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Lost Rivers: Tracking down the urban world's many buried streams

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Blame it on “the Great Stink” of London in the hot summer of 1858 – the Thames and its tributaries were running with human waste, which prompted an overhaul of the sewer system that put most of the natural water system underground. Similarly, in cities around the world, rapid industrial growth led to water systems being covered, paved over so that storm water and sewage became unhealthily merged.

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Lost Rivers, Montreal director Catherine Bâcle’s informative, if literally and figuratively all-over-the-map, documentary, traces some of the “daylighting” projects to bring natural water systems back to the surface, both for their aesthetic appeal and for the health of the cities around them.

There are some success stories. In Yonkers, N.Y., the Saw Mill River, formerly used for industry and then capped 90 years ago, saw daylight again in 2011, creating an attractive, tourist-friendly new city centre. In Seoul, the 8.4-kilometre Cheonggyecheon Stream – or at least an 8.4-km simulacrum of it – was finished in 2005 in the city core. In spite of conflict with local merchants during construction, the project has succeeded to easing downtown traffic and creating a symbolic link to the city’s history. In one scene in the film, a young man proposes to his girlfriend by the waterway, while their image appears on a giant screen nearby.

Not every city venture has been as successful. In Toronto, architects Kim Storey and James Brown proposed, in the 1990s, that the now-underground Garrison Creek – which flows down through the city from St. Clair Avenue West and exits into Toronto Harbour near historic Fort York – should be allowed to surface in holding ponds in parks during rainy periods. Instead, Torontonians continue with a combined waste and storm-sewer system that causes sewage overflows more than 50 times a year, periodically making the city's Lake Ontario beaches unsafe for swimming.

There's a gadfly quality to the film, in its seemingly arbitrary choice of cities and its soft, enviro-bliss approach to the tough subject of water engineering, though some of the digressions do pay off: One tributary to the main narrative involves the work of outlaw "drainers" or underground adventurers, who explore these underground systems. In Brescia, Italy, members of one such formerly radical group have become official subterranean tour guides and historians, helping bring awareness not only to the rivers, but to the medieval and Roman towns that once thrived beneath the modern streets.

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