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Urban Plunge
New designs for natural
swimming in our cities

Curated by Jane Withers for Wonderwater

Urban Plunge — New designs for natural swimming in our cities

Jane Withers

Cities grew up around rivers for many good practical reasons — transport, agriculture, defense, access to fresh water — and historically rivers have been at the heart of urban leisure and cultural life. In the London of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Thames was the city's watery playground, criss-crossed with craft for transport and leisure, pomp and pageantry, frequented by swimmers as well as home to floating swimming pools. In the 20th century, as recently as the 1950s, photos show the beaches by Tower Bridge thronged with bathers and picnickers. But just the other day, at low tide on a searing Friday in July, I was the only person walking on the beach beneath Horlseydown Old Stairs. Looking across to the Tower of London, the foreshore at Traitors' Gate was equally deserted. Today, although our waterfronts are heaving with alfresco living, beneath them is a darker underworld where few venture. Compared to earlier centuries, we seem to recoil fearfully from urban waters. And yet the schemes showcased here are evidence that this is beginning to change.

Urban Plunge brings together a series of current projects for natural bathing in New York, Copenhagen, and London that offer a new water level perspective on the city. Harbour baths and floating swimming pools are interesting because they touch on so many aspects of the city and city living, and challenge the way we use and think about the future of our urban waterways.

The idea for this exhibition began to take shape about a year ago when I came across Studio Octopi's Thames Baths Project in the open call for 'London As It Could Be Now' at the Royal Academy of Arts. The intriguing proposal for a natural bathing pool beneath the Victoria Embankment at Blackfriars struck me as a wonderful counterpoint to the terrestrial urban environment. While the embankment streams with cars and suited people, beneath it is a place of almost surreal contrast — a pocket of watery wildness, a refuge for swimmers and wildlife right in the midst of one of the city's busiest strips. As a self-confessed aquaholic, I began to think more about the possibilities such proposals offer for enriching urban experience.

Although there seem to be sparkling waterfront developments everywhere, these usually stop abruptly at the water's edge. We tend to treat rivers as blanks in the city waiting to be bridged

or converted into boat superhighways, rather than places for people. The result is that huge areas of our cities have effectively been cordoned off from public use, but here is evidence of a more human-centric approach.

Thus began a game of mentally assembling a list of like-spirited places from the Jugendstijl bathing stations on the Rhine in Basel, to the swimming channels in Zurich's Limmat, or the series of new harbour baths in Copenhagen. I quickly identified a dozen or more new designs and proposals for urban swimming experiences from Osaka to Helsinki, from Sydney to Stockholm, from Amsterdam to Prague, London, Berlin and New York. Even this morning I caught a news flash about a new floating pool for Montreal's Old Port. The exhibition was able to become a reality through the enthusiasm and support of Roca, and their interest in exploring the role of design in protecting the water environment.

Urban Plunge sets out to explore this phenomenon through a series of projects that illustrate architecture and design's role in changing river usage and challenging our attitudes to the urban water environment. Beyond their primary function as places to swim safely in city centres, these projects also help us to reconnect with the lifeblood of our cities. For a city lover, what could be more thrilling than a water level perspective, bathing with views downstream to Tower Bridge or with Wall Street as a backdrop? Leaving behind the earthbound world is a chance to explore our surroundings in a new way, and revel in spaces that seem to exist in a different time frame from everyday city life, a watery underworld that we have lost touch with.

As much as these schemes share a common spirit, what's also interesting is their different approaches. While Thames Baths proposals for natural bathing pools at Blackfriars and Temple Stairs recall the wilderness of marshes and reed beds of pre-industrial London, + POOL's crisp design mimics Manhattan's grid, a giant chunk of the city floating in the East River. Conceived as an art installation, Of Soil and Water: King's Cross Pond Club explores how we can re-introduce natural cycles into the urban environment. It promises the tantalising vision of urbanites shedding their city armour to bathe in a man-made natural pond in the middle of central London's largest construction site. In contrast, Copenhagen's harbour baths are sculptural wooden promenades that create new links between land and water, social in-between spaces much like beaches.

For the moment, Londoners — apart from a rebellious few — can only dream of river swimming in the heart of the city, but if we follow Copenhagen's example that could change. Over the past fifteen years, the Danish capital's harbour has been transformed from an industrial port to a cultural and social centre, and is now one

of relatively few European cities, where it is safe to swim in the centre. The critical step to improved water quality was modernising the sewer system and diverting wastewater that used to discharge directly into waterways during heavy rainfall. Since the first Copenhagen Harbour Bath in 2002, a further four have opened and the phenomenally successful programme has been emulated in other Danish cities, paving the way for more ambitious thinking on urban waters.

