



The Public Bath and the City *Christie Pearson*

...it is something within me which knows very well that it would be useless for me to take pains to appear strong and display self mastery, for my wild nature will always be visible through a thousand and one cracks.

— JEAN GENET, *THE MIRACLE OF THE ROSE*

Imagining the city as an enclave of constructed civility always entails a contrasting backdrop of wild nature. But even within urban boundaries, elements of nature are protected through ritual practices, and in spaces where natural forces can have their pleasurable and restorative effects in safe confines. The public bath in its many forms around the world has provided a place for these rituals. Here the distinction between “culture” and “nature” blurs. The public bath as a civic amenity is in decline worldwide, and its value as a ritual has been fractured in the West. At the intersection point of many apparent oppositions — good and bad, clean and dirty, sacred and profane — the meaning of the public bath as an image or an institution reflects our shifting definitions of civil culture, functioning as a mirror of city itself. Now may be the moment to reclaim urban public bathing culture.

Traditions of collective bathing are inseparable from the history of human cultures, with examples stretching back at least to Mohenjo Daro, a city that flourished around 2000 BC in the Indus Valley of what is today Pakistan. Baths may be retreats placed outside a settlement, like the North American sweat lodge, Japanese onsen, European hot springs, or Scandinavian cottage sauna. Some forms may require pilgrimage to a sacred landscape: Hindu worshippers travel to the Ganges to pray and immerse themselves in its cold waters, and to confluence sites for the Kumbh Mela events. When the public bath moves into the city, it may frame natural landscapes, as in an indoor wave pool or a Japanese open-air rotenburo, or amplify the elemental



qualities that buildings usually try to moderate, such as heat and cold, wet and dry, darkness and light. These urban bath cultures, like the Roman *thermae* and *balnae*, Turkish *hammam*, Japanese *senjo*, and Russian *banya*, have formed a cornerstone of their cities' spatial forms and their citizens' daily rituals. They rely on boundaries and rules, which continually evolve as long as the tradition is alive. Etiquette prescribing degrees of nudity shifts: bathers in a disreputable medieval English "stew" were fully naked, while in the eighteenth-century European spa they wore muslin bathing dress. Rules about contact between the sexes shift: when Commodore Perry arrived in Japan in 1853 and the disapproving American eye beheld the mixed bathing in Japanese cities, he pushed the Japanese to more strictly enforce segregation. This taboo took hold eventually—but only in the city. The fact that all still bathe together at many rustic *onsen* illustrates how flexible the inner and outer behavioral codes must be at the public bath, particularly as the context becomes more or less urban.



People go to public baths for beautification, hygiene, healing, socializing, amusement, sex, and worship. A visitor to a public bath in the West today may be apprehensive. What are the rules? We fear that our personal boundaries will be compromised and that our public personae will be lost with our clothing. Moral uncertainty always seems to accompany the public bath. Austere Romans echoed Spartan and Greek warnings that a warm bath would make men effeminate. Bathing was held to be an agent of moral decline by early Christians (focusing on outer cleansing could detract from inner purity), and lauded by industrial-era social reformers as a key to moral improvement. Bathing the poor and the ill was considered an act of charity by medieval Christians and Buddhists alike, yet the fear that too much enjoyment would lead to moral deterioration haunts the Western traditions of the bath.

The roots of public bathing lie in the history of the sacred landscape, and many early bathing sites appear to have first been places of

worship. Originally chosen for their spectacular and evocative geographies, these sites have the potential to inspire awe before a force greater than ourselves, and even transform us through a meaningful encounter. The urban public bath attempts to capture the power of a wild landscape and its water, and to bring about a catharsis in the bather through its rituals. The rituals that rule the public bath are designed to encourage one to linger and ultimately lose one's sense of purpose, allowing a peaceful space of silence to emerge.

The history of mankind goes from natural cave to the artificial cave, from the underground cave to the aboveground cave...

—NORMAN BROWN, *LOVE'S BODY*

In the West, the act of entering a discreet realm within the city and disrobing with others can symbolize a return to nature, to paradise, or to the amniotic bath from which we are born. The bath in the city may act as a kind of container for a socially constructed version of nature: once inside, we are paradoxically freed to act “naturally” through ritualized rules. Its accepted status as a space governed by ritual makes possible behaviors that the rest of public life rejects. The urban bath has policing agents of various kinds, including your neighbor who will be sure to tell you what you are doing wrong. The many kinds of pleasure that may be enjoyed at the baths are continuously kept in check, adjusting to shifting sensibilities, so that we may approach the powers of the wild in safety, and in a well-rehearsed ritual moderated by evolving architectural and behavioral forms.

