

Buoyant Life: Floating Urbanities Adrift in the Archipelagic Imaginary

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Abstract

Against ecologically modernist calls for the building of floating cities in the name of climate-proofing littoral futures, and this work critically engages with travelling technopolitical dreams for building with or on water in rapidly submerging coastal landscapes. We ask how buoyancy serves as a metaphor and method with which to contemplate areas as relational entanglements of the urban-amphibious in archipelagic Southeast Asia(s), while drawing on exclusionary practices of municipal placemaking. Foregrounding both grandiose and small-scale projects in the globalist wet dreams of a floating infrastructural future, we illustrate how policymakers struggle to contend with their own narratives of an amphibious vernacular past, often through archipelagic riparian imaginaries that reinforce prevailing modernist terra-centric urban planning biases and readings of watery inundation.

Keywords

Floating cities; coastal climate adaptation; amphibious architecture and design; infrastructural politics; Indonesia

Introduction

This engagement explores the global circulations of speculative visions around buoyant urban design and planning, connecting diverse sites across archipelagic Asia and beyond. We begin by reflecting on the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose formative work influenced poetics and imagination, the philosophy of science, and the phenomenology of space:

If we compose a poem about a house, it frequently happens that the most flagrant contradictions come to wake us from our doldrums of concepts, as philosophers would say, and free us from our utilitarian geometrical notions . . . Solidity is achieved by an imaginary dialectics. ([Bachelard \[1958\] 1964](#)).

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Bachelard's reflection gestures to the instability of form, suggesting that even the most grounded structures rest upon imaginative buoyancies. By unsettling the rigidities of architectural modernism, he reminds us that the materialities of the city — its walls, grids, and shorelines — are contingent and open to reconfiguration. Through this lens of buoyancy, we examine how submerging urban littorals, often situated at the margins of abandonment and overdevelopment, generate new understandings of areas as relational entanglements. How might archipelagic histories and terra-aqueous milieus shape contemporary infrastructural projects while rethinking urban materiality?

In recent years, grand ecologically-modernist visions of floating cities, along with smaller-scale buoyant structures, have emerged as powerful symbols for 'climate-proofing' urban futures in an era of rising seas and climate solutionism. Long before the UN-Habitat's (2022) unerring call for ushering in a new age of sustainable floating cities, oceanic spaces have been sites of intense socio-technological and geopolitical intervention — from buoyant constructions facilitating oil, gas, and mineral extraction, to underwater communication cables, maritime military installations, and latterly floating islands (Steinberg 1999; Simpson and Sheller 2022). Modernist buoyant infrastructural construction remains a subset of conventional marine engineering and naval architectural practice. In comparison to land reclamation and artificial island-making that have historically endured as practices of coastal city-making (Roy 2011; Anand 2023), buoyant design and its speculative experiments may appear as a relatively quiet(er) revolution against other broader practices of littoral territorialisation such as land reclamation.

Nascent promises around floating cities do not merely presage socio-technical innovations. They hold imaginative sway, particularly among planners, on the very un/remaking of littoral urbanity and what offshoring everyday life may seem like. Arguably, at the same time, their materialist im/possibilities appear socio-economically and politically conservative against the unfolding climate crises and a form of planetary urbanisation deeply mired by intersectional inequalities as speculative city-making continues to perpetuate the same neoliberal market logics.

Volatile terra-aqueous landscapes of the Indo-Malay-Philippine archipelago remain conflictual critical zones characterised by colonial and modernist legacies of delta engineering (see Morita and Jensen 2017; Krause 2017; Ley 2017). These sites bear witness to longer histories of amphibious 'vernacular' art, architecture, and design, replete with houseboats, *rumah panggung* and *rumah lanting* abodes for example (Schefold et al. 2008). Java-led Indonesian institutional practices of modernist urban planning have remained terra-centric. In tandem with the global surge in waterfront expansion and revitalisation in metropolises of stark disparity (Siriwardane-de Zoysa and Amoo-Adare 2021), Indonesian planners have historically favoured the movement of quotidian and subaltern life away from water, resulting in evictions of the urban poor from coastal and riparian edges (Mutiah 2023), to political narratives legitimising the relocation of Indonesia's administrative capital to Borneo (Widodo 2023), alongside the heralding of hard infrastructural and geo-engineering interventions such as seawall construction and land reclamation as part of lucrative real estate development (Wade 2019).

