

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Minneapolis, Minnesota, showing a wide river (the Mississippi) flowing through it. In the foreground, a large, curved parking lot is filled with cars. To the right, there are several large, multi-story brick buildings, possibly a university campus. In the background, a dense urban skyline with various skyscrapers is visible under a blue sky with some clouds. A bridge with a red and white structure spans the river in the middle ground.

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The cover image is aerial view of University of Minnesota East and West Bank campuses and the Mississippi River. Photographer Patrick O’Leary. Image via University of Minnesota.

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OBSERVING THE WATER LANDSCAPE IN GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

By Kristen Anderson

I am a student at the University of Minnesota studying political science and sustainability. In my liberal arts education, I have had plenty of opportunity and flexibility to take courses in environmental policy, urban planning and design,

and sustainability in theory and in practice. I have grown especially interested in water issues. I care about the Mississippi riverfront in Minneapolis, the effects of agriculture on water quality, and the connections people have to their



*Weir dam and lock on the Rhine River at Breisach, Germany.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*

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drinking water, lakes, and rivers. So when I went to Germany to study, I took a good look at how the places I visited treated water as part of the landscape.

I spent 11 months in Europe studying abroad and traveling. Because I only visited a handful

of places, it's impossible to make generalizations about "Europe" overall. There are so many histories, so many languages and dialects, so many different cultures. Here are some things I observed, organized by their scale on the landscape.



Drinking fountain near Freiburg, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.

Drinking Fountains, but Different

Drinking fountains with potable water are often found on city streets. Zurich is especially proud of its clean water and beautiful public fountains.

Whereas in the United States we have drinking fountains inside all schools, businesses, and most public buildings, I don't think I ever saw



Water fountain and mural in Basel, Switzerland. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.

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an American-style drinking fountain inside of a building there.

Other fountains are incorporated into historic structures, such as this water fountain and mural tucked under an eave in a historic quarter of Basel. A small sign under the spigot indicates in multiple languages that the water is potable. Generally, fountains are assumed to have clear, drinkable water unless labeled otherwise.

In Vienna there is a modern set of drinking fountains. The 12 large stainless steel fountains were

designed for the European Soccer Championships to provide refreshment to fans in crowded public places. They have “Drink Water!” written prominently (in German and English) and feature two spigots and a button-operated mist shower. These movable fountains are now set up in the most popular tourist areas of the city to provide free fresh drinking water.



One of twelve drinking fountains in Vienna, Austria, designed for the European Soccer Championships. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.

