

# A HIDDEN BEAUTY: SEEING (AND HEARING) THE KUMUTOTO STREAM

**Kedron Parker**  
**Multi-media artist working with water**

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation provides case studies about the public art sound installations *Kumutoto Stream* and *The Wet Index* as examples of how art can provide a platform for increasing community understanding and appreciation of urban water issues.

Prior to the launch of *Kumutoto Stream* in February 2014, few Wellingtonians knew about the existence of a stream at Woodward Street, which connects The Terrace office district to Lambton Quay. The stream was also the site of the former Kumutoto Pā, home to two Māori chiefs and a regional hub for the flax trade.

Like so many urban streams, Kumutoto was incorporated into the city's stormwater network and largely forgotten about. But the stream is neither lost, nor dead: it flows under the CBD and still supports an urban ecosystem.

Today, following the installation of *Kumutoto Stream*, those entering the Woodward Street pedestrian tunnel experience the immersive sounds of trickling water and abundant native birdlife, which provide a moment of relief from the cityscape above which offers no green space or for those inhabiting its office blocks.

Adjacent to this, a temporary installation entitled *The Wet Index* displays water collected from the source of the stream.

By showing the stream, and recreating the sounds of its former environment, these public art pieces prompt us to ask important questions about what is lost when we culvert streams underground.

## KEYWORDS

**Kumutoto Stream, The Wet Index, Kumutoto Pā, Iwi Te Atiawa, urban streams, public art, public engagement, education**

## PRESENTER PROFILE

Kedron Parker is a multi-media artist living in Wellington. Kedron's 2014 sound installation *Kumutoto Stream* has become the first permanent media-based artwork in the city's public art collection. In 2015 she co-created a temporary installation entitled *The Wet Index* with collaborator Bruce McNaught, using water collected from the Kumutoto just before it enters the stormwater culvert.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## A Need to Engage the Public

The topic of urban water management is a broad one with many implications for a city's inhabitants; however, it is not a frequent topic of public discourse.

While a service being "out of sight, and out of mind" is an inherent sign of its success, it also means that in regards to urban water, the general public has little knowledge or appreciation of the intricacies of its management, or level of investment it requires.

As a result, there is a relatively small group of people who have the depth of knowledge to understand the various implications of urban water planning decisions.

These planning decisions, however, can have a huge affect on how our cities develop and the quality of life of our inhabitants now and in the future.

Faced with the pressures of climate change, population growth, and increased regulation, cities are facing hard and unprecedented decisions about the future of their water management.

At the same time, many citizens are calling for more sustainable practices, and increased participation in decision making.

With these huge shifts, robust decisions about water and related infrastructure investments will require a new era of public engagement which allows the many facets of the topic to be explored from different points of view.

## The Role of Public Art

Cities are built in layers around waterways, and where there is water and people, there are stories to tell.

Public art has always been a vehicle to tell these stories. By telling stories about waterways and the layers of the city, we come to a better understanding of why the city developed in the way that it did.

There is a great deal of scope for public art to increase the public profile of water networks, and enlighten people as to how and why they evolved. Understanding these considerations will promote the benefits of better water management in the future.

Stories and art provide an indirect approach to education, and allow people to formulate their own ideas, questions, and conclusions.

This can greatly enhance the scope of public discourse and the community's level of commitment, which can in-turn bolster public support for the additional investment needed to support best practice, water-sensitive urban design.

# 2 CASE STUDIES

## 2.1 CASE STUDY: KUMUTOTO STREAM

The public art sound installation *Kumutoto Stream* is as an example of how art can provide a platform for increasing community understanding and appreciation of urban water issues.

Prior to the launch of *Kumutoto Stream* in February 2014, few Wellingtonians knew about the existence of a stream at Woodward Street, which connects The Terrace office district to Lambton Quay.

Like so many urban streams, the Kumutoto was incorporated into the city's stormwater network and largely forgotten about. However, after 150 years of existing in a pipe, the stream is neither lost, nor dead: it flows under the CBD and still supports marine life.

Multi-media artist Kedron Parker traveled around Wellington, the Wairarapa, and the Taurarua regions creating field recordings of streams and birds, which were then collaged to create an audio interpretation imagining the area as it might have sounded in 1850, before the area was built over, and the Kumutoto became Wellington's first culverted stream.