Drawing on theories of infrastructure in STS, coastal anthropology, and more-than-human geographies of the city, this engagement interrogates area-based entanglements around ‘buoyancy’ and buoyant construction as a discursive and praxis-led set of speculative placemaking practices, in this context nested in distinct readings of archipelagic identity and spatiality. Based on qualitative interviews, observational data, and archival research conducted between 2019 and 2023, our study connects sites and their entanglements of knowledge and practice across Jakarta, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Banjarmasin (South Kalimantan), Singapore, and the Netherlands. Thus, the creative emergence of terra-aqueous infrastructuring in their very sites of flotation is traced by ‘following the infrastructure’ (Cowen 2019), and assemblages of dreamscapes, blueprints, construction materials, architects, capital, knowledge brokers, policymakers, implementation agents, local residents and more. While buoyancy can be treated as a distinct category of the amphibious, our interest is on how far terra-centric visions of planning are being challenged by newer metaphors and methods of buoyant building and habitation on water across spaces of intertidal flux and volatility, making the *terra firma* seem elementally redundant. In seeing water as ‘a conduit for living’ (Bowles et al. 2019, 7), such material formations reproduce and challenge terra-centric logics of place, space, and everyday relations of dwelling in spaces of watery submergence.

This intervention begins by exploring early modernist infrastructural histories and what discursively appears to be a contemporary ‘buoyant turn’ in global infrastructural experimentation at new forms of littoral city-making. We depict pluralising visions around floating cities, megaprojects and briefly explore small-scale ‘aquatectural’ interventions and entrepreneurial initiatives. We then trace the translocal process of materialisation of a two-storied floating library as a state-driven prototyping project in Semarang City (northern Java), located in a fisher *kampung* and an urban poor community with a history of forced eviction. Throughout, we explore how buoyant material cultures – mixing the ecologically modernist and at times the muted vernacular – are enlisted in serving contradictory aspirational futures of Javanese planners in the engineering sciences.

Urbanising Buoyant Becomings

Floating futuristic infrastructures and their blueprints can be analysed as a global infrastructure that is both generative and a product of unequal geographies of placemaking. Emerging research continue to offer insights of how technopolitical genealogies of knowledge-making have evolved and travelled over time and space. The industrialisation and urbanisation of the ocean as it unfolds remains a central backdrop, harking from imperial and colonial encounters to the Cold War and post capitalist decades culminating in elite-driven libertarian movements such as Seasteading (Adams 2018; Steinberg et al. 2012; Richardson 2019; Simpson 2022). Historically some of the oldest blueprints implicating visions around floating cities in postwar Japan of the sixties and seventies, such as architect Kiyonori Kikutake’s vision of *Unabara* or the Sea City (Huebner 2022), while unfolding experimental knowledge between the engineering sciences, design, art and architecture, alongside quotidian forms of experimentation continue to traverse cognitive, spatiotemporal, sociocultural and disciplinary boundaries.

Drawing inspiration from what Neri Oxman (2016) terms as the ‘Age of Entanglement’, this work privileges a granular understanding of enmeshments between postcolonial histories, technology, and politics, turning to Indonesia as empirical ground. Prompting tighter conversations between STS genealogies connecting plural Asias (see Fischer 2016), quotidian and technoscientific ‘amphibious’ experimentation (e.g. Wakefield 2019; Elinoff 2021), and writing on archipelagic modernities (Amir 2017), we bring to question the un/making of areas through infrastructures. Foregrounding Susan Leigh Star’s (1999, 380) influential work on the social and epistemic life of infrastructures—her argument that infrastructures are ‘layered systems of substrates’ whose operations depend on often invisible relations of maintenance and labour—areas are conceptualised here through interrelated itineraries and traversals of both terrestrial and aquatically-oriented technologies, blueprints, speculative materials, and labouring bodies. Terrestrial infrastructures in delta landscapes therefore remain irrevocably bound to their ‘dynamic interplay with aquatic infrastructures’ (Morita 2016, 136).

