"I think Houston is in denial about its history of flooding," observes this collection's coeditor, Lacy M. Johnson, in an interview with Raj Mankad, former editor of Cite: The Architecture + Design Review of Houston and now the op-ed editor at the Houston Chronicle (p. 73). Like other contributors to More City Than Water: A Houston Flood Atlas, Mankad recognizes that “flooding” is a social construct related to how humans have engineered their relationship to their environments or, as Cymene Howe writes in her chapter, “From Ice to Inundation,” “water out of place is a relative perspective, one dependent on where we imagine water ought to be” (p. 248). Flooding is a man-made disaster, and our responses to it exemplify and exacerbate the man-made inequalities that make it a disaster in the first place. We see this in how we distribute relief, how we value property, and, necessarily, how we value people. It “often comes back to racism,” Mankad concludes, and economic exploitation by the wealthy and well-to-do (p. 73). The evidence is plain: where property buyouts occur, where the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) responds most efficiently, and which customers are best compensated with the least resistance by insurers all reinforce existing inequalities. However, insofar as the racially and economically dysselected members of our society bear the greatest burdens related to man-made climate disasters, they stand at the front lines of an existential crisis that threatens us all. As the book's essayists collectively argue, given that we are all connected—and the data on sea-level rise definitively demonstrates the interwoven rather than linear nature of these connections (see Howe's chapter)—if we remain unwilling to confront the consequences of racial capitalism and its effects of environmental degradation, as Mankad states, “we’re not up to the task of saving ourselves” (p. 80).

More City Than Water is a striking book of eighteen essays, an introduction by Johnson, a brief overview of major storms affecting the Houston-Galveston region by Cheryl Beckett, and complementary maps organized in three thematic sections: “History,” “Memory,” and “Community.” The
e-book version is a pleasure to read, but as an atlas, this book feels, looks, and reads most beautifully (and hauntingly) in the reader’s hands. *More City Than Water*, an attempt to reckon with the vulnerability of the nation’s fourth largest city exposed by 2017’s Hurricane Harvey, is a project of the Houston Flood Museum and was completed with the design expertise of twenty-five graphic design students at the University of Houston. The book’s maps are not to help readers navigate the city but rather to visualize the power of the ideas embedded in the essays, all of which have been carefully crafted by skilled and engaging writers. Some essays are more memoir than academic, others more poetic than prose, and yet all are accessible to readers who care about Houston, the city’s relationship to water, climate change, the conceit of capitalism, socioeconomic inequality, and the existential questions each of these raises.

While the book is divided by the aforementioned themes, the works are held together through a more argumentative set of ideas. First, many of the chapters make clear that “flooding” is a social construct, a problem that does not originate from water but from how humans have established ourselves in relation to water. Bruno Ríos cites the dictionary to define flooding as “water beyond its normal confines” (p. 105). He then compels us to question under what rubric we get to define what is normal and where and how water should “normally” be “confined.” But water resists containment and its flows can disfigure and displace the things that humans imagine as stable and fixed, including the memories embedded in photographs that, in floodwaters, become “illegible in [their] original intention,” according to Lyric Evans-Hunter (p. 91). Yet the photograph, in its transmuted form, is still “a reminder that one day you will die” (p. 96). Thus the trace meaning of the photograph survives even as it may persuade us to reimagine, as Sonia Del Hierro’s poetry does, the meanings of home, stability, and salvation.

However, if Hierro’s poetic essay raises the question of salvation, Mankad’s sober conclusion that “we’re not up to the task of saving ourselves” points toward a second argument that suffuses *More City Than Water*. The essayists frequently note the hubris involved in flood mitigation strategies, in recovery and rebuilding efforts, and in the will to ignore the frequency and increasingly devastating symptoms of climate change. “Each storm inspires infrastructural solutions,” Beckett writes, even as we have already “witnessed the futility of miles of bayou projects to mitigate flooding” (p. 69). That is, Houstonians are haphazardly adjusting to climate change while such changes continue to outpace stopgap solutions. Those who are well-off enough in the Meyerland area, for instance, have elevated their homes five feet off the ground. However, many of them remain committed to a universal model of aesthetic beauty, camouflaging their raised properties with “cosmetic topiary and brick façades,” Dominic Boyer explains (p. 211). Definitions of aesthetic beauty remain fixed to a certain mid-twentieth-century suburban ideal drawn on landscapes where environmental exigencies are quite different from Houston’s.

