From function to ritual: a recent history of the bathroom

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"So how do I define a great bathing environment? It is simply, or rather not so simply, a place that helps bring my fundamental sense of who I am into focus, a place that awakens me to my intrinsic earthy, sensual and paganly reverential nature."
Leonard Koren, 'Undesigning the Bath'

In not much more than half a century the bathroom has metamorphosed from a domestic Cinderella to play an increasingly prominent role in home life. What was once rarely more than a sanitised cell is being reinvented with a physical, psychological and pleasurable dimension that can go way beyond basic hygiene and grooming.

Like most changes in the home this has been a gradual process. Despite the fact that the bathroom is one of most technically demanding rooms in the home, the story isn't led by technological development (after all a wealthy Victorian could have piped hot and cold water). More important are changing social and cultural attitudes: attitudes to sexuality and the body, health and hygiene, physical and psychological

wellbeing all influence how we position bathing in the domestic pantheon.

Looking back to the 1960s and 1970s one of most influential manuals for bathroom design in Europe and the US was 'The Bathroom' (1966) by Alexander Kira. With chapter titles like 'Design criteria for cleaning the body – Bath', Kira reduced bathing to series of ergonomic studies showing how ablutions could be carried out with maximum efficiency in the minimum space . It is a chilling reminder how little had changed since 19th century attempts to compress washing into a science of hygiene, not just free from disease but also messy emotions and naked confrontation. Yet we also forget the reality of bathing habits in our not so distant past. Kira quotes a report from the German press that claimed "More than half the population bathe only once a week and brush their teeth only rarely, and approximately 10% bathe once every four weeks."

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Yet while Kira presided over the triumph of clinical correctness (a hollow conclusion to Le Corbusier's vision of the role mechanisation could play in defining the modern home), a shift towards a more celebratory sensibility was already gathering pace. In 1976 Leonard Koren launched 'Wet: the magazine of gourmet bathing', an idiosyncratic West coast magazine devoted to the free-thinking counter culture that bubbled up around the hot tub. It was a first step in Koren's crusade to reawaken the possibilities of more

imaginary and sensually charged bathing experiences that are shaping how we think today.

An influential stage in the bathroom's 'coming out' is connected to growing interest in fitness and the gym in the 1980s. Together with the burgeoning market for interiors magazines, this helped make the bathroom a stage for the body beautiful and designers such as Andrée Putman and Philippe Starck gave it a new gloss, helping shift ideas of luxury away from traditional style to a modern visual language. The role played by hotels is also significant. In the new breed of so-called 'boutique hotels' the bathrooms were photographed as much as the bar. Although bathroom as designer icon may seem remote from most daily washing experiences, like the influence of couture on high street fashion it has percolated through to mainstream thinking.

More recently interest in the whole panoply of non-western approaches to healing and wellbeing have profoundly influenced how we think about bathing and its increasing association with relaxation and regeneration. In the US expenditure on spas has overtaken skiing, and the number of spas has increased at an annual rate of 21% in the last five years, while surveys highlight shifting perceptions of the spa from 'pampering' or 'indulgent' to 'important to wellbeing and staying healthy'. Something of this is coming home not just in an appetite for essences, but in the way the bathroom is reinvented as the domestic focus for wellbeing.

The urge to reconnect with the physical and sensual is partly a side effect of our industrialised and virtual existence and the disquieting sense of spinning out of synch with natural rhythms. In "Undesigning the Bath', Koren defines the great bath as "a place to escape from the depredations of the technological world, not revel in them." Equally increasing environmental concern is forcing us to redefine how we value water. It might seem ideologically bankrupt that in a world where over 1 billion people lack access to even the WHO's most basic requirement of 20 litres per person per day, the wealthy west nurtures a more celebratory approach to washing. Yet it is also true that if we are to manage global water resources, we need to radically change how we value water in every aspect of its use. Andrée Putman's observation that water has 'acquired the reputation of an unwelcome guest' is revealing: "I consider the bathroom, along with the kitchen, the only indispensable room in the home ….I believe the closest attention should always be paid to the bathroom and the kitchen, the seat of fire and water, where the ancient and laughable drama of human life is played out, interspersed by the repeated actions of using water for washing and fire for cooking. This would ensure that these rooms offer the vital level of physical comfort essential for our spiritual ease."

But how does this take physical form? It's ironic that as the generic western bathroom has been adopted more or less around the world, the west is looking to other cultures and the pre-industrial past to rediscover a sensitivity largely lost to our straight–laced bathing culture.

Japan, with its extraordinarily refined bathing culture that has managed to endure despite the onslaught of moulded plastic is one example. This is built around an intense relation to water and its enjoyment and characterised by an authentic simplicity designed to induce mental and spiritual repose and support a series of carefully honed rituals that make cleansing a separate activity from relaxing in the bath. Something of this is captured in bathrooms by John Pawson where the extreme restraint of the environment is a frame for human activity. Another cultural model inspiring contemporary bathing rituals is the hamam, the Islamic bathhouse that grew out of the remains of Roman bathing culture around the Mediterranean. Although it originated as a place of ritual purification attached to the mosque , this penumbral world is also a sensual paradise, where the majestic womb like architecture and use of marble or stone create the setting for a bathing experience that is hard to match in the contemporary world. Peter Zumthor's thermal baths at Vals come to mind but given the growth in the spa industry it is remarkable that there are few other examples. This might seem a long way from the domestic sphere but it is exactly such places that are enriching current thinking about how we incorporate water in daily life.

The most obvious change in the home is not only how bathing is prioritised in terms of space allocated but also how it connects with other activities. Following the shift away from a cellular room structure towards more fluid living spaces, the bathroom is breaking down into its component parts and reassembling in different configurations. The

common merger is bathing and sleeping, with bathing recast as a relaxation ritual as much about intimacy and play as body care, and often sociable rather than strictly private. Such arrangements acknowledge that rituals are different at the start and end of the day, with the shower more likely to be a morning routine and the bath take place in the evening. Again hotels are leading the way. For an exhibition on 'Grand Hotels' Toyo Ito designed an ideal hotel room for New York city where more or less the entire floor space was occupied by two large circular pens, one for sleeping and one for bathing and equally playful and eroticised.

In the quest for domestic space that supports a less structured way of life, it is the fixed nature of plumbing that constrains where and how we bathe. Yet designers and manufacturers have tended to concentrate on the appearance of a bath or basin rather than the systems behind them. But certain initiatives are beginning to challenge this. For example David Chipperfield's concept for a plumbing system incorporated in a raised tiled floor means that, in theory at least, the bath and basin could be moved around like furniture. Or Dornbracht's project for bathroom modules as self-contained units that can be inserted in an open living space much like a kitchen.

In fact the kitchen provides a useful precedent in the way it has evolved from a centre of food production located firmly backstage to become the focal point and social hub in many contemporary homes. If current developments continue we

may find ourselves coming to think of the bathing area as the counterpoint to the kitchen and eating, one nourishing our physical needs the other nurturing wellbeing in a larger sense.

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