The archipelagic can be understood in several ways: as a ‘group of islands’ viewed beyond continental terms from offshore perspectives (Volland and Ching 2024, vi); as a geopolitical construct shaped by postcolonial historiographies of statehood and maritime identity, such as Indonesia’s *wasawan nusantara* (Ford and Lyons 2009); as a relational metageography of more-than-human connections, fragments, and circuits (Kintzi 2024); and as an elementally fluid third space shaped by nondualist ontologies, exemplified in the Indo-Malay concept of *tanah-air* (terra-aqueous). In littoral Southeast Asia, riverine, estuarine, and deltaic ‘amphibious’ settlements have long stood as culturally romanticised and fetishized figures of enduring tradition. As an ontological category, amphibiousness continues to be loosely conceived within architecture and the engineering sciences, while connecting disparate riverine to salty and brackish intertidal worlds. Our analysis not only treats amphibiousness a category of elemental intermixing – of human and more-than-human relations of inhabitation at the interstices of sediment and water, the surface and subterranean (Gagné and Rasmussen 2016). Amphibiousness remains a ‘relational achievement, linking entities whose characteristics are never singularly given but always enacted across emergent configurations . . . of politics and science, materiality and imagination.’ (Jensen 2017, 226).

Emergent scholarship seeks to untangle material relations and flows between diverse *forms* of amphibious being-in-the world and to examine these quotidian lives of in-betweenness. The many different ways in which ‘water is experienced, narrated and understood’ (Bowles et al. 2019, 5), call for more nuanced explorations of sensorial phenomena and their embodied experiences differentiating submergence, buoyancy, and numerous ways of sensing and being with water.¹ While diverse kinds of water, flows and

¹Tidal variances and other socio-ecological factors aside, how might the material relations of stilted *rumah panggung* fisher dwellers along northern Jakartan urban shores flanking the Java Sea differ from riparian dwellers inhabiting floating bamboo-based *lanting* houses along Banjarmasin’s Martapura River, or increasingly sedentarised *Bajau* collectives across the Indo-Malay Archipelago that reside in houseboats for example? Here, buoyancy and the

fixities are remade as sociotechnical artefacts and embody a multiplicity of historically inflected socionatures ([Strang 2004](#)), the affective, sensorial *experience* of water continues to be materially and symbolically remade through objects, social relations, and everyday practices.

Buoyancy is usually applied to subjects that float or rise to the surface; or as an elemental material liquid or gas, that keeps a body afloat or causes it to rise. As materiality and metaphor, buoyancy indicates lightness, and, figuratively, a sense of liveliness and freedom of/in being. Yet, buoyancy does not embody the sensibilities of free, open drift – a metaphor increasingly used across the blue humanities when conceptualising the agentive quality of recalcitrant matters of waste such as toxic spills, marine plastic and other kinds of flotsam and jetsam. Drawing from old French *boie* or Middle Dutch *boeye* meaning to chain or fetter something to a spot, buoyancy as a term signifies objects and life forms that are nestled in place and time.

Meanwhile, urban spaces are themselves never quite spatially bound. Urbanity – as a fickle concept – comprises mobile assemblages of infrastructures, social relations, practices, objects, capital, and its more-than-human life. The rhythms and circulations that characterise the contemporary city as a space of transit and drift renders it amenable to multiple forms of material and metaphoric flotations – from ideologies and capital to itinerant traders, and migrant bodies to whimsical flâneurs, kinetic elites and more. Furthermore, the entanglements of deltaic cities read through circulations of socio-technical imaginaries, knowledge brokers, and materialities of intertidal volatility continually un/make not only their socio-spatialities and relations of power ([Dewan 2022](#)). These entanglements of traversal foreground and forge radically new sensory, embodied and often aspirational utopic experiences of urbanity and settlement that foretell of a ‘city-ness to come’ ([Jazeel 2023, 258](#)), while being haunted by their own antithetical futures of cataclysm and hope.

