



How Building a Bridge Taught Me About Being a Global Citizen

I try to be a responsible New Yorker, as a small step toward being a good global citizen. I live the old adage, “think global, act local.” But the world is so big, so complicated, so varied, that it’s hard to feel connected and part of the solution. And yet, the terrifying backdrop of global politics, the ugly rhetoric of presidential candidates, the city’s insane cost of living and my inability to keep up with it, takes its toll.

I moved to New York in the late 90s for the same reason so many come to its shores: its crackling creative energy. Brooklyn became home because my best friend from college grew up in Midwood, and after sharing her parents’ garage for a summer, Manhattan seemed an expensive world away. One day as we were unpacking boxes, another New York transplant, Hal, gave me an enduring piece of advice. “If you ever feel beat down by the city, go for a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge,” he said. “The skyline and the water will give you a new perspective. It always works for me.”

Coming from a small college town where I felt I didn't fit in (like so many other New Yorkers), here was a patch of asphalt where I could become anyone I wanted to be, or at least the person that was stuck trying to fit into my hometown culture. And so I did and was. I was a designer for many years before pivoting towards art and public projects. Working as an art director for *Metropolis* magazine from 2003 to 2007 gave me a front row seat to one of the biggest architectural and planning booms the city had seen in the past 100 years, and made me realize how much I loved the ideas of cities. And although I also believed New York was a city amongst cities—special in its brand of intellectual and physical vigor—I left the city four times between 1997 and 2009, each time with the potential of no return.

And yet, I returned this last time, in 2011, ready to admit that I'm too much of a New Yorker to live anywhere else. Having lived in Austin, Toronto, San Francisco, and the Netherlands—places I love very much— I missed the very particular social MO of the city: New Yorkers are uniquely open to human contact. In these other cities, my eye contact was rebuffed, my smile was overlooked, my irrepressible need to trade thoughts on the drunk Santa boarding the bus completely ignored. Seems it's just not something strangers in other cities do. Turns out, I love New York because when a woman trips on the West 4th street subway stairs, everyone near her stops to help: they ask her if she's OK, offer to call for help, collect the pocket change that exploded out of her pockets and inform her when they are placing it back in her pocket. They are there for her, not because they stand to gain anything, but because the city is hard enough, for all of us. The guys who run Ziad's (of *Motherless Brooklyn* fame) around the corner from my first apartment still remember me after 10 years, ask me if I've been working out (we used to go to the same sports club), and after we've caught up a little bit with each other, I'm offered a free coffee, light not sweet. They remember that, too.

To the shock and incredulity of our family and friends from out of town, we all live in apartments that are impossibly small and deeply imperfect. We do so because Jane Jacobs was right. The mixed and vital density of the city offers us an expanded home—from our next-door neighbors, to the businesses in our neighborhood, to the farther flung territories of our daily routines and social centers. It's a city made of real people, people who will engage.

It's also a city made from and on the water. The city charter designates that all waterfront structures must be approved by the Small Business Services. This is because once upon a time, all the business conducted in the city was on the water. The unique geography of this city was its destiny. The special interplay of climate, land and water created optimal conditions for people to call this place home, providing food, shelter, protection, transportation, and more than enough coastline for the commercial exchange of goods.

For the first 10 years I lived in New York, I may have registered the historic role of the water to the city's founding, but I didn't know its extent. I never thought about the water, except that, being a Brooklynite, the water defined my difference, my outerboroughness. The water was something I had to get over or under every day to work in Manhattan.

Having spent a significant amount of time in Shockoe Bottom's cobble-stoned flood zone of the James River in Richmond, Virginia, Red Hook always felt like home to me. And after crossing underneath the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, it seemed there was water at the end of most streets. Before I moved to Red Hook, I never felt before that I was living on islands, or that the water lived in the city. And that was exciting until, in the summer heat I found myself teased by it. Red Hook has a tiny beach, one of the few places one can wade into the water, but I'd been warned about the water's toxicity, and a horror list of things that could happen to me if I swam in it. There was so much water, but nothing that could be done with it.

