

# **Drowned in Neretva River**

**Letters to a river  
transformed by war**

**By Jonas Langbein, Armina Pilav  
and Damir Uglijen, Un-war space lab**

## Archifutures

Dear Neretva,

This is the second time that I am writing to you. I am sorry that it took me so long. In my dreams, and not only, I wandered about your stream bed, organic formations, rocks, plants, animals and anything aquatic that is related to you. Your underwater world is without humans in flesh and blood but is filled with material traces of their everyday lives and achievements, traces that are destroying your ecological balance and proposing new radical environments.

Drowned in Neretva — me, you, temporary war bridges, a lot of iron, plastic bag animals, blankets and a wardrobe, more plastic bags, books, supermen, cables, bullets.

The first time I wrote to you, I asked different questions that came to my mind after I walked on your banks. I was so attracted by the greenish colour of your water, by the sounds of the stream. I carefully observed the shapes of your flow. Immersing my hands and feet in your cold water, I wanted to become you. I wanted to become a river.

Instead, my organic transformations have to wait.

I noticed that many things changed for you. I also changed — I am still looking for our relationship — but I do not want to become you anymore. That was my anticipation of your past excluding external and internal violence on you. Any human attempt to become a river brought you in this environmental danger that you are going through.

Forget some parts from my first letter, I am not interested any more to know how you archive all the human materials violently drowned in you, like the bullets. But I am longing to know how you “live with” and “think with” these materials.

Finally, and if I think deeper, there is still something important from my first letter that you should know: if I will ever have a daughter I will call her Neretva.

With love,  
Armina

## Un-war space lab

Un-war space lab is led by Armina Pilav, a researcher in ecologies of violent spatial transformations and lecturer at the Department of Landscape Architecture, The University of Sheffield. She received the Marie Curie Fellowship for her Un-war Space research (2016-18) developed at the Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment at TU Delft.

Damir Ugljen is an independent researcher, working in the fields of archaeology, social anthropology and spatial inquiry.

Jonas Langbein is an architect working on other forms of human cohabitation through architectural projects about inclusion, communication, care, more-than-human relations and living together.

*Opposite:* The Neretva River, Bosnia and Herzegovina.  
Image: Anna Saracco

The city of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina developed along the Neretva river. It was connected by nine bridges which, along with the river banks, were important social spaces before the Bosnian war (1992-95) violently transformed them. The destruction of the bridges – including the famous Old Bridge, built by the Ottomans – led to the construction of temporary war bridges that embodied traumas from the inhabitants' survival strategies.

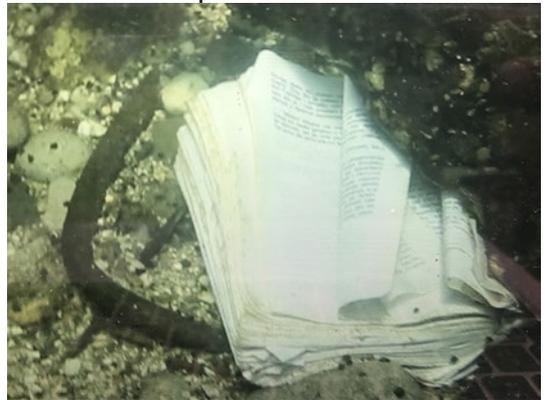


During the Bosnian War all the main bridges connecting the city were destroyed. The inhabitants of Mostar, together with the army, built temporary bridges across the Neretva from what materials they could find, including debris, in order to reconnect the two sides. Photo: Jakub Hadžić

The ecosystem of the Neretva also changed, not just in environmental terms, but in its spatial and social roles as well. As a result of the war, the river habitat became a depository for its inorganic detritus: pieces of exploded bombs, remnants of temporary bridges and other debris. Since then, the hybrid ecosystem of the river has continued to evolve.

*Drowned in Neretva River* is a collection of letters written to the river with the aim of documenting the ecological, political and material transformations caused by the war.

## Archifutures



Un-war space lab uses varying media, psychospaciality and radical observations to explore ecologies of transformations of rivers, land and related natural forms, architectures and society during and after the wartime. Our aim with this project is to “think with” the Neretva and document her hybrid condition through narratives on architecture, nature, mapping and underwater archaeology. ■

Our underwater research investigating new environments created by the forced coexistence of fish, bullets, plastic bags, iron, books, algae and other material in the river (May 2018).  
Video stills: Armina Pilav