Meanwhile, this commitment to the façade of the “normal” provides distraction from the ongoing environmental degradation stealing life from Houstonians daily. Bryan Washington concludes, “it remains to be seen how long the promise of development and capital will deem the risk ... negligible” as state and national leaders, bankers, insurers, land speculators, and developers continue to ignore the environmental violence of polluting industries (p. 117). Dana Kroos’s photographic essay walks the streets of Upper Kirby, a well-to-do neighborhood that touches River Oaks and Montrose. “The power never went out” there, the homes “did not flood,” and “the streets were quiet” (p. 137). But the cracked sidewalks that characterize the area demonstrate that underneath even these streets, Houston is moving—swelling with water, shrinking in the dry season,
threatening the integrity of an environment built on top and against the land and water, rather than with it. The cracked sidewalks are a metaphor for the cracks in the city's social and economic infrastructure: “the causes are cyclical and ongoing” (p. 121). Kroos describes one such crack: a neighbor who “launched into a diatribe about neighborhood code” because the author’s garbage can was visible from the street just a few days after Hurricane Harvey passed (p. 147). In her affluent silo, the neighbor demanded a commitment to a comfortable way of life that required her blindness to the disaster affecting her and other Houstonians—the toxins spilling into Houston’s waterways and pouring into the air, the hungry people without shelter, and the sick in need of medical supplies.

Third, the conceit that compels us to see “flooding” as a natural disaster also encourages us to rebuild against the odds and to shy away from the pervasive social and economic structural inequalities that climate-related disasters expose. The attitude of many residents and elected officials is that disasters will simply happen, and our task is to adapt, never to retreat. Thus, according to Mankad, in all of the work for the Harris County Flood Control District, “nobody” was suggesting “a plan for the region as a whole, for making decisions about where people could live, and what areas to develop” (p. 75). In doing so, leaders act without attending to everyone’s needs, making disaster inevitable and knowingly placing the highest burdens on those who are most vulnerable to its social, psychological, and economic effects.

Undeniably, there are many Houstons, Sonia Hamer explains, and while she writes that “Harvey swept away … fictions” that represent social and economic inequality as random, natural, and irremediable, these fictions seem stubbornly situated given the city’s ongoing failures to address them (p. 17). Indeed, as Hamer later acknowledges, “Time has passed, regulation has been strengthened, and industry and technology has improved, but the overall dynamics of injustice have changed little” (p. 21). Pointing to the work of Robert Bullard, P. Grace Tee Lewis explains that Houston’s “prosperity was born on the back of … communities of color” and these Black and Latinx communities comprise a “purposeful, systemic sacrifice … in favor of white or more affluent communities” (p. 160). Likewise, as he juxtaposes how water management disproportionately devastates poor communities in Houston and in the Sonoran Desert to the benefit of those with power, Ríos notes, “Either by thirst or by flooding, the same people always suffer the most” (p. 108). A clearcut example is the ongoing flooding issues in Independence Heights, the first incorporated Black town in Texas that was annexed by Houston in 1929. Not prone to flooding at its establishment, parts of Independence Heights now experience chronic flooding due to the state’s engineering of I-610 and its intersection with I-45. Its construction assiduously “avoided the homes in the affluent white neighborhood of Garden Oaks” while it claimed 330 parcels from Independence Heights (p. 29). This is not merely an engineering problem, Aimee VonBokel and Tanya Debose explain, but “a
problem with social, political, and economic dimensions” (p. 30).