A converging fascination with Governors Island and Buttermilk Channel, the waterway between it and Brooklyn, lead me to the offices of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Walt Whitman's old newspaper. There, I read about a walkable sandbar that once joined the two that included a reference to farmers leading cows across that shallow water. That image was so powerful: the idea of being able to roll up my pant legs and walk out into the harbor sparked an irrepressible idea: I would build a floating bridge to remake that walk. My feet wouldn't get wet, but I would move across the Channel on my own volition, free from the subway and ferry schedules, and feel the water beneath me. We could be in conversation with one another. From the first spark of the idea, I could see the bridge in my mind; it would be a simple floating structure, about as wide as the boardwalk on the Brooklyn Bridge. It would be a new kind of Brooklyn Bridge created by a New Yorker for all her fellow New Yorkers. I called it Citizen Bridge.

Artists have all sorts of processes: mine can be described as “concrete journalism.” To understand the permissions system of the waterways, the issues at stake, structural engineering and hydrodynamics, I reached out to everyone I knew who I thought might know someone with that knowledge. Mary Mattingly, artist of the visionary project Waterpod, connected me with the U.S. Coast Guard. I met with them in the first week and showed an early collection of sketches outlining potential design approaches, ranging from bamboo to inflatable rafts to floating concrete and human-sized hamster balls. Without commenting on my sketches, they explained that Buttermilk Channel is a navigable waterway, meaning vessels are allowed to move through it, and that my project would obstruct navigation.

Because there is an alternate route around the western edge of Governors Island, they offered the possibility of closing Buttermilk Channel for a 24-hour period. They also unfolded the permitting process for a Marine Event—temporary water-based happenings like July 4th fireworks are permitted as Marine Events—which requires 135 days minimum to execute, including 60 days allotted for public comment. The residency on Governors Island I had just begun was about 145 days, so I left with those two pieces of information: I needed to understand the concerns of all those with interests on the waterways, and I had to work fast to design a modular floating structure that could be built on land and quickly installed.

Those first few months were an intensive education in understanding the basics of distance, materials, buoyancy, tides and currents. I made my own 1200-foot tape measure to understand just how long the bridge would have to span. Some calculations showed that it's about the same distance as six city blocks. I luckily found a bridge engineer who was excited by the idea and game to spend time teaching me some of these basic ideas over beers. I invited architects to my studio to brainstorm materials and construction techniques. I made more sketches and scoured the internet for ideas. Over the first six months, I'd built a community of practice around the project. I'd spoken with members of regulatory agencies, architects and bridge engineers, carpenters, members of the local maritime community, and teachers and students. Needless to say, halfway through those 135 days, I still had no final design, but I had learned enough to know that this was no six month project. I'd be lucky if it could be completed in six years.

Days after our team—a bridge engineer, a friend, and I—tested the first prototype at Red Hook's tiny beach, Superstorm Sandy devastated the neighborhood, and

countless others along the coastline. Flood waters are cruel in their capacity to fill every nook, crack and corner, and it takes a huge amount of labor to clean up after them. My experience of the togetherness and sense of shared purpose over those days and weeks in Red Hook was buoying. The destructive capacity of the water is great, but so is the human capacity for cooperation and support.

Water is necessarily cooperative. Whether it be on a boat, or after a flood, its force requires coordinated cooperation for survival. I've noticed this in studying sailing shanties, which were sung to synchronize a crew's labor—so that all members row at the same time or hoist sail lines with unified effort. I've also experienced this when working with students at the Harbor School on Governors Island, a high school whose curriculum is marine-based. Students, in addition to learning English and math, also study vessel operations, scuba diving, and aquaculture. Whenever they're on the dock or the water, the students cease to be teenagers and become a crew. Everyone has a role, and everyone works together for the good of the group. Mary Mattingly has remarked that being out on the water keeps everything in perspective. Whatever conflicts might be aboard, they are quickly forgotten in order to tend to the immediate needs of the vessel and the water.