Kedron spoke with representatives from Iwi Te Atiawa who told her the rich history of the stream. Immediately adjacent to the pedestrian tunnel stood the former Kumutoto Pā, home to two Māori chiefs and a regional hub for the flax trade.

During this research phase, it happened that ecologist Frances Forsyth and her team identified two banded kōkopu fish in the source of the stream – proving that despite its existence in a stormwater pipe, the stream still supports marine life.

There are many piped streams in Wellington, and while I developed my own work, I learned that another stream/stormwater related work had taken shape in Wellington's Cuba Quarter. In late 2012, a piped stream was uncovered during construction at a Z petrol station on Vivian Street. In 2013, working with Taranaki Whānui, the Z petrol station marked the site with an artwork by Ra Vincent entitled "*Te Pikonga o Mapihi*." Blue lines across the petrol station forecourt mark the path of the Waimapihi Stream, leading to a sculpture made from the stream's Victoria-era pipe, beautifully carved with pictures relating to wildlife and the stream's Māori history.

*Kumutoto Stream* was launched as a temporary work in February 2014. At the opening / hui whakawatea for the piece, Iwi leader Liz Mellish recounted the history of the stream and why it is significant for local Māori. She added that she would like underground streams to be called by their real names rather than their stormwater pipe designations.

As a result of the installation, those entering the Woodward Street pedestrian tunnel experience the immersive sounds of trickling water and abundant native birdlife, which provide a moment of relief from the cityscape above which offers no green space for those inhabiting its office blocks.

*Kumutoto Stream* captured the local imagination, and for the first time, people began to ask questions about the pipes under the street, and where they lead, helping individuals to think about stormwater's role in the urban water cycle.

Discussions have circulated about whether the stream could be day-lighted – and while this is unlikely to happen – these discussions have educated people about why restoring urban stream systems is so difficult after they have been built over. These conversations can help to inform future decisions as other parts of the city and region are developed.

This work reminds people that there are many creative ways to bring water and nature back into the city, even in small spaces.

Because of the sounds of the stream, the pedestrian tunnel – a former eye sore that people avoided – became an intentional destination for many walkers, reducing jay-

walking on The Terrace. Levels of graffiti, broken glass and trash were reduced in the pedestrian tunnel as well – in turn reducing rubbish in the storm drain that connects with the stream.

After a wave of positive feedback, *Kumutoto Stream* was upgraded and rededicated in an Iwi-led ceremony in February 2015 as it joined the city's permanent public art collection.

By recreating the lush natural soundscape of a stream and its birdlife, this public art piece has prompted impromptu discussions amongst CBD office workers and residents to ask important questions about what is lost when we culvert streams underground.

The text of the work's signage was carefully chosen to tell the public about the existence of the stormwater pipes, the fact these pipes connect to the harbour, and that these pipes are part of an urban ecosystem:

*"A soundscape imagining the experience of walking in the bush along Kumutoto Stream, which still flows and carries marine life in pipes under this tunnel to Kumutoto Wharf".*

By being specific about the location of the pipes under the pedestrian tunnel, people can draw a mental map of where the water travels underground through the CBD, imagining this layer beneath the cement as it reaches its final destination at Kumutoto Wharf.

City residents' mental map of the Kumutoto underground will be reinforced by another public artwork, Michael Tuffery's large scale partially submerged sculpture *Nga Kina*, which greets the stream as its pipe enters the harbour.

## **2.2 Case Study: The Wet Index**

Having created a soundscape, I began to yearn to see the actual stream water above ground on Woodward Street. I partnered with collaborator Bruce McNaught to look at ways we could show people the actual water itself.

By showing people the beauty of the water in its natural state, Bruce and I wanted to challenge people's perceptions of stormwater as wastewater.

*The Wet Index* is a rain curtain that displays water collected from the source of the Kumutoto Stream, which flows in stormwater pipes underneath Woodward Street to the harbour.

In a small shop window at 11 Woodward Street, passers-by can enjoy a glimpse of the elegance of fresh stream water before it hit the storm drain. Another window displays alternating images of the source of the stream, its pathway, and Te Atiawa tupuna.

Co-located next to the sound work, *The Wet Index* offers a glimpse of the actual stream water that flows underfoot as people exiting the tunnel can still hear the stream's soundscape.

Near Victoria University, conservation biology students are restoring a hillside known as Kumutoto Forest, where the source of the stream remains beautiful and wild for a short stretch just before it enters a stormwater culvert.

The Wet Index plays on the thin and sometimes arbitrary line between fresh water and waste water in the urban context.

