ecological, and cultural realities of the Danube firsthand. The resulting photo collection provided a critical lens for reimagining the river's future and became a vital resource for the speculative design narratives developed during the workshop.











The culmination of the workshop invited students to synthesize their week-long research, discussions, and site explorations into a final project: a visual collage paired with a brief written narrative of a future scenario. This assignment challenged participants to imagine and communicate alternative futures for the Danube River, reflecting on the spatial, ecological, and cultural themes explored throughout the workshop.

The resulting works spanned a wide spectrum of perspectives, from optimistic visions of resilient urban ecosystems to more pessimistic projections of loss and transformation. Some proposals leaned toward practical and grounded

solutions, envisioning sustainable interventions, while others embraced more speculative and imaginative futures, pushing the boundaries of conventional thinking.

Despite the diversity in tone and approach, all the projects shared a common intent: to provoke thought and critical dialogue about the pressing challenges facing the Danube and similar waterways. By blending visual storytelling with written narratives, the collages served as powerful tools to question, reimagine, and confront the realities of climate change, urban expansion, and shifting landscapes, offering a creative exploration of how we might respond to an uncertain future.



In the future, 150 years from now, climate change will have rendered the Earth's surface inhospitable—dark and devoid of natural light and color—forcing humanity to adopt advanced innovations for survival. One of the key developments is a colossal geodesic dome that covers the entire planet, creating a climate-controlled haven for life. Constructed from self-repairing, bioadaptive materials, the dome adjusts to external temperatures, ensuring ideal conditions and balancing technological innovation with environmental restoration.

Urban landscapes beneath the dome have transformed into networks of massive bridges that no longer function solely as transportation routes but have evolved into multi-layered ecosystems, including living spaces, urban farms, and recreational areas, allowing communities to thrive.

Advanced bioluminescent organisms provide a soft, organic red glow to replace the absent natural light, creating a naturally lit ecosystem. This red glow emits a safe form of radiation, essential for human navigation within these environments, enabling functionality in an otherwise transformed and inhospitable world.

All these elements have turned the Earth into a controlled sanctuary, blending cutting-edge technology with environmental care, supporting human life and the biodiversity necessary for planetary recovery.

Polina Kuprina  
Photography MA1

«... the dome adjusts to external temperatures, ensuring ideal conditions and balancing technological innovation with environmental restoration»



C. was staring at the horizon. Standing on the river's shore accompanied by hundreds of excited people, she was waiting for something. She covered her eyes with her hands, and a little after sunrise she grasped.

The Bubble arrived. She's been dreaming about this moment, for years. Because the Bubble wasn't just a floating art festival.