Engineering Wet Dreams

Architecture and the engineering sciences have often conventionally perceived buoyancy as a facet of amphibious design through multiple structural forms. The American-based Buoyancy Foundation, drawing inspiration from vernacular knowledges spanning Louisiana and the Mekong Delta, designs structures on dry land that are capable of rising with floodwaters. Fashioned as a form of flood resilience, buoyancy is tactically enlisted for terrestrially grounded projects fixed in place. In contemporary articulations of Japanese ‘liquid architecture’ built form benefits from an ‘acute awareness of flows’ marrying notions of seasonal, spatial and material transit, transience with the ephemeral, thus defying any fixities afforded to an environment patterned by seismic activity and tidal rhythms ([Ota in Brownell 2011, 145](#)).

amphibious-grounded might be put into conversation in ways that transcend calcified conceptual boundaries between fresh- and saltwater, the grounded and the fluid, the hinterland and the littoral – all of which pattern kaleidoscopic conceptualisations of the amphibious.



Against varied templates at buoyant world-making, global infrastructural projects appear to have taken the material fixities of grounded living onto watery surfaces. Their spectacular megaprojects such as the Shimizu Corporation's Green Float and the Dutch Docklands-led Maldives Floating City, are clustered in maritime Asia. Vaguely alluding to the visual aesthetics of biomimicry, lily pads and brain coral respectively, they are perhaps best exemplified by their aerial formations, not unlike neoliberal projects at artificial island-making in the Arabian Gulf. The UN-Habitat, Busan Metropolitan City, together with the New York-based bluetech company OCEANIX and its transnational architectural partners dues its construction in South Korea as not only 'the world's first prototype of a resilient sustainable community' but as 'humanity's next frontier'. Global infrastructures of this kind obscure the often racialised labouring bodies enlisted in precarious construction work at the intersections of vertical land-based heights and watery depths. What is being frontiered are ecologically modernist chimeras: massive modular forms championing market-led visions of sustainability, urban disaster-proof resilience, and carbon-neutral lifestyles tailored to serve mobile elites.

Not all technopolitical experiments at floating city-making embrace visions of grand global infrastructure. What kinds of flotations matter for the quest of affordable, liveable social housing in quintessentially splintered cities across the global north and south, stratified by social relations of power and urban belonging, remains an enduring question. Architect Kunlé Adeyemi's short-lived Makoko Floating School² in Lagos and the Dutch-based floating City App³ which is in the business of offering 'small scale instant solutions' to what it pejoratively sees as 'wet slums' are cases in point. Meanwhile, transcontinental knowledge networks like Paving the Waves, the Network for Amphibious and Floating Architecture, Design and Engineering (ICAADe) and the World Conference for Floating Solutions (WCFS), driven in part by the Society for Floating Solutions (SSFS) call for flotation as an urgently needed political corrective to extractive and ecologically destructive practices of sand mining and land reclamation. Based out of Singapore, one of the world's most densely terraformed city-states, SSFS founders argue for the leveraging of Singapore as a regional centre of global offshore petrochemical refining supported by a postwar history of buoyant industrial infrastructural formation. As a Singaporean representative of the SSFS once reflected:

...it's time to repurpose our decades of scientific knowledge of marine engineering and naval architecture. When we think of living and working space, we lack the imagination to divide the city into two interrelated

² Adeyemi's award-winning Makoko Floating School was constructed on an informal settlement on the Lagos waterfront using prefabricated material intended to serve 100 elementary schoolchildren. The controversial construction was in operation for just four months and lasted approximately three years before collapsing amid a storm surge.

³ One of the enduring legacies of Makoko might have been the mushrooming of fintech embedded businesses and design initiatives that sought to upgrade informal settlements across flood-prone city spaces in the global south.

spheres. So let us think of new possibilities like building floating offices in our ample coastal waters and returning to land to live. (Interview, SSFS, 18 April 2023).

Here, a dualistic vision of urban life that divides the elemental is engendered; unlike in projects like Seasteading, urbanity is not entirely offshored. However, islanded enclaves, whether on floating foundations or reclaimed land materialize in two distinctly polarised, interrelated forms. First, as paradisaic, utopic spaces of secluded living and excess consumption. Second, as racialised, classed, and gendered spaces of social segregation, as in the case of Singapore's early mass-scale experiments at offshoring the brown bodies of thousands of blue-collar male foreign workers (mostly of South Asian descent) during the Covid-19 pandemic, deemed as being pathogenic, in repurposed floating dormitories ([Otsuka 2020](#)). Somewhere between such sites of high-value speculation and landscapes of floating social housing lies Semarang City's floating library, a symbol of both aspirational globalist infrastructure-making and one that attempted to incrementally redress urban histories of shoreline eviction and political struggle.