Both works ask questions about how we value urban water, and when is it worthy of our stewardship?

These co-located works, taken together, consider the past, present and future state of Wellington in relationship to the land and waterways upon which it is built.

### **3 CONCLUSIONS: LEARNINGS**

Before I started this work, I was unaware about the existence of the stream, or its history.

The Wellington City Council (WCC) was instrumental in connecting me with a wide range of Council staff who assisted me to better understand the area's history and the infrastructure considerations related to my project. This led to a series of conversations, each reflecting a different part of Council and their respective areas of work, and thus different set of sectoral interests, considerations, and points of view.

Most significantly, the WCC Treaty Relations Team connected me with representatives from local Iwi who held a great deal of knowledge about the site.

My research took me a full year – much longer than I anticipated. During this time, as started to unpack the history of the stream and its current-day status as stormwater, it deepened my understanding of the place and its history, and my work began to evolve.

I became aware that something so simple as a short stretch of stormwater pipe can have wide ranging implications for many different groups of people.

I also realised that there was power in shining a light on these different implications, showing people's interests in this short stretch of pipe from all its various angles.

#### **3.1 Learnings For the Artist**

- The urban water sector is multi-faceted, and cross-disciplinary.
- A short stretch of stormwater pipe can have wide-ranging implications for many groups of people.
- Since the artwork has been installed, less litter and glass have been observed in the storm drains at the site.
- City Councils can enhance outcomes for artists by sharing their networks.
- Conversations with Iwi enrich the process at every stage.

### **3.2 Learnings For the Sector**

- Artists can be good communicators.
- Cities are made of layers and artists can help people to visualise these layers, and appreciate the systems underfoot that support our city to function.
- If the sector invites artists to participate in inter-disciplinary conversations about urban water, there will be more art reflecting the story of urban water.
- Because water management is multi-faceted, the artist will need to connect with as many people in the sector as possible, including local Iwi, and this takes time.

### **3.3 Looking forward**

It is my hope that in the future more planners engage artists to help tell the environmental, social, historical, and engineering stories about urban water, including stormwater.

My current thinking about future projects is that:

- Art can assist to contextualise historical, cultural, environmental and engineering aspects of planning decisions and help to re-frame potentially controversial issues of the day.
- If artists are involved at the front end of projects, and are able to meet the planners, engineers, and other stakeholders involved, they can better understand and communicate the significance of the place and the project.
- Public art co-located with stormwater projects can help to showcase new innovative solutions, and bring attention to best practice infrastructure.

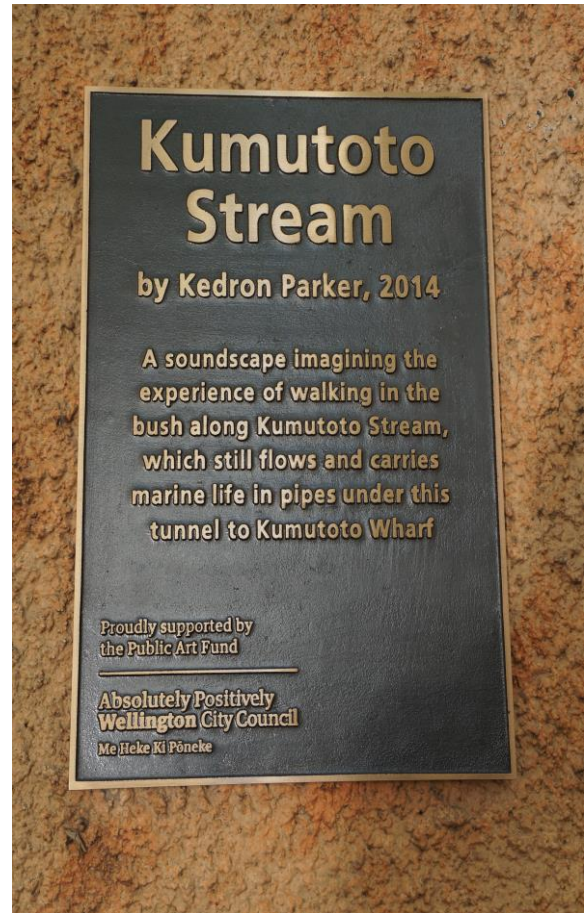
### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*The Wet Index* was made possible through the support of Urban Dream Brokerage, Cornerstone Partners, and Creative New Zealand.



