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Architect's vision of cities that float on water

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"The Netherlands is a complete fake, artificial machine." So says the Dutch architect Koen Olthuis. More than a quarter of the country sits below sea level. Beginning in the 15th Century, the country's windmills were used to pump water out of the ground. Parcels of land were buffered with raised walls and drained, creating dry areas, which the Dutch call "polders."

The threat of water overtaking the land is so deep in the Dutch national psyche that it has inspired a mythological predator, the Waterwolf.

Olthuis has spent more than two decades seeking ways to coexist with the wolf. His architectural firm, Waterstudio, specialises in homes that float, but its constructions have little in common with the wooden houseboats that have long lined Dutch canals.

Waterstudio's signature projects look more like modern apartments, with glassy façades, full-height ceilings and multiple stories. In the past decade, as severe weather brought on by climate change has caused catastrophic

flooding, demand for Waterstudio's architecture has grown. The firm is currently working on floating pod hotels in Panama and Thailand; a floating forest in the Persian Gulf; and, in its most ambitious undertaking to date, a floating "city" in the Maldives.

Waterstudio's headquarters are situated in a former grocery store on a quiet residential street in Rijswijk, a small suburb halfway between The Hague and Delft. Scattered around the office, like loose LEGO bricks, were tiny 3D-printed models of houses from the Maldives Floating City. On a tabletop, Olthuis unrolled an enormous sheet of glossy printer paper. It was an aerial view of the project. Estimated to cost a billion dollars, the development will be situated a 15-minute boat ride from the overcrowded capital of Malé.

A first batch of four houses for the city was recently towed out into the ocean, and Olthuis estimated that construction would be completed by 2028.



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