Floating with Our Roots: Archipelagic Imaginaries of Amphibious Living

Located in the coastal floodplains of the *Pantura*⁴ region, Semarang City has long been politicised for its rapid land subsidence,⁵ tidal inundation, and unplanned coastal densification. Protective practices at displacing water through 'dry urban planning' were established as a colonially-mandated approach by Dutch colonists that Javanese planners have continued ([Kurniawan and Suharini 2021](#)). The industrial appetite for water and lack of centralised public water provision has spurred massive groundwater extraction, together with high-density construction in a colonial city founded on alluvial soils and wetlands ([Batubara et al. 2021, 113–115](#); [Karmilah et al. 2023](#)). Remedial sociotechnical measures often dovetailing upon Dutch-influenced polders and hard infrastructural measures have historically been privileged. Today, Javanese planners often pit 'wet approaches' against dry, land-based protective infrastructuration.

Paradigmatic approaches to diverse forms of wet design draw on global visions of floating infrastructures in which modernist utopian visions of coastal living that are nevertheless reimagined against idealised, nostalgic perspectives on nativist-historic pasts of amphibious traditionalism. Piloting floating infrastructure as an alternative way of urban amphibious survival was first proposed by the Head of the Research and Development Agency of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR), Dr. Antasena.⁶

⁴ *Pantura* is a portmanteau of the Indonesian words '*Pantai Utara*' or the Northern Coast which specifically refers to the area of the northern coast of Java which had been the commercial centers since the pre-colonial times but grew into importance after the construction of the Great Post Road during the governorship of the Napoleonic Dutch East Indies, Governor Herman Willem Daendels (1808–1811) (see [Nas and Pratiwo 2002](#)).

⁵ Semarang, along with Jakarta and Tianjin in China are classified as having one of the fastest land subsidence rates of 20–30 mm/year ([Wu et al. 2022, 7](#)). Global sea level rise of 0.1–0.6 cm per year in the *Pantura* region ([Andreas et al. 2017, 6](#)) exacerbate the rapid land submergence in the city.

⁶ A pseudonym.

Paradoxically, the key inspiration behind Semarang's buoyant experiment was Ijsberg, Amsterdam's newest residential quarter, a highly gentrified enclave bearing little trace of the city's historically iconic boathouse collectives.

Having visited Ijsberg, Antasena envisioned replicating a hyper-modernist interpretation of 'Dutch-styled urban amphibious living' in a bid to explore alternatives to capital-intensive coastal armouring. Alongside like-minded engineers at the Research & Development Agency (R&D) of PUPR it was anticipated that floating infrastructure would reconnect Java with a loosely essentialist 'archipelagic' amphibious past of building and dwelling between land and water, in which 'every bit of Indonesian territory was put to use'. As a PUPR official argued:

Is Indonesia a maritime or continental country? Now, how many maritime technologies are being used for housing development in Indonesia? For a maritime country, why are there few marine technological innovations used in solving housing problems? (Interview, PUPR Engineer, 24 February 2023).

Planners invoked the term 'local wisdom' as a shorthand reference to an archipelagic imaginary, loosely set against backdrop of Indo-Malay meanings around *tanah-air*, the terra-aqueous. Suggesting vernacular *lanting* houses of riparian Banjarmasin City in South Kalimantan, PUPR engineers focused on the importance of sociotechnical resilience where buildings were made to withstand fire and seismic movements, while gradually shifting community-based apprehensions of inhabiting intertidal waters of immense volatility. The archipelagic stood in reference to a distinct geospatial formation and resource-centric morphology, in which 'every part of land and sea' could be utilised in its territorial capacity.

Ultimately, the piloting of an infrastructural prototype was planned in one of Semarang's most precarious and politically contentious littoral sites: the fisher settlement of Tambak Lorok, a site of mass eviction and urban struggle and similar to other urban kampongs, as 'informal racialized sprawling settlements of rural migrants' established during Dutch colonialism (Colombijn 2014, 73-74). In 2016, Indonesia's first floating library was completed in Tambak Lorok with a grand opening ceremony. A year prior to that, President Jokowi had inaugurated the settlement as *Kampung Bahari* with the hope of distancing it as a site of political strife and deprivation in public imagination. When PUPR agents were tasked with 'revitalising' the kampung, community leaders suggested a floating children's library that served as a multifunctional public space in the rebranded settlement.