Copenhagen's House of Water is a futuristic vision for an island dedicated to water experiences. The idea of learning about water and the environment emerged from the Danish government's Blue Plan to plant a colony of artificial islands in the capital's harbour. House of Water's undulating white landscape looks as if an iceberg has parked up in town, and riffs on the way the geography of Nordic cities changes in winter as liquid becomes solid and water becomes land, creating new public spaces and routes across the city.

While Copenhagen's ambitious commitment to clean up the harbour and river waters is beyond the reach of most cities at the moment, there are other approaches. The starting point for the designers of + POOL was the realisation that if you can't clean the whole river, why not try and clean a part of it? The floating pool acts as a giant strainer filtering river water through its walls, so New Yorkers can swim in safe conditions within it. This filtration system is currently being tested on a temporary floating lab on the Hudson River and the results published online allow New Yorkers to track river water quality.

It is paradoxical that while we settled around water, growing urban populations and industrialisation have turned our rivers into sewers, burying, barricading and polluting them to the point where they are no longer accessible or hospitable for human use. Water quality, dangerous currents and increased river traffic are the arguments generally put forward against swimming in the Thames. In her forthcoming book 'Downstream: a history and celebration of swimming the River Thames', author Caitlin Davies argues that a culture of fear has grown up around the Thames, we have burdened it with dangers, real and imagined, and over time this has led to the deserted foreshores we see today. Yet in terms of water quality, the nadir was reached in the 1960s when the Thames was declared biologically dead. Since then it has improved considerably, and 'Is now the cleanest in living memory' says Davies.

Interestingly, Davies also argues that the sort of water leisure activities currently being proposed — public swims, floating baths, leisure boating — are a return to activities that used to animate urban rivers. In the 19th century there were palatial floating pools at Charing Cross and Waterloo, as well as in New York and on the Seine among others. If we turned our back on urban waters through the 20th century, at last there seems to be a change in the tide. In the

case of the Thames, the Mayor of London has commissioned a feasibility study to explore if and where lidos might be positioned in the central stretch, given such issues as strong river currents, navigational routes and water quality.

Of course, the current tide of proposals for natural urban swimming is part of the larger wild swimming movement swelling in popularity in Britain and internationally. While the lido movement in the 1930s offered sanitised swimming in clean waters as an improvement on bathing in ponds and rivers, now we hanker after the reverse — a sense of elemental connection in our nature-deprived urban environments.

But the important point is these river and harbour baths offer a safer wild swimming experience. Although I grew up swimming in Hampstead ponds, I am certainly not a fearless open water swimmer. (As I write I am failing to pluck up courage to join a breakaway group from the Serpentine Swimming Club on one of their informal summer swims at high tide in the Thames at Hammersmith). The appeal of the river baths surveyed here is that you leave behind the antiseptic world of glistening tiles and chlorinated waters for a freshwater experience, but one where you are unlikely to drift into danger. These river baths can be enjoyed by more than just the hardy (or perhaps foolhardy) few.

In a recent article in the New York Times, 'The Self-Reflecting Pool', writer Bonny Tsui argues the appeal of swimming as one of the last refuges from connectivity, 'as the world, with its escalating rings and pings, gets ever more hysterical, suspending yourself in water becomes ever more appealing.' Many writers, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to neurologist Dr Oliver Sachs, have written about the mood-enhancing effects of swimming and observed connections between swimming and thinking. In the essay 'Water Babies', Sachs writes: 'There was a total engagement in the act of swimming, in each stroke, and at the same time the mind could float free, become spellbound, in a state like a trance.' Sachs recounts that 'theories and stories would construct themselves in my mind as I swam to and fro, or round and round Lake Jeff'. In the city the lure of liquid escapism is even more heightened: river swimming offers a physical and mental connection to the waters that animates urban experience, right in its midst we can unplug from urban life as the sloshing of river water cancels out the city sounds and sets the mind afloat.

But beyond the thrill and rejuvenating effects of city swimming, this swell of river baths challenges us to rethink how we use and abuse our urban waterways, helping us reconnect to these great rivers that are all too often still treated as wastewaters in our cities.

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