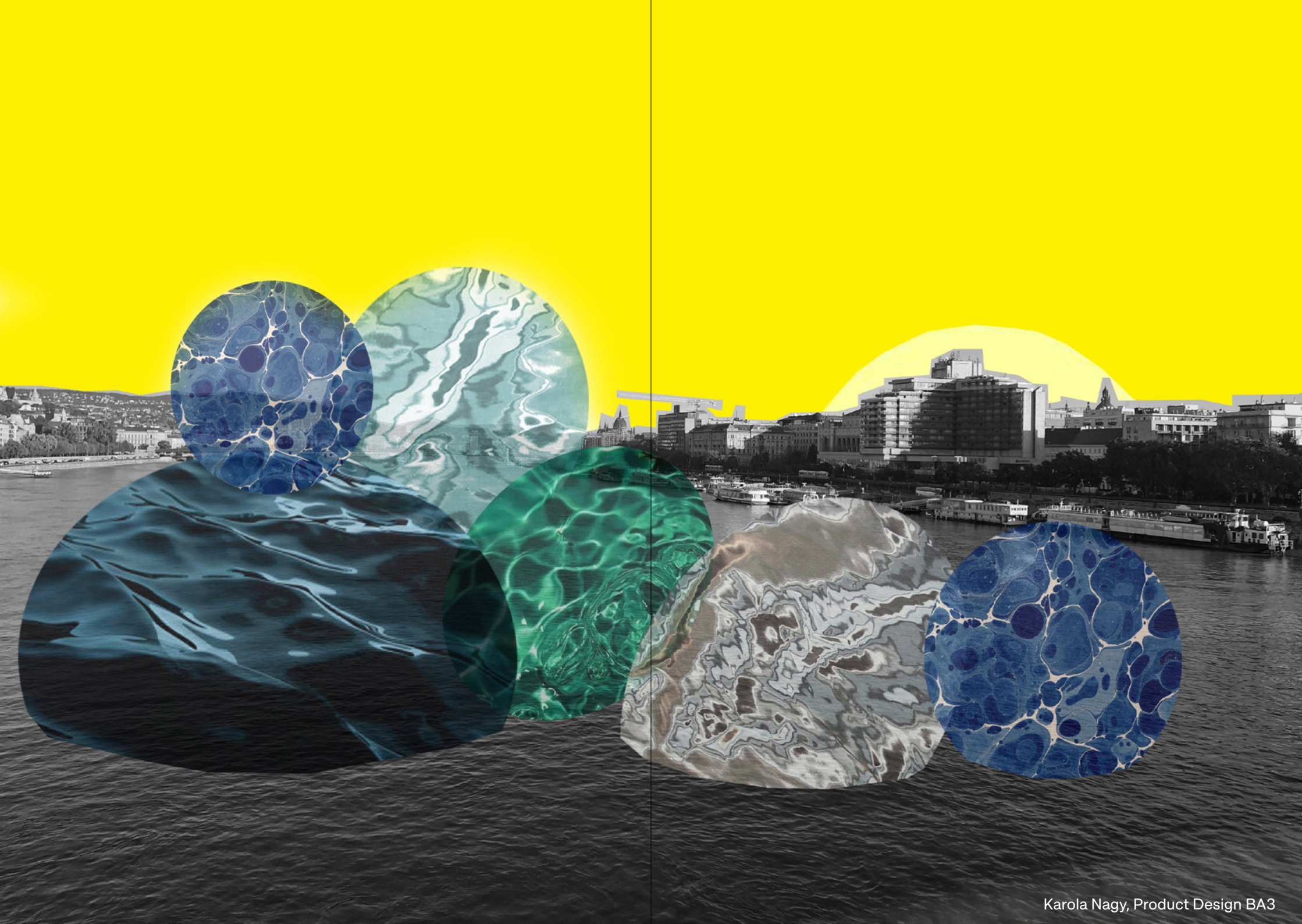
It was a symbol. A symbol of collaboration and trust. A thread between 10 different countries connecting the citizens from the Black Forest to the Black Sea through art and culture. Being on the Bubble meant connecting to the Danube and its users. Meant celebrating different cultures and sharing experiences. Meeting new people, meeting the people of the Danube.

C. believed that when you are on the slowly floating Bubble, all differences disappear, no matter how many wars, conflicts, and crises are happening in the world.

The Bubble came once every two years. The festival was entirely run by volunteers. A creation of humankind based purely on culture and passion making sure that people won't ever forget how important it is to learn from our differences and not be scared of them.

C. grabbed her bags and looked up at the slightly transparent, giant but surprisingly light walls, and she stepped foot onto the squishy surface of the Bubble.

Karola Nagy  
Product Design BA3



Climate change gets worse and worse during the years of neglect and people from all over the world start to rise up in fear of what will come. They go on the streets to shout for an action and all the riots last for several months, the media goes crazy. Community sense in people shows, they draw attention in every country.

Finally, the government and the world's nations hear the voices of despair: they get together at a World Wide Conference to discuss an initiative for a better, sustainable future to bring, which affects all the cities and regions.

The first stage of change is the outcome of the 25 years plan that also affects Hungary. 2050's Budapest is more clear, sustainable and holds a better life for the next generations. People's attitude to life shifts vividly and the provisions of the government are also evolving: they use less materials as

plastic, concrete, the streets are now without cars, people use bikes or go on foot instead, some of the industrial factories are closing due to the lack of interest for their products, which brings less pollution into the city.