Fitted with solar panels and bio-composting toilets, its foundation was made of fabricated recycled Styrofoam developed by B-Foam, a Bandung-based company, as an alternative to the historic use of bamboo



as a floating material.⁷ To its makers and designers, Styrofoam—recycled from ‘found’ objects and waste collected from waterways—symbolised not only a sustainable construction material but also the promise of a new material culture: one oriented toward earthquake-resistant and buoyant forms of building. If Styrofoam could be seen as a new material provocateur and B-Foam’s visionaries and engineers as geological agents of the Anthropocene, Styrofoam appears as ‘both antagonist and protagonist at once’ in assembling a buoyant speculative landscape ([Elinoff 2021, 176](#)).

During subsequent visits to Tambak Lorok in June 2022 and February 2023, we found not a bustling library filled with children’s books, but a two-storied floating A-frame building in slow decay, housing empty cobwebbed shelves. A connecting bridge had collapsed during a recent flood, while the structure itself bobbed solidly over the water’s edge (see [figure 1](#)). Beset by fragmented institutional responsibilities and financial constraints over repair and maintenance,⁸ it exists as yet another costly, top-down, state-funded white elephant undertaken with little earnest community participation.

The PUPR’s terra-centric planning visions point to two interrelated paradoxes. Java’s experiments at floating urbanity were set adrift in a socio-legal landscape in which regulations governing water-based tenurial security barely exist. Article 47 of the Indonesian Basic Agrarian Law of 1960 (*Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria*) only allows citizens to use ‘natural’ water bodies (sea, lakes, rivers, etc.) for resource extraction such as fishing and mining without ownership rights or customary entitlements for building and dwelling on waterways. In turn, Tambak Lorok inhabitants expressed disinterest in the idea of investing in any form of buoyant life, let alone support the afterlife of a project for which no supportive financial resources could be secured for its upkeep.

At the same time, planners acknowledged that the narrow legal framing of property-as-land was to the detriment of kampong dwellers, when claiming compensation for lost, submerged sites of aquaculture, farming, and residential use. What was discursively pitted by planners was the deeply polarising question of whether to ‘stay and float’ or to ‘abandon and relocate’, illustrating how the inundated littoral is read as an absent or erased spatiality, rendering spaces of submergence tenurially spurious. Beyond narrowly framed

⁷ Historically, bamboo has been enlisted in vernacular forms of buoyant construction, as in the case of riverine *lanting* structures. Bamboo materiality stands to represent diverse meanings – a building material regulated by the Dutch due to its perceived inferiority. During the Suharto dictatorship, the overharvesting of bamboo resulted in a moratorium.

⁸ Responsibilities for maintenance lay with the central government in cooperation with local community leaders. This includes financing the maintenance of the building. It was planned that after initial activities were held, the authority would be transferred to the municipal government of Semarang. However, since 2016, both the central government and the municipal government refused to process the authority transfer, leaving the maintenance of the building in limbo with the local superintendent taking on the responsibility to privately fund its maintenance, wherever possible. (Interview notes from Tambak Lorok, February 16, 2023).

socio-legal quagmires, residents still remained wary of tidal storm surges, while at the same time living under the shadow of forced state eviction. Meanings of desired 'solidity' were twofold: stable, non-moveable structures that could weather a storm, while at the same time offering a sense of longer-term tenurial security. The devastating floods of mid-2022, further compounded existing mistrust towards the state, as residents beseeched the municipal government to seal off urban watercourses in a timely manner.



[Figure 1](#). Collapsed aspirations in slow ruin in February 2023 (Source: Authors' own).

What was ambitiously introduced were high-maintenance and ecologically modernist features that barely addressed the existing concerns residents had about dwelling on water. Planners themselves, invoking lofty scripts on resilience, alluded to tendencies of 'archipelagic forgetting' and a much-needed nativist-nationalist revival in buoyant building as a means with which to bolster an otherwise culturally essentialised form of 'adaptation' in waterlogged sites. As an ontological experiment, it was far removed from the aesthetic sensibilities that vernacular design afforded to Indonesian amphibious-buoyant structures such as *lanting* houses, an unwavering symbol of the archipelagic 'traditional amphibious' in the imagination of Java-based planners. Yet, its discursive discordance lies in the fact that *lanting* abodes as a potent speculative symbol of vernacular amphibious design to be retrofitted accordingly is primarily associated with riparian spaces as opposed to densely built subsiding coastal landscapes battered by erratic intertidal ebbs and flows.