While these problems may more directly and disproportionately affect Houston’s low-income communities, as well as Black and Brown families of varied economic statuses, in the present, if we accept the degradation of their collective quality of life, all Houstonians will remain vulnerable to the excesses of such exploitation in the long run. For instance, many Houstonians were probably unaware that just before Hurricane Harvey’s arrival the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality turned off its equipment that monitors air quality around the Houston Ship Channel’s industries and kept them off even after the threat to equipment integrity passed. This made it impossible to know how much toxicity the energy industry allowed to rest atop the homes of Houstonians and to move across east Texas and the Gulf region. However, we do know that the carcinogen benzene, toxic at any level of exposure, spilled into Houstonians’ air without legal consequence. After experiencing flooding in Houston, Allyn West, raised with a nearly unshakable faith in American individualism in the Midwest, learned to see the world in much more structural terms: “Houston is built on decisions none of us made, imperiled by weather none of us can control. It is a city none of us can save on our own” (p. 157). Thus, Lewis points to the One Breath Partnership for Texans who care about advocating for true enforcement of environmental regulations, legal accountability, and public transparency.

Finally, many of the essays raise questions that encourage us to reimagine our relationship with each other and the world of which we are collective component parts. They begin by pointing out fissures in what appears to be a cohesive social world. Susan Rogers, for instance, notes the mismatch between the location of resources for disaster relief and the communities that need them. Ben Hirsch highlights the work of charitable organizations defined by “fear of the poor,” which manifested as armed guards and heavy police and immigration enforcement presence, and required drug testing to receive aid, making aid sites inhospitable for some and completely inaccessible for others.

In light of such challenges, Laura August’s dynamic, poetic photo essay exposes how the flood-as-disaster compels us to rethink and even question what we mean by home, place, belonging, stability, and mobility. Many of the essayists do raise these questions and, in doing so, help readers realize that there is no reason to commit to the world as it is, given that it is one where a disaster as devastating as Hurricane Harvey is viewed as the natural order. And the disaster, to be clear, is not simply one of a slow-moving storm through a megalopolis, for the storm simply exposed the ongoing disaster: the environmental violence of the oil and gas industry and its contribution to climate change, the lax legal regulations and penalties for purposeful and accidental spills of toxic chemicals, and the quotidian creation of cancer clusters in the low-income communities that abut these industrial plants.

In “Community Power,” Ben Hirsch asks what I believe is the question that encapsulates the whole project: “Disasters not only prompt a humanitarian and altruistic response; they also create ruptures in our standard way of operating that prompt us to ask, ‘Why is the world this way?’” (p. 195). He responds, “What the destruction caused by Harvey—and people’s immediate reactions—demonstrated is that another way of being is possible” (p. 196). In conversation with Johnson, Alex Ortiz, who works with the Texas Living Waters Project, also suggests that we can imagine the world differently. Ortiz notes that, unlike in the United States, in other countries nature has legal standing and individuals can file suit on nature’s behalf, having no requirement to prove their own personal injury in order to seek redress. And Geneva Vest calls for a new approach to designing the Houston megalopolis that treats it as one large
ecoregion rather than a hodgepodge of individual developments and rural satellites.

However, the authors maintain, reimagining human life in the era of climate change cannot result in mere adjustments like stilts and brick façades; we must embrace revolution. The consequences are always scary and never fully predictable; but it is conceit, for instance, in the engineering solutions of the past that have failed us, that compels us to put so much faith in our predictive power. As Martha Serpas writes, “water is humble, and too few of us are” (p. 51). Thus, Roy Scranton suggests that, as living parts of a changing economy and climate that is decreasingly hospitable to human life as we currently live it, we seem to be beckoning our own cataclysmic decline. Whether we want to admit it or not, the water will take the low places and hearken a break in the way things are. What will we do when that break inevitably comes?

More City Than Water is therefore compelling in many ways. It is academic yet personal, critical yet accessible, local yet global, pessimistic but not cynical, hopeful but not blindly. Its maps are immersive, allowing for extended meditation on existential questions related to human interconnectivity and our collective embeddedness as members of the environment rather than its masters. It will be a worthwhile addition to undergraduate syllabi and, more widely, to all those who care about Houston, climate change, and human rights.

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