The Danube basin is naturalized and wetlands start to appear, former species are coming back. Cities start to grow their own goods to feed their own citizens, they form cropfields beside the Danube to use its clean water. Everything slows down a bit in the capital.

The Danube basin evolves to a new Oasis in the european region.

Blanka Vincze-Hajnal  
Architecture BA2



This dystopian scene is set in a not-so-distant future, where the frequent droughts and floods caused the moisture of the soil to fluctuate too much.

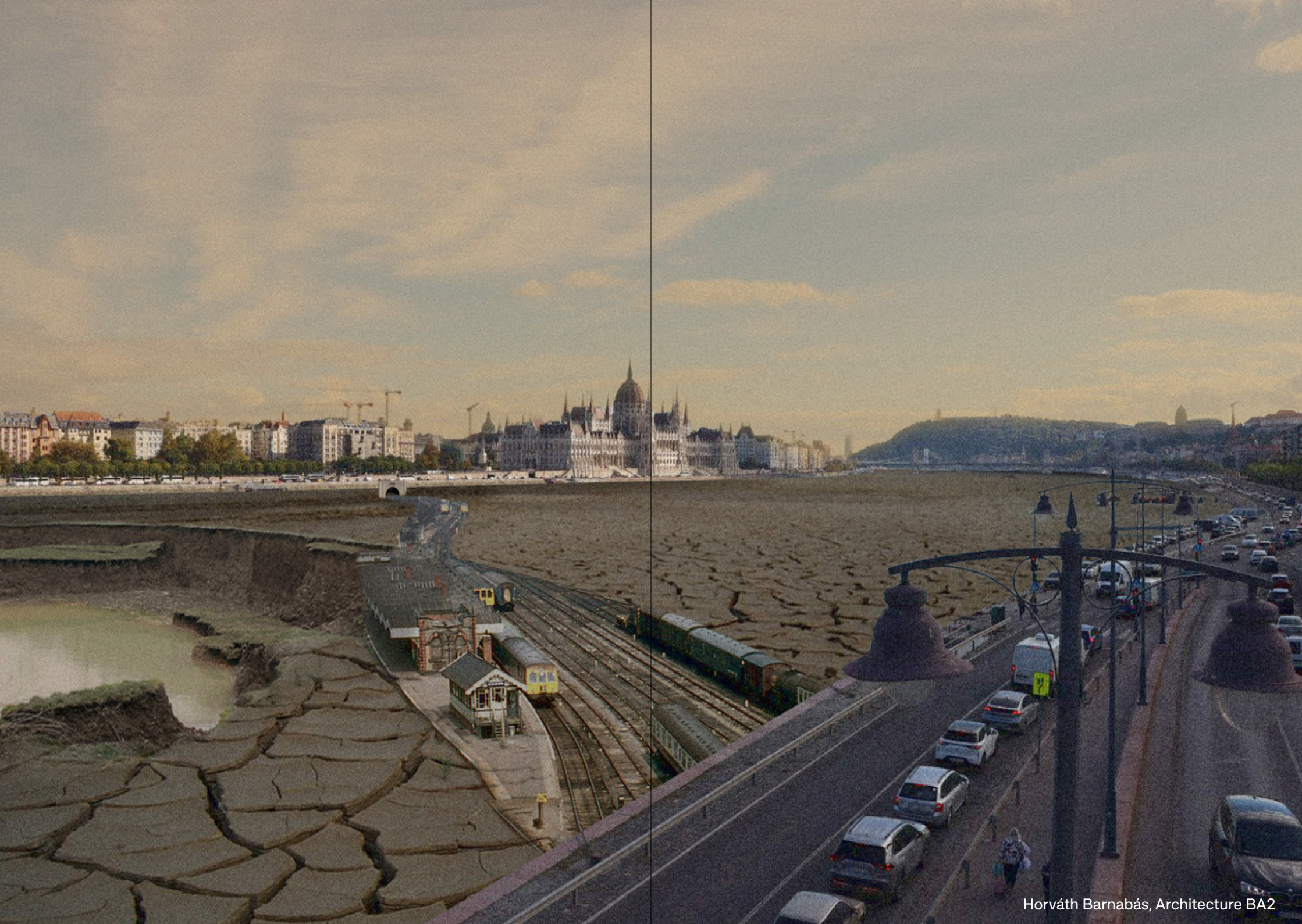
The shrinkage and expansion of the clay soil started to cause some serious damage to the foundations of the buildings built near the river, making them unsafe to live in.