Quo Vadis: Speculative Drifts

If the figure of the floating city stands to be taken as a speculative, promissory leitmotif for climate-changed coastal urbanities, the ‘buoyant turn’ in architecture, design, urban planning, and engineering resists singular visions of an amphibious urbanity – whether as infrastructure tethered in place or as mobile flotillas, vernacular retrofits, or as futuristic, far-fetched innovations. Taking buoyancy as metaphor and method for contemplating area-based entanglements, we return to Bachelard’s ([1958] 1964) opening quotation critiquing modernist, Western-centric preoccupations with solidity and stability, which continue to haunt globalist visions of buoyant solutionism.

Modernist visions of buoyancy remain Janus-faced: universalist claims of climate-proofing new futures are countered by concerns over emerging forms of gentrification and segregation. Celebrated as a less ecologically destructive alternative to land reclamation and a much-needed corrective to land scarcity and social housing, buoyant assemblages also foreshadow intensified practices of racialized and classed dispossession. Situated between the spectacular and the ordinary, the elite-driven and the justice-led, buoyant interventions risk depoliticisation, potentially charting deeply polarising pathways.

The entangled character of Southeast Asia’s maritime cities in the *longue durée* are often narrated as being intimately knitted through circulations of ideas, human and more-than-human agents. Yet, how might we think more broadly of areas as relational entanglements which may (or may not) materialize through the flows and hybridisations that barely leave visible traces and tracks depicting intimate histories of sojourn? In this example, an experimental floating library (inspired by a watery quarter of high-end real estate in Amsterdam), remains as imaginatively distanced and unhinged from the localised politics of tenurial struggle in urban Java. The historic, political and aspirational recast areas as ‘knotty’ entanglements emerging from transoceanic legacies of the Cold War, trajectories of resource extraction, and the remaking of newer forms of classed, racialised labour. Similar to sedimental lives in motion (see [Suhaimi et al. 2025](#)), we call upon to think of entanglements beyond elemental buoyancy as a civilisational hope that rises above the swirling tides of a submerged urban Anthropocene, promising foundational stability which at the same time displaces water through impermeability that defies leakiness.

What ontological provocations might thinking-with buoyancy afford, particular as entanglements that un/make areas? As layered infrastructural multiplicities with their own afterlives, urban centres also remain constitutive of diverse kinds of flotations – of blueprints, technologies, capital, knowledge carriers, technological brokers and more. Submergence was narrated as more than just the swallowing of the *terra-firma*. Generative of new material transformations, it was not simply a matter of dreamscaped Dutch design aesthetics that travelled to its postcolony only to fall into a state of material and moral decrepitude. At first glance, Semarang’s floating library reveals how structural inequalities and asymmetric socio-legal and political dependencies, set these very experimental materialisations adrift. The irony of situating a pilot project on flotation in Tambak Lorok was that this partially submerged kampong was already amphibious, afloat through multiple temporalities of more-than-seasonal and daily rhythmic tidal incursions that



turned its coastal fringes into a veritable waterworld for several hours each day. To planners, buoyancy was distantly framed as a highly-situated adaptive practice, a curious elemental feature nestled in a terrestrially-read archipelago that seemed to be forgetting the solutionist magic of its own buoyant amphibiousness.

We therefore call for more granular explorations and situated theorisations that not only decentre modernist, western-centric understandings and sensibilities around buoyancy, but also foreground modernist-vernacular encounters around transcultural, infrastructural creolisation. Embodied, multisensory dimensions of volumetric dwelling – at the interstices of land and water, the surface and the subterrains that remake archipelagic imaginaries – offer fertile ground in un/thinking notions of ‘area’. Moreover, this work serves as an invitation at pluralising situated meanings and experiences of dwelt-in buoyancy, buoyant beginnings, and unmoored culminations.

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