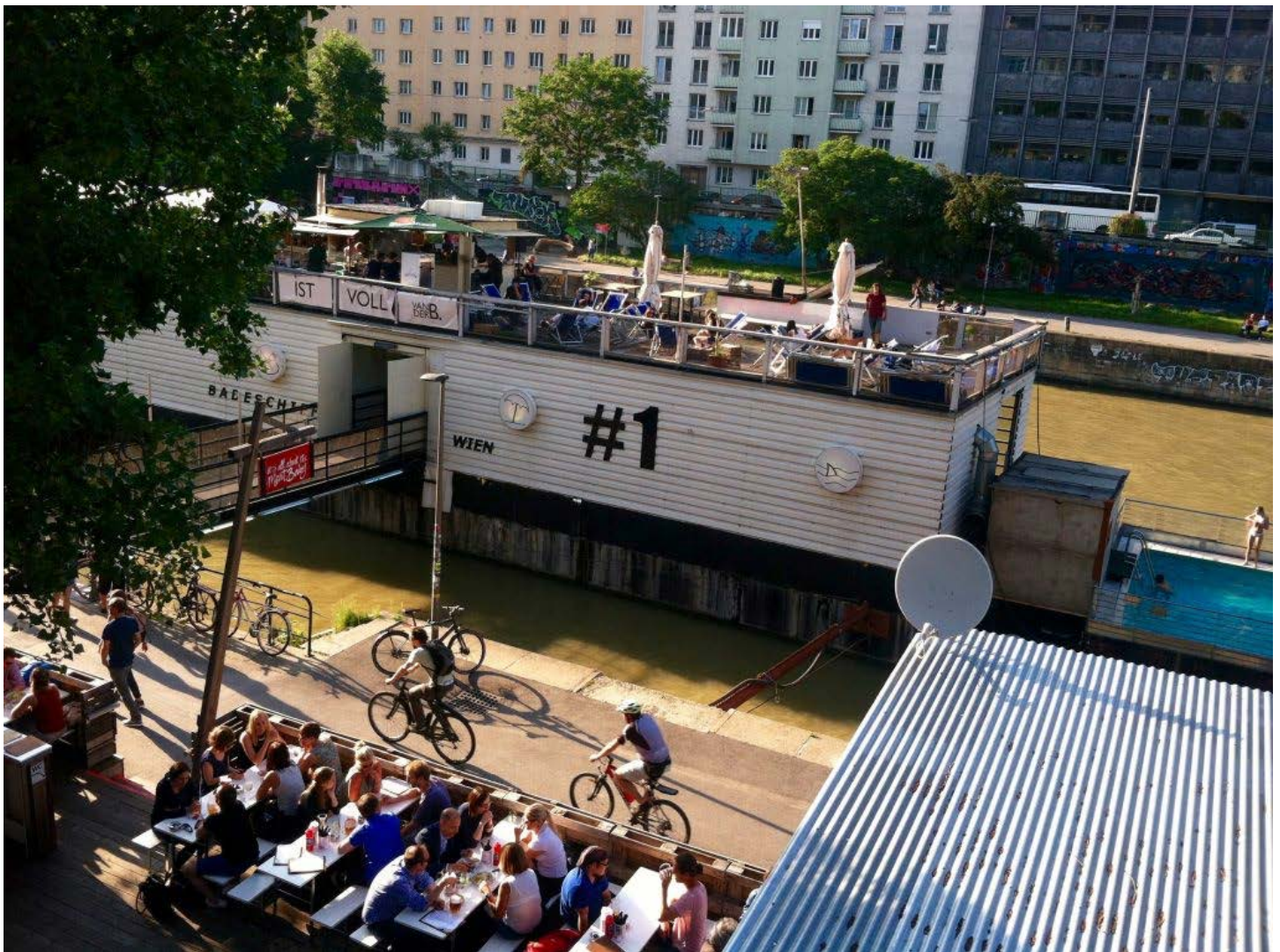


*Viennese drinking fountains feature spigots and a mist shower.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*

Lively Urban Riverfronts

In Europe, many riverfronts seem to have a lot more people on them, engaged in many more types of activities, than in the U.S. There is nothing wrong with biking and jogging and walking, which is what the American riverfront is used for, but population density in Europe is much higher than in the United States. There are more people competing for their share of public space and natural resources, and there have been

for centuries. Because of the higher density and demands on their environment, Europeans must be innovative in how they design, govern, power, and live in cities. American cities sprawl out with new greenfield developments and separate their commercial, residential, industrial, and recreational uses of land. In contrast, European riverfronts are often multi-modal and multi-use.



*Floating restaurant and swimming pool on the Danube Canal in Vienna, Austria.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*



Wading near a streamside cafe in Freiburg, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.



Pedestrian paths and bridges along the urban Dreisam River in Freiburg, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.

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An excellent example of a lively riverfront can be found in Vienna on a summer afternoon. The old Danube Canal flows near the historic downtown, while the actual Danube River flows further away. Along the canal there are walking and biking paths, walls of colorful graffiti, cafes with outdoor seating overlooking the scene, and boarding areas for tourist cruises. A floating restaurant occupies half of a barge and on the other end there is an aqua-blue swimming pool floating above the gray-brown canal water.

On a much smaller riverfront, Freiburg has some great spots alongside the small Dreisam River. Five minutes from the central commercial pedestrian zone is a large arterial street and the Dreisam River. Anyone can descend right to the cold, clear water, and the sounds of traffic almost disappear. Then they can enjoy brunch or a beer

at a streamside cafe, or wander on the walking path which has plenty of benches. When it's hot, the river is an alternative to air-conditioning. There are wonderful wading and swimming spots, and highly used picnic areas. People even set up lawn chairs and grills right in the middle of the stream.

On the other riverbank of the Dreisam, opposite the walking path, there is an express bike route. At the intersections where the bike route meets a road, the bikes have the right of way. This express bike path is part of the city's Bicycling Concept for 2020 because it gives easy access to important neighborhoods, to the city center, and to other attractions like the stadium located along the river. The riverfront bike path extends several dozen miles. High water levels are monitored by public gauges reporting daily streamflow; the



Picnickers enjoy the Dreisam River and the beginning of the Black Forest in Freiburg, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.