The government saw the solution in the complete flooding of the metrolines crossing under the river to keep the moisture of the soil stable all the time. By diverting the river underground they had replace the metro lines with a new public

transportation system on the surface. A new railroad was born connecting the two sides of the city, crossing a newly formed wasteland.

In these new hostile conditions, the riverbed never repopulated with plants, instead, it serves as a constant, ugly reminder where humanity's values lie: they will rather save buildings than save the very reason itself those buildings were constructed there in the first place.

Horváth Barnabás  
Architecture BA2





Humans tend to turn their heads away from problems, that is how we work. When a crisis occurs, we might panic and do ridiculous things to calm our conscience, or to prove – mostly – to ourselves everything is in control, even when the truth is the opposite.

It is 2050. Because of climate change, the water cycle of the planet has been disrupted. The Danube has already dried up. People didn't care about it until it had disappeared entirely.

Without a better idea, a man starts to water the empty basin with a garden hose to create a little streamlet. It's too little too late to fix the situation that we caused in the first place.

What could be the purpose of his action anyway? Does he care about the condition of the river, and the environmental issues caused by the lack of water? Is it possible that his action was guided by his desire to preserve the tourist attraction that the Danube was?

In conclusion, what is the main problem? Is it too little too late or are humans still not guided by the good cause?

Lilien Borbála Kovács  
Architecture BA2



It is year is 2100, following the 2096 giant flood in Europe, cities around the Danube had to rethink their very existence.

The damages were catastrophic, buildings on the riverbank are devalued, young people and victims of the housing crisis take over these once beautiful houses made more than 200 years ago. In the summertime, the droughts make the transport of goods on the water impossible, while every winter could end in an even bigger catastrophe like before.

The new waterproof Chinese magnetic train system in the riverbank was built in less than 1 year with more than 150.000.

Chinese guest workers, to solve the transportation crisis caused by the low water level. The new multifunctional flood management system is also tested this year, causing the capitals of Europe keeping a close eye on Budapest.

