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# FRAME

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# Controlling

# the

JamesPlumb used a medical pump to control the speed of water droplets in Aēsop's meditative installation space.

# Elements

Many are simply inspired by water, but JamesPlumb actually tamed it for Aēsop in London.

WORDS Tracey Ingram  
PHOTOS Andrew Meredith

'WE'D always thought about doing something with water for Aēsop,' says James Russell, who together with Hannah Plumb makes JamesPlumb. A potential collaboration had been bubbling away for a few years, but it wasn't until late 2014 that a project cropped up in London. 'When we heard about the location on Lamb's Conduit Street in Bloomsbury, it all added up.' An extremely brief history lesson: William Lamb's name was given to the street in 1577 when he donated money to rebuild an underground conduit.

During their research the designers happened upon *Springs, Streams and Spas of London*, a book written over a century ago by Alfred Stanley Foord. 'He describes how some residents would pay to tap into the conduit from home instead of going to the communal pump. He calls it a "quill of water", which completely enchanted us.' Adopting the reference as a working title for the project, the designers focused on the 'elegant control of water', which Plumb says 'had to be the central material.'

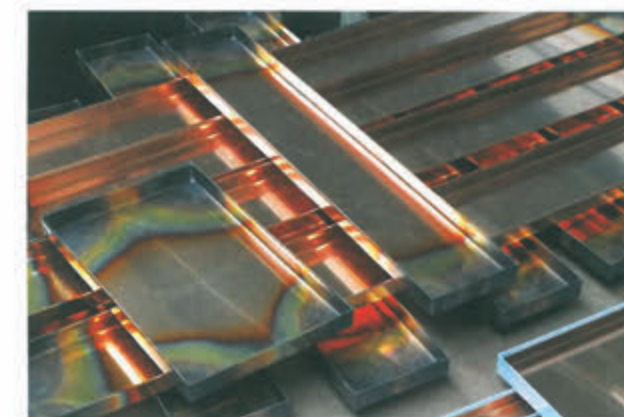
The designers, dead set on subtlety, aimed for a space in which customers would notice reflections, light and sound before the water itself. 'We didn't want it to feel too gimmicky, like "welcome to waterland". Or like a history lesson,' says Plumb. 'The historical relevance simply fascinated us. We wanted to cite it quietly.'

The conduit reference instinctively led to talk of channels, gullies and guttering. 'The concept evolved from a natural process of elimination. What could we physically *make* in the allotted time? We settled on an idea that we loved: water running through the shelves themselves. It's strangely discreet but also right there on the surface.'

It soon became clear that using an existing system wouldn't suffice. 'Anything too decorative focused on the container rather than the contents,' says Plumb. What followed was what Russell refers to as a strange exercise in 'un-designing' the shelving. 'We designed it just enough to have it do its job quietly.' They chose to work with copper, which 'felt like an absolutely natural bedfellow with water'. ↵



An intricate system of pipes channels water through the shelving at Aēsop in Bloomsbury, London.



All corners of the shelves and sinks were brazed with a copper-based alloy, chosen for its strength and for its ability to oxidize in a way similar to that of copper.



Process photos courtesy of JamesPlumb

During the brazing process, each corner is heated until it burns cherry-red. Braze is applied and carefully heated until it bonds with the copper.



It may have felt that way, but Plumb says they soon experienced the volatility involved in the relationship between copper and water. After being told by experts it was impossible to maintain the level of oxidization they wanted, they took matters into their own hands. Ironically – or poetically, perhaps – the answer to JamesPlumb's problem was water. 'We ended up exhausting and accelerating the oxidization process by carefully and rigorously submerging the copper in water.'

Along with the shelving, the other main challenge was behind the scenes: the pump that controls water flow. 'A fraction of a litre per minute of extra flow would transform it dramatically,' says Russell. 'Some fairly simple solutions weren't possible, because there wasn't enough control.' Plumb laughs: 'We sound like control freaks. We're not. Okay, maybe just a little bit.'

To test all the variables, they built a life-size replica of the main display wall in their studio. 'We were finally able to create a lovely column of water,' says Russell. 'It flowed in, agitated the water beautifully, but it wasn't a jet and it wasn't...'

'... too pissy,' adds Plumb with a smile. 'It was almost like fine-tuning an instrument.'

Lighting was also key. The designers consulted with experts at PSLAB via Skype. 'We were holding up the laptop in the studio, trying to make sure the light hit the water at the right angle to create the best reflections.' Finding the perfect balance proved tricky. There had to be enough light to illuminate the products, but not too much to drown out the shadows. 'In PSLAB's experience with lighting for other Aēsop stores, they found that shadows are the enemy,' says Russell. 'Here, light reflections were accentuated by the darkness.'

Conscious that they were giving Aēsop a somewhat high-maintenance solution, JamesPlumb invented a character called Naughty Charlie – a child with a penchant for vandalism. A kill switch near the cash register shuts off the pump, but they also had to consider overflows caused by pipe blockages. 'We developed a simple analogue system,' says Russell. 'A basic float switch cuts off the pump to the whole system if there's any overflow. It's incredibly sensitive.'

The taming of water even extends to the wispy taps. 'We wanted to control how people physically experience the water in-store when testing the products,' says Plumb. 'We wanted the flow to be gentle to match the overall meditative feel...'

'... so that the control of water becomes part of the experience of the store and not just the aesthetic,' adds Russell. Special valves reduce the pressure, resulting in a longer ritualistic experience.

'We had to be careful not to make it too slow, but hopefully we got it just right,' says Plumb. 'You really take your time. There is a quiet reverence for skin and for water as a material. As the material. It's a pleasurable way to experience Aēsop's products whilst enjoying a longer stay.' X

[jamesplumb.co.uk](http://jamesplumb.co.uk)



Process photos courtesy of JamesPlumb

Each downpipe in the system has a custom-made copper washer, which was soldered onto the copper pipes at the required height before being fused to the underside of the shelves.



The designers fabricated their own pump system, which is located in the basement, to control the flow of water to the shelving.



Parts of the analogue water pump are made from copper. Even though it's not located in the main retail space, the designers spared no effort in its design.



Shadows cast by the shelving make water reflections more pronounced.