

# PUBLIC BATHING

Jane Withers' latest exhibition in London takes a new look at old bathhouses.

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Jane Withers is a design consultant and curator whose work often focuses on environmental issues. From urban swimming to ocean plastic pollution and »water footprints«, her multifaceted work delves into the social and environmental questions surrounding water. GROHE caught up with the London-based curator in the run up to her exhibition »Soak, Steam, Dream«, where she unites architects and designers to reimagine the bathhouse as a social space.

## GROHE

In your work you address important global environmental challenges such as water sustainability and pollution via a design-led approach. Subjects such as large-scale ocean plastic pollution and urban river contamination are turned into exhibitions. How can this approach not just address but also change how people relate to water?

### Jane Withers

Design is a very good medium for looking at environmental challenges and introducing imaginative perspectives. For example, the »Urban Plunge« exhibition looked at swimming in urban rivers and about water in relation to the human body. Urban rivers are some of the only large-scale public spaces we have left in cities. We should make them liveable again. This raised the subject of water quality and all the other issues around it in a less obvious way than just banging on about urban rivers being hazardously filthy.

**G** In your exhibition »Project Ocean«, where you partnered with Selfridges department store in London, you addressed ocean plastic waste, one of the major 21st century concerns. How can commercial partners contribute to the debate when it's often consumerism itself that is contributing to pollution?

**JW** With the Project Ocean exhibition on marine plastic pollution, we wanted to see how we could communicate this in a way that would inspire people to rethink their disposable plastic use. We all suffer eco-fatigue at some point. However, marine scientists say that plastic pollution is an issue where the individual can make a difference. Selfridges described it as »retail activism«. They stopped selling single-use plastic water bottles and encouraged visitors to think about their water use. We need to re-evaluate plastic and how we use it. Studio Swine did this wonderful project with captured sea plastic from plastic gyres and reworked it as a precious material. It's a very interesting way of visualising ideas across cultures.

**G** The Zoological Society of London's #oneless campaign, which has grown out of your Project Ocean, encourages people and organisations to give up plastic water bottles.

**JW** #oneless came about through Project Ocean; it has a symbolic focus that's easy for people to grasp. If you say, »Why not reconsider using a plastic water bottle?«, it's a good entry point. Very



soon you're thinking about the plastic bag, the disposable coffee cup, and ultimately your plastic use. We want London to give up the plastic water bottle and reduce plastic pollution in rivers and the ocean. This is also why I'm looking forward to be testing the new GROHE Blue Home in my house. The ability to get filtered and sparkling water straight from the tap is a great way to reduce the usage of plastic bottles.