Máté Erős  
ADM MA1





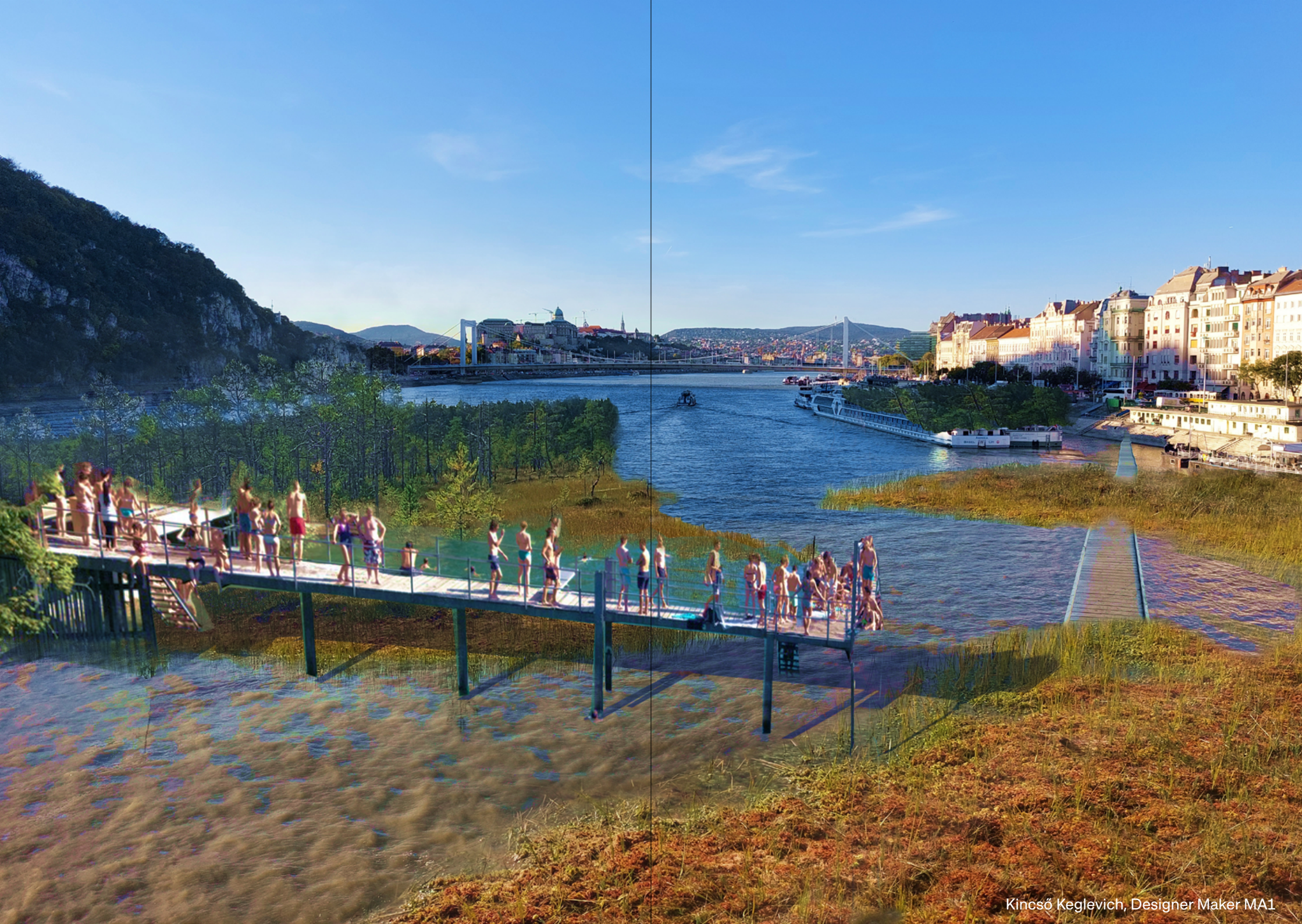
# swirL iver

When I swim I always feel I could become free, primarily because my body becomes weightless, every movement so slow compared to the usual feeling. In my utopia, Budapest's life is also slower than it is today.

All people have a closer connection with the River Danube, because the water level is getting higher every year. Public transport needs to adapt to this new system. More and more people are choosing to work near water.

The people developed roads, parks, swimming pools and playgrounds on the river. They are no longer afraid of flooding, they have accepted the river's tidal atmosphere.

Kincső Keglevich  
Designer Maker MA1



No one thought that in just 100 years one of the greatest rivers of Europe had almost disappeared from sight. Due to the extreme changes in our climate, natural occurring rivers have become tourist attractions - if there's anything left to see. Hungary had a bit more luck than others; the Danube still exists but cannot be compared to its 'golden years'.

