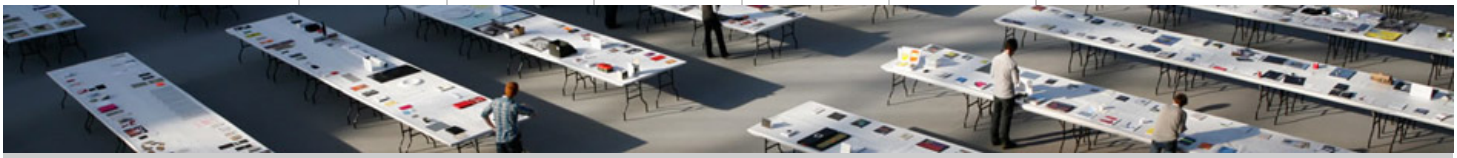

Commentary

- 50 years of looking forward
- **Behind the idea**
- Client relationships
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- Insight
- Judging creative work
- What is a good idea?
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Behind the idea

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The Future of Water: Wonderwater

In the second part of her look at the future of water, Jane Withers describes the Wonderwater project. More information here: www.wonderwater.fi

Wonderwater Cafés will take place in Helsinki and London in 2012, as part of the Wonderwater programme for World Design Capital Helsinki 2012

Wonderwater at Tian Hai : restaurant exterior during Wonderwater pop-up

What can design do in the face of the sustainability challenge?

One aspect that seems to me increasingly important is design's role as a communicator, helping us engage with big, difficult issues in ways that engage and provoke, even charm and amuse us rather than send us running for cover. Our recent work on water and designing for a sustainable future - ranging from exhibitions, writing and consultancy to live projects - is about finding ways to communicate urgent issues that hopefully connect with peoples lives.

Wonderwater is an initiative I started recently with Kari Korkman, Director of Helsinki Design Week. The idea is to develop projects aimed at raising awareness of critical global water issues. Our first Wonderwater project took place in September during Beijing Design Week. Wonderwater Café was a pop-up event about the water footprint and food, designed to show how massive quantities of water go into food production, and explain how our choices could be affecting local and global water consumption.

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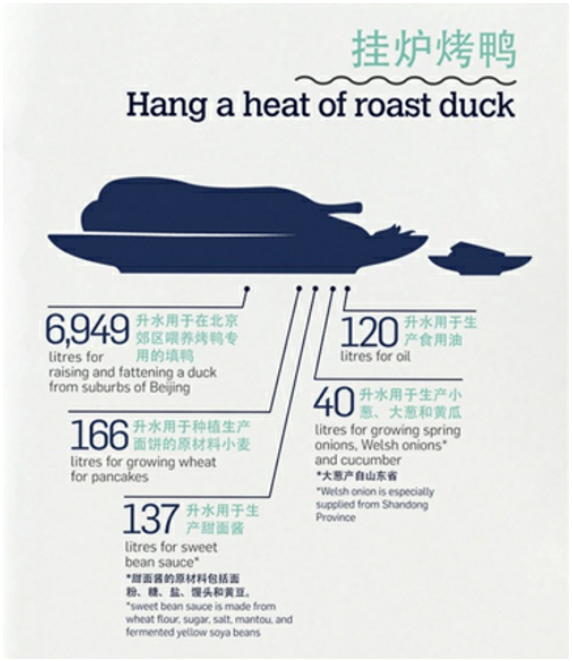
For a week we took over Tian Hai, a small buzzy restaurant in Dashilan, Beijing's historic district. We used their menu to show how almost unimaginably large quantities of water are used in food production, and how what we choose to eat effects local and global water consumption.

Flags in the dishes indicate the level of water footprint: High, medium and low

We took popular dishes with a range of water footprints: beef (high), pork (high-medium), chicken (medium), seafood (low if it's not farmed) and vegetables (low), as well as such staples as rice, beer and tea. Our menu illustrated the breakdown for each dish and explained what the water is used for. We've all had Peking Duck in the local Chinese, but who had any idea that it takes almost 7000 litres of water to raise a single farmed duck in the suburbs of Beijing? This is mainly used for growing the duck's feed.



Detail: The Wonderwater menu explains the water footprint of Tian Hai's most popular dishes

The project was developed in collaboration with Aalto University in Helsinki. Aalto's multi-disciplinary approach bringing together designers, scientists and engineers opens doors for collaborations that are critical to the sustainability challenge, but not so easily achievable in design schools within arts institutions. Matti Kummu from the Water & Development Research Group, advised on the content and calculated the water footprints, while Aalto's Design Factory was involved in realising the project.

The original graphic identity for Wonderwater was done by Studio Emmi and then developed by Aalto graduates Iina Valila & Tiina Koivusalo for the café.

The Wonderwater menu explains the water footprint of Tian Hai's most popular dishes

Our design brief was simple - a clear and engaging way to get the complex message across - but complicated by the dual language English and Mandarin. We came up with the phrase 'How Much Water Do You Eat?' as a way to catch attention and draw people in. The difficulty we struggled with was the level of detail - keeping the message accessible while giving the public enough information to begin to understand how the water footprint works.

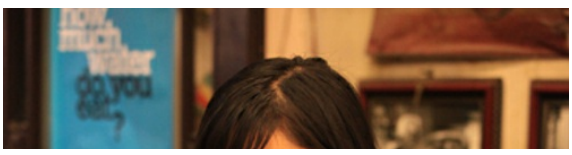
It was intriguing to see how diners reacted and what dishes they chose. But what was really interesting was the conversations around the table.

Interior of Wonderwater café at Tian Hai

It's not about scaring people with huge numbers but rather raising awareness and offering alternatives. It isn't that a high water footprint is necessarily bad but we need to look behind the figures and understand where this water comes from. Those delicious green beans may be grown in water scarce Kenya. That cup of coffee I had this morning took 140 litres of Brazilian water to grow and process the beans, and for transportation.

Posters for Wonderwater Café

What we've done is made our water consumption invisible, and it's this hidden water that we really need to think about. How much water do we wear, sit on or drive? How much water do we eat? On average each Brit uses over 4000 litres of water a day for food and all the other products and services we consume. We have 'outsourced' our water footprint, importing many water intensive goods from other countries, often in the developing world. We really need to start thinking about the effect of the food we choose on the local communities where it's grown.



interior of Wonderwater café at Tian Hai

With concern over future food security and how we feed a growing global population, there is already discussion around trade in virtual water and an equivalent of a fair trade label for water. In the future we will certainly pay more for water intensive foods and goods.

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