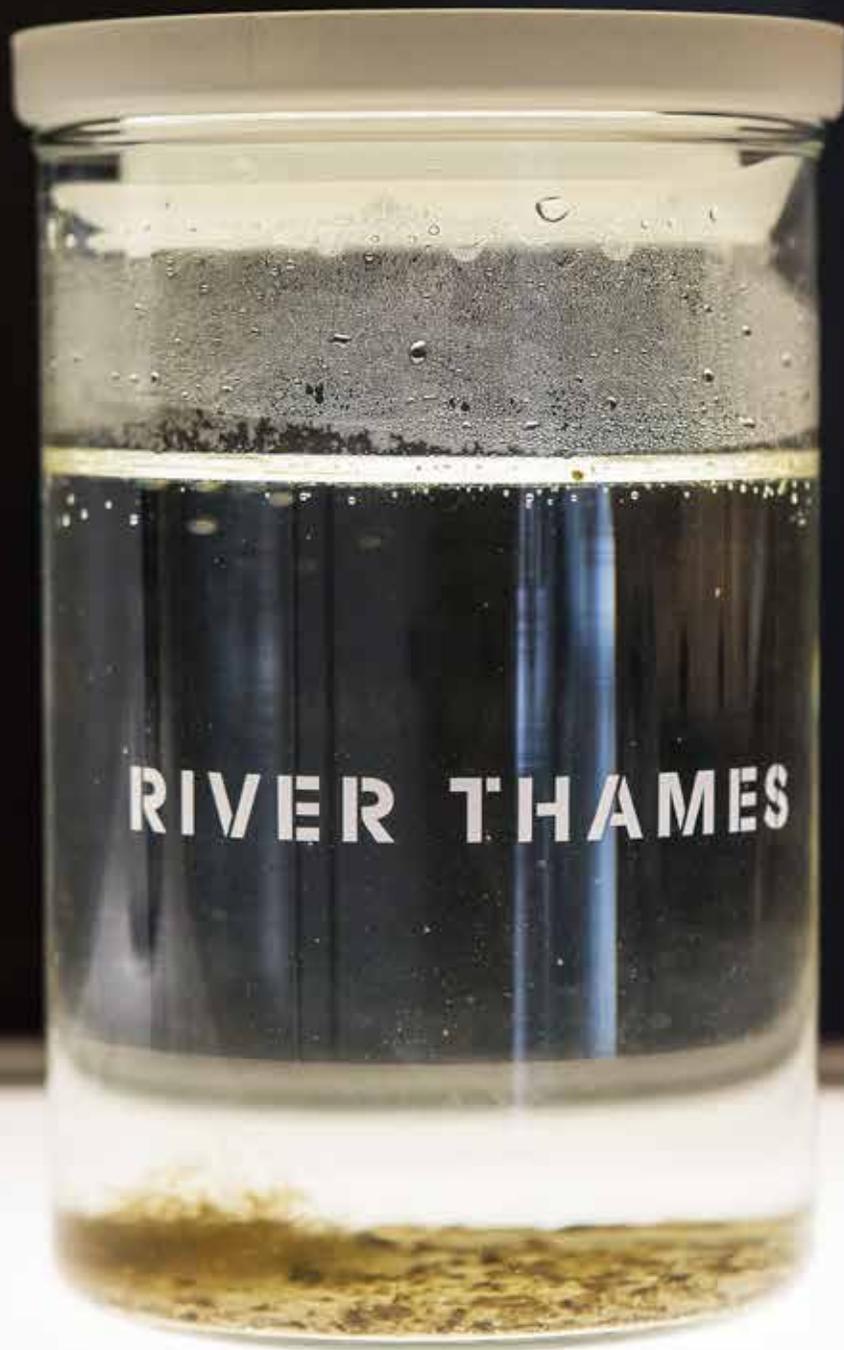
**G** »Soak, Steam, Dream«, your upcoming exhibition in London, looks at modern bathing culture and examines ideas from contemporary designers and architects. Why the focus on bathing?

**JW** The exhibition shows there is a revival of interest in the bathhouse. For example Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals reinterprets ancient bathing cultures from a contemporary perspective. Other architects and designers are bringing back the idea of the

bathhouse as a space for social, cultural and even political exchange. The idea of »taking the waters« is also experiencing some form of resurgence. We have this concept of wellness and the spa, but that's a more private, privileged experience.

**G** Where do you locate the contemporary resurgence in this interest? Is it to do with communal experiences and communitarianism?

**JW** I think it's a way of building community. In Barking, one of the poorer London boroughs, there was the Barking bathhouse, a temporary project by Something & Son that was very much trying to return to the idea of the local public bathhouse as a community space, making the whole experience more affordable. There is also a very interesting project in Gothenburg by raumlaborberlin architects, which is sowing the seeds of regeneration in the disused dock area of the city.



Water sample from the Thames as featured in Urban Plunge.

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With her exhibition Urban Plunge, curator Jane Withers raised the subject of water quality in urban rivers.



Bathing culture projects like this Gothenburg sauna by raumlabor architects are on view at »Soak, Steam, Dream: reinventing Bathing Culture« in London until 28 January 2017. Learn more at [janewithers.com](http://janewithers.com).