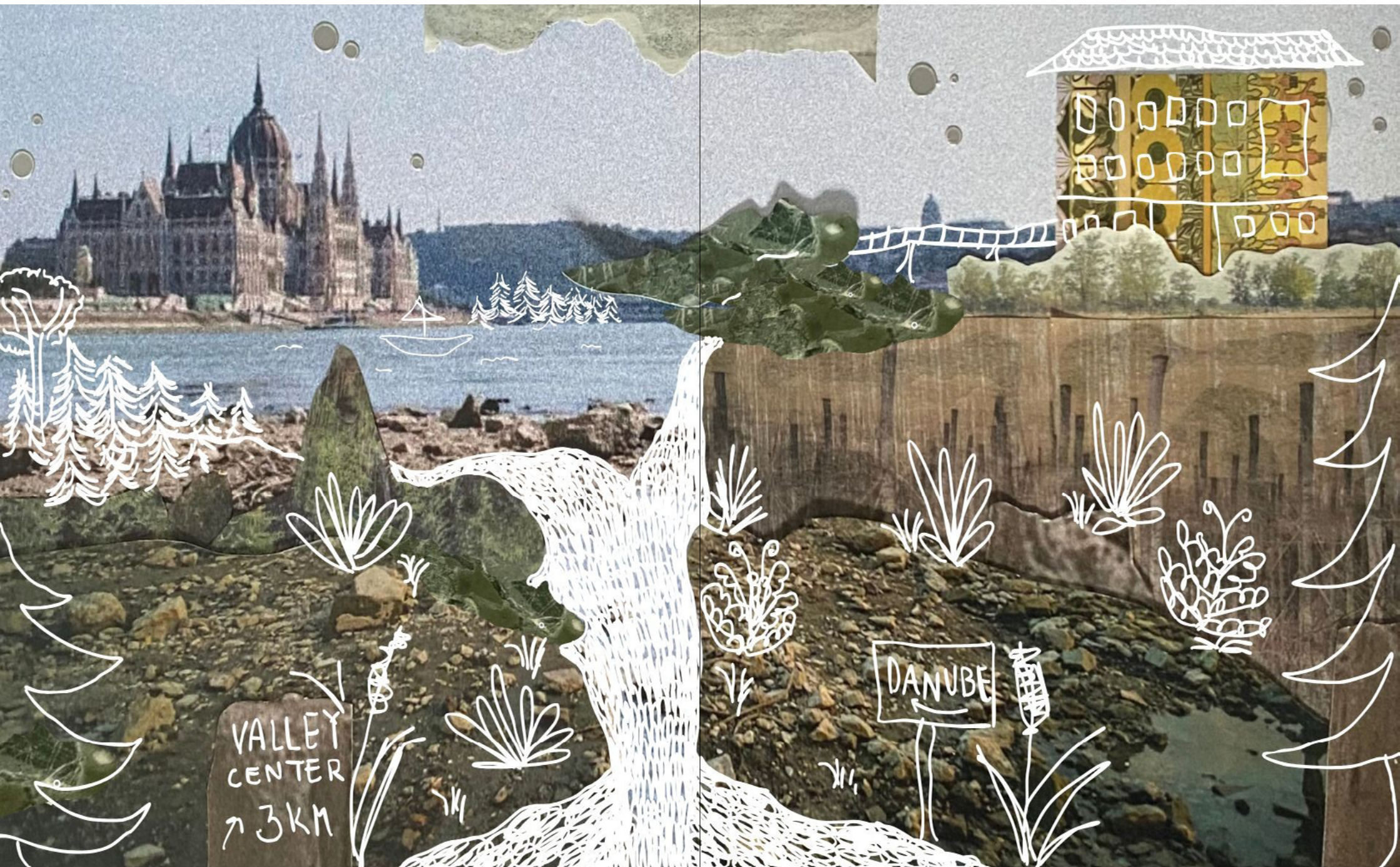
But luck can only push a nation so far - there has to be intention. Thanks to years of planning and many professional contributions from various fields, The Valley was born. An area that is given back to

nature to restore biodiversity, fight pollution and in general bring back the once lost balance.

The collage showcases a first person view of The Valley; we can see the Parliament, the surrounding forests, the Valley Center( that consists of an educational center, youth house, beaver reservation and workspace of the workers of the Valley) and of course what was left of the river.