Though scientists, activists and artists—including very close friends—have made climate change the focus of their work for many years now, Superstorm Sandy charted a new course in my awareness. It made me realize that New Yorkers are living in a sinking city. I find myself imagining the next flood—reminding myself that it's not a matter of *if*, but *when*. So day-to-day while I'm trying to mitigate my environmental footprint to help the climate, I also think about how it might change our daily lives in the city. Specifically, I'm thinking about the water. New York City turned its back on the water in the mid 20th century, and now it's coming back for us. But I don't consider this a dark prediction; there is an opportunity in this moment for all those who live in coastal cities.

We're in a moment of complete disconnection to the water. Interacting with the water was once a matter of course for New Yorkers—and for citizens of coastal cities everywhere. Fishing and gathering food, bathing one's body, travel, swimming for recreation: these were activities everyone engaged in. Growing up near the water meant knowing about tides and currents, the behaviors of fish, the implications of certain clouds, wind, or other storm predictors. It's a difficult negative feedback loop we're in: we're fearful of the water because we don't know about it, but the risk seems too high to engage with it to learn about it.

The opportunity I see in reclaiming the waterways as a public space is the renewed sense of citizenship rooted in place. Without a doubt we're global

citizens living in a shared political economy, which requires a certain amount of cosmopolitanism. But we're also citizens of a very particular place with very rich histories and provocative future possibilities. Accessing those future possibilities means relearning from history, and getting our hands—and feet—wet. It also means actively taking on “the future,” not as something that will inevitably happen to us, but as something that we, a group of people living together in a shared space, make together.

Building a bridge is my way of taking this idea on: it's bringing an idea inspired by history into conversation with the future. It is, in effect, an alternate future incarnate in steel and plywood, and a question about how we want to live on the water: what is both possible and preferable? And it shouldn't just be me asking that question. Everyone should be asking that question and should be empowered to turn to others for help when inspiration strikes. Innovation isn't owned by visionaries or corporations. It's in all of us, when we feel supported to express our wildest ideas.

The process of developing this temporary pedestrian bridge could also be called *Building A Thousand Tiny Bridges*—those between me and all those who have offered time, expertise, or ideas. It also includes the moments I've spent with the water: rowing a boat through Buttermilk Channel, sailing on large craft, wading in at Valentino Pier to test a prototype, kayaking, and helping businesses clean out oily, gritty floodwaters. It's changed my idea of what Citizenship means—an idea that I suppose is what's kept me in New York all along. Citizenship in a 21st century coastal city is the care and cooperation we show one another and our surroundings. Care is taking time to learn about one another (nature included). It's finding the courage to embrace the predictions and find the opportunity in them—to face uncertainty with an improvisational “yes, and....”

Last summer a team of nearly twenty—structural engineers, marine engineers, contract and environmental lawyers, architects, and advisors with experience in mobile art projects and city regulations—tested the first fully engineered prototype. We had spent eight months working on the re-design of the previous version so that it would withstand the tide, current, wave, and wind forces of the channel, while supporting the estimated foot traffic of nearly 8,000 people. On the day of the test, our team, assembled at 6 am under the Brooklyn sunrise, rushed to finish all the final details before the crane arrived to put the pieces together and into the water. I was so nervous, I felt nauseous. But I had nothing

to fear, because the team put their best expertise forward, and the section performed just as anticipated.

Before lifting the pieces out of the water, I was urged to stand on the section and be towed out into the harbor. Standing out there, on this (seemingly) simple set of platforms, moving in time with the gentle waves of the afternoon, I couldn't contain the emotion of the moment. I realized that I wasn't alone: the water was with me (not against me). It was just as powerful and intimate as I had been dreaming all these years. The generosity and enthusiasm of all those who I've met and who have willingly donated their time, coming together to bring the vision so far, is a clear symbol to me that—despite current economic and political rhetoric—we're living in a time of bridges, not walls.