*Express bike route, pedestrian path, Dreisam River and picnic grounds in Freiburg, Germany.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*



*High water levels nearly flood the Dreisam River bike route in Freiburg, Germany.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*

trails are closed or rerouted if seasonal flooding of the trails occurs.

Longer-distance river bike tours are fairly common. German-speaking travel companies offer several routes and itineraries for tourists to cycle leisurely along riverfronts by day, explore cultural gems and enjoy dinner in a restaurant, then find

their luggage already delivered to the hotel room. The Danube is a particularly popular destination for this kind of activity. These travel companies also make it easier to tour rivers by offering electric bikes, short daily distances, and transport past rough or difficult areas. In the United States, organized bike tours are much less common.

Regional Landscape Influenced by Rivers

Between France and southern Germany is the unique Alsace region. The Rhine River has often served as a natural border. But over many

centuries of shifting control, the region also had shifting borders and developed its own language, culture, and river borderland history.



*Tourists and Tanner's House in the Petite France area of Strasbourg, France.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*

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Imagine living in Strasbourg, France, but then the Germans claim the city, and then a couple decades later once again being claimed by the French!

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Rhine River was straightened by military general Johann Gottfried Tulla. The massive engineering

feat was intended to reduce the catastrophic results of natural flooding, but the deepened channel also lowered the groundwater level and changed the floodplain ecosystems.

Additional canalization in the Upper Rhine Valley is seen in the extensive Grand Canal of Alsace. It has several locks and dams and allows



Students walk past a sign indicating historic flooding levels prior to channelization of the Rhine River in Istein, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.



*Weir dam and lock on the Rhine River at Breisach, Germany.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*



*From the bottom of the image to the top: Rhine Canal, navigation channel,
hydroelectric plant. Breisach, Germany.
Photographer Norbert Blau. Used under Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).*

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for navigation to Basel, Switzerland. This is a very important European inland waterway. The French won exclusive hydropower rights in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles (which brought an end to World War I). Parallel to the hardscaped canal flows a wild channel, which can take on seasonal extra flow diverted from the canal.

The Integrated Rhine Programme proposes floodplain restoration through a series of polder projects to reclaim land via dikes and drainage systems. It was developed by the French and German governments through an agreement signed in 1982 to increase flood protection and riparian wildlife habitat. The polder at Altenheim is a working example. Dikes surround an area of alluvial forest which is flooded when a gate is opened. Then the water slowly drains back out to the main channel of the Rhine River. Downstream communities benefit from mitigated river flow.

Of the proposed projects necessary for full implementation of flood regulation on the Rhine, some have encountered resistance. At a project near Hartheim, for example, local citizens put up a billboard to express their concerns about increased truck traffic through their town. The project involved the removal of thousands of truckloads of gravel which allowed the river to flood into the gravel pit area. Despite the local frustrations, within two years there was successful regrowth of the willow-poplar alluvial forest. Other projects have yet to be completed.



*“Natural” Rhine River channel allowed to flood near Hartheim, Germany.
Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.*



Citizen activists oppose a flood management project with this billboard on the proposed site near Hartheim, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.



Students learn about a successful new flood mitigation forest several miles from another project facing opposition at Harthem, Germany. Image courtesy of Kristen Anderson.

Concluding Thoughts

I saw and experienced these examples of connections to water through the lens of my liberal arts education and my interest in water resources and urban planning. It is impossible to generalize attitudes about water that would take into account a whole continent of people from various cultures, so it would not be fair to say that my observations proved that water was more intentionally cared for by Europeans. However, I do believe that the Germans, Swiss, and Austrians have a certain consciousness about the value of their natural resources. Maybe it is ingrained in their society because of centuries-long interactions with fields and forests, stunning wild Alpine landscapes, and natural water features.

This valuing of resources is evident in Germany's comprehensive recycling programs and in a German company's commitment to developing water-efficient appliances. It makes sense that Germany leads the European Union in organic agriculture standards that protect land and water

and that Austria and Switzerland utilize their mountainous geography and high annual precipitation to generate 60 percent of their energy using responsible hydropower.

As I continue my studies and professional development, I will look at the familiar Minnesota landscapes and waterways a little differently because I have gained a new perspective on how the communities I visited treat water as a valued part of the landscape.

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About the Author

Kristen Anderson is a senior at the University of Minnesota studying political science. She is interested in sustainable agriculture, community engagement, and environmental advocacy. Her experiences in Minnesota, Germany and beyond have taught her about living responsibly and cultivating meaningful relationships with people and places.