Ódor Ágnes  
ADM MA2





The Valley, 2024, mixed media (collage/digital drawing)

## DREAM PLACE

*I had a dream about the city Budapest. I dreamed about the city that will face a crisis it created itself. In the next hundred years Danube dries up and the city will panic. The solution? Concrete. Lots of it. Engineers, thinking they know best, will dig canals all over the city, trying to control the river. They'll call it a victory of technology over nature. But water won't care. It will keep disappearing. Fish? Gone. Nature? A memory. Empty concrete canals will be useless, while there will be floods during heavy rains. But people won't stop. They'll keep adding more technology and more concrete, until they realize the truth: they can't fix problems they created only by themselves.*

*That's when things will change. After years of fighting with nature, they'll switch to follow the nature. They will try to understand its systems and use its knowledge in recovering river Danube and the whole city. People will start making wetlands besides of the concrete canals, and the river will come back to life. Birds, fish, and frogs will return, and the city will start to breathe.*

*People will make new community gardens where they will grow their own food, build beehives and turn mostly vegetarian. Shareable electric cars and bikes will replace traffic jams, and life in the city will slow down. There will be no needs of a big profit and the government will behave wisely.*

*Budapest will become a quiet, green city, where people care more about community wealth as opposed to their own. The air will be cleaner, people will feel better and the city will start to live again.*

Markéta Blažková

WAS IT JUST A DREAM?