## KUMUTOTO STREAM



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*Kumutoto Stream: At the art opening / hui whakawatea, Iwi Leader Liz Mellish explains the Māori history of the area and the significance of Kumutoto Stream (Photo by Grant Maiden). This was followed by a ritual procession (Photo by Bridget Zimmerman). The artwork's signage makes specific mention of the pipes, where they go, and the ecosystem they support. The final photo is of Kedron standing directly over the piped stream, and beneath one of the installation speakers imagining what it sounded like before culverting (Photo by Elske Parker).*



## THE WET INDEX



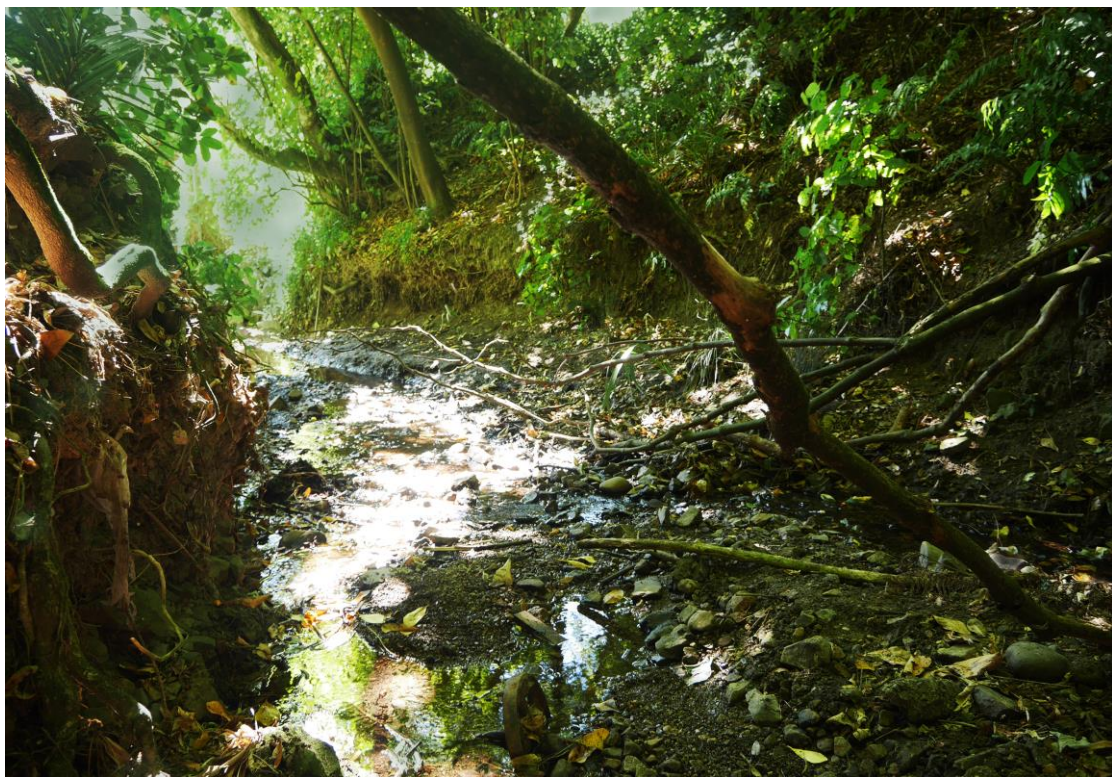
*The Wet Index: At the opening / hui whakawatea, Mayor Celia Wade-Brown, local Iwi, Council representatives, business people, and artists look at the stream/storm water on display in the window of 11 Woodward Street in Wellington (Photo by Denise Batchelor). Below: A photo of the Wet Index (Photo by Leo Mihaka-Ryan)*







*Above: The Wet Index viewed at night, with an image of Te Atiawa chief Wi Tako Ngatata.  
Below: The source of Kumutoto Stream, where fish has been documented.  
(Photos by Kedron Parker)*





## OTHER WELLINGTON PUBLIC ARTWORKS RELATING TO STREAM/STORMWATER



*Above: Ra Vincent's Te Pikonga o Mapihi at the Z petrol station on Vivian Street in Wellington, marking the piped Waimapihi Stream (Photo by Elske Parker)*

*Below: Michael Tuffery's sculpture Nga Kina, which greets the Kumutoto Stream as it's pipe enters the harbour at Kumutoto Wharf. (Photo by Kedron Parker)*



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