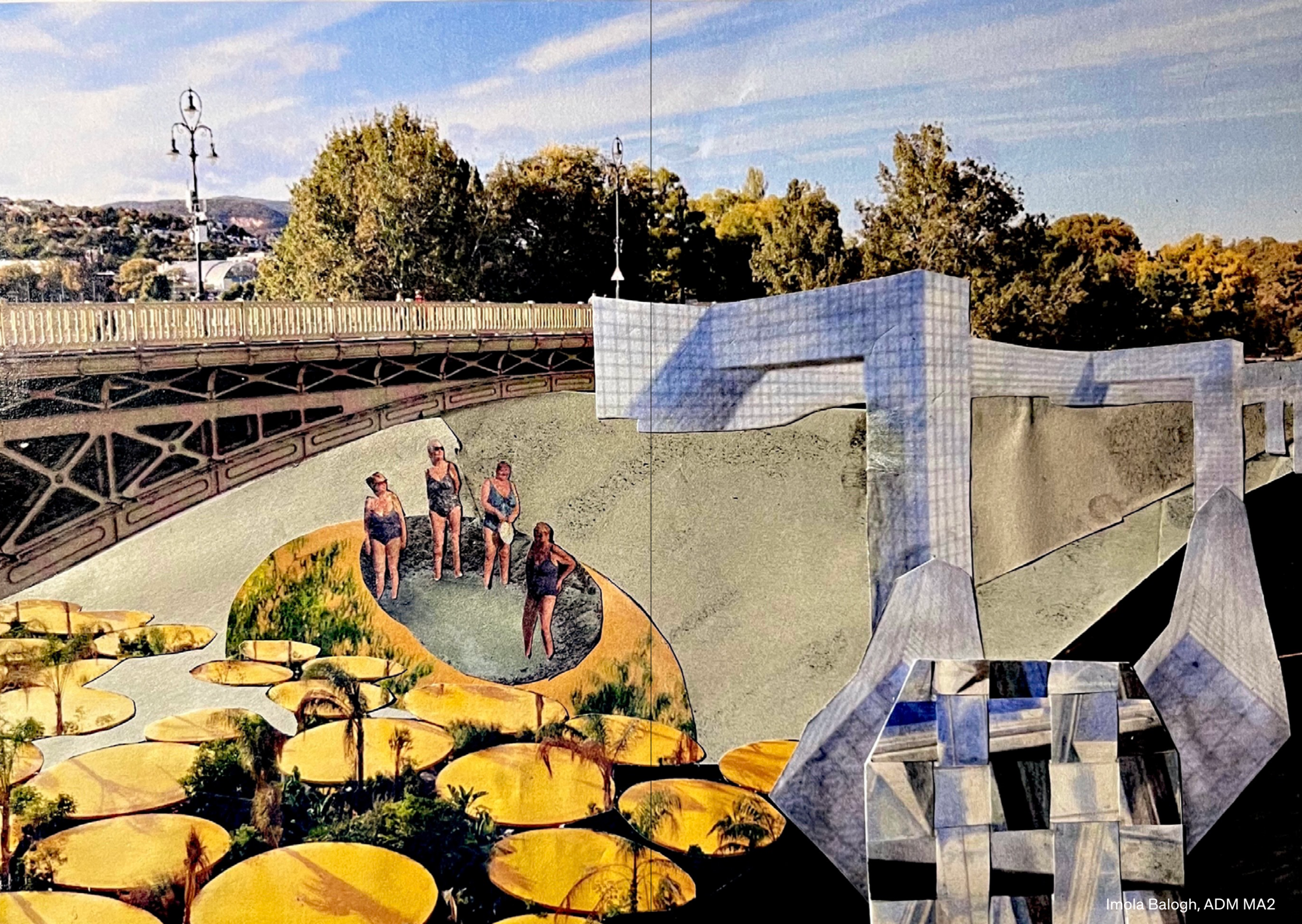


It's only been 20 years since the citizens of Budapest decided to build a dam to protect their beloved city from the extreme floods in 2050.

The path of the river has been altered and now it flows naturally around the city creating beautiful wetlands. The Danube's old watershed has been reborn as a natural, sustainable park where the river no longer divides Buda and Pest.

Mariska, an old lady, visits what's left from the river daily, reminiscing about the powerful river of her youth. Now, she sees this peaceful sanctuary, that symbolizes the delicate coexistence of nature and human progress.

Imola Balogh  
ADM MA2



By the year 2060, the existing social and political tensions came to a breaking point. Conflicts between European countries seemed unresolvable, and the European Union was dissolved. New alliances were formed based on core beliefs, but for the most part, individual countries attempted to become as self-reliant as possible. Hungary, however, proved to be too small to achieve this. As water became scarce, Hungary's lakes and rivers were tapped into as water sources. Natural resources rapidly deteriorated, and every bit of land was put to use. Hungary had to take drastic measures to survive.

After losing all assistance from the EU and other countries, Hungary's economy became increasingly dependent on Russia. A pact was proposed in which, in exchange for Kárpátalja (from the previously invaded Ukraine), Russia was welcomed into Hungary's decision-making council. Hungary benefited both politically and economically from the new land but had to abide by Russia's word from then on.

An unforeseen act followed this agreement. European countries were already growing more wary of Russia's imperialism, but this was the last straw for Austria.

Austria decided to build a dam on the Danube at the Slovakian border. The aim was to weaken Russia's new ally and reserve more water for themselves. This resulted in a nearly empty riverbed during the dry months in Hungary and a half-filled Danube for the rest of the year. The devastation caused by this—essentially the loss of the Duna as Hungarians knew it—was unimaginable.

Two large dam walls were constructed in the riverbed to contain the reduced Danube. These could withstand the flooding that occurred during dam openings. Additionally, the narrowing of the river created a new free space between the Rakpart and the walls. This space was quickly occupied by industrial facilities and the transport infrastructure supporting them.

Karolina Kustor  
Architecture MA1

«Two new big dam walls were built in the riverbed to contain the reduced Danube... This new space was occupied by industrial facilities and the transport supporting it.»



The workshop concluded with a compelling display of creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative exploration.

The final review featured guest critics Laura Sutori from Balka Creative and Clément Blanchet from CBA, whose valuable insights further enriched the presentations. Students unveiled their speculative collages and accompanying narratives, responding to a central question for the future of urbanism: how can we rethink the relationship between the built and natural environments?

Their projects reframed this relationship as more than engineering for human protection. Instead,

they highlighted opportunities to foster symbiosis, strengthen ecological systems, and create spaces that elevate qualitative human experiences. The outcomes ranged from grounded sustainable proposals to bold, imaginative visions, sparking meaningful dialogue about urban design's role in environmental resilience.

This workshop emphasized the power of interdisciplinary collaboration and speculative design in tackling global challenges. It stands as a platform for rethinking urban futures—one that imagines innovative, symbiotic, and sustainable relationships between cities and their natural systems.