The evolution of the Western European public bathing tradition attained its cultural peak, in terms of sheer impact, with the great *thermae* of Imperial Rome. Modelled on the less luxurious Greek men's gymnasium with its cold showers, these institutions grew to accommodate thousands from many walks of life. At the height of the empire, leisured Romans spent every afternoon at the baths:





beginning in the dressing room, apodyterium; then moving to a warm room with a heated floor, the tepidarium, to begin a sweat; then the hotter caldarium, which usually contained a hot water source; finishing with a cold plunge bath in the frigidarium. You might decide to warm up by working out in the palestra, or with some poetry reading in a library exedra within the thick wall of service spaces, stores, libraries, and galleries. Vendors roamed, selling food, drinks, depilation, and sexual services. Some emperors tried to enforce gender segregation to prevent the baths being used for sexual activities, but this was never a popular rule: they mostly remained mixed-gender. Roman bath architecture pioneered experiments with complex concrete domes and curves that would later be adopted by Christian churches to evoke another spirituality. A sectional cut through Bath, England, illustrates a history shared by many Western European cities. Beneath the newly developed swimming and health establishment of Bath Spa lie the remnants of Georgian and Victorian spas for the well-heeled,



seventeenth-century curative baths frequented by royalty, a medieval monastery where monks used the waters to heal the sick, and the Roman bathing and temple precinct of Sulis-Minerva, all built over the sacred spring of the Celtic goddess Sulis. The civic and sacred functions overlap and continually reframe the hot spring's water.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, public baths and, in fact, bathing of any kind all but disappeared. Medieval bath-houses had to contend with outbreaks of plague and venereal disease and the warnings of doctors, who now considered bathing itself to be dangerous, theorizing that immersion in water compromised the protective covering of one's pores. The monks who had believed in the curative powers of Bath's spring later condemned the public baths for their twenty-four-hour revelry and debauchery, as a rise in illegitimate births caused churches throughout Europe to enforce segregated bathing. Then, when the bubonic plague devastated the continent in the fourteenth century, public baths were closed, abandoned, or openly turned into

brothels—only to be cleaned up once again in the sixteenth century when new sexually transmitted diseases appeared.

With the emergence of germ theory in the mid-nineteenth century, opinion again shifted. Cities were crowded and growing quickly as the Industrial Revolution gained strength, and a fear of contagion between classes took hold. Planners came under pressure to provide for public standards of hygiene. England led the way, with measures such as the Public Baths and Wash Houses Act of 1846. American social reformers wishing to “elevate” their citizens responded with the “City Beautiful” movement of the 1890s, when great parks and monumental bath houses were built in cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. These cities quickly had to institute regulations prohibiting showers longer than ten minutes, as pleasure was distracting from purpose. New York children told to leave the summer swimming baths on the Hudson would dirty themselves to be allowed re-entry. People were enjoying themselves, sidestepping the facility’s proper hygienic function. The moralizing approach to public improvement attempted to prevent this slide into decadence, away from the good life of virtue into the good life of pleasure.

What survives today in the modern Western city is a splitting and compartmentalizing of programs that were, for a time, coexistent. Cleansing as a moral duty has given way to scientifically endorsed health programs, including showers at public swimming pools and gymnasiums, or in your own home hygienic unit. Bathing is now also a beautifying treatment at the day spa, and is the scene of eroticism in gay male bath-house culture—a vibrant expression of the public bath incorporating sensuality, sexuality, and cleansing. There are some exceptional places where men and women can bathe together; far fewer where erotic expression between women or between genders is tolerated. While still gender-segregated, a sauna or hot tub at a recreation centre is a rich social space that offers many opportunities for communal conversation or private reflection.

Non-Western traditions of public bathing have changed less over

the centuries. The Finnish sauna, Japanese sento, Russian banya and Turkish hammam are examples of living traditions, under siege yet still a vital part of communal life. In these enduring forms of the public bath we glimpse what our societies could have. Public baths in Islamic societies are traditionally situated adjacent to or as part of the mosque complex, which includes community centers and schools. The plan of Istanbul reveals cells of residences and businesses, each served by a central hammam and mosque. The architecture of the hammam is an Islamic riff on or repurposing of Roman baths. Its iconic central form is a cosmic dome, and the baths themselves are a sequence of courts, where the largest space flips you up into a constructed starry night sky. Men and women are allowed at different times, or in different areas. The bather first passes through the *camekan*, a space for smoking, drinking tea, and lounging, to which you will return at the end. In a warm disrobing room you put on wooden clogs and wrap yourself in a *pestemal* (Turkish towel). Next is the largest space, the *hararet*, where you sweat lying on an elevated, heated platform. Either alone or with the help of a *tellak* (attendant), bathers may receive a massage, soaping, and rinsing at one of the perimeter basins. Although once inside the hammam the sexes are segregated, literature makes clear the historical opportunities for liaisons en route to the baths, underscoring the baths’ apparent aversion to excessive purposefulness. In Ottoman Turkey, groups of women would spend entire days soaking and gossiping at the hammam, bringing with them their children, food, drink, and musical instruments. At many points in history, this has been the only public social space accessible to women who were otherwise sequestered in the home.

Bathing friends are the best of friends. — JAPANESE SAYING

Urban recreational spaces, such as public pools, gardens, and parks, periodically create festival conditions by temporarily dismantling social hierarchies, allowing us to choose to be participants or spectators in

the collective. The urban public bath is different; it makes detached spectatorship impossible. A gentle saturnalia is evoked when we enter the city outdoor swimming pool in summer, or the sauna at the YMCA. The creative excitement of the festival is present, but here it is restrained, guarded by its ritual use. This public bathing tradition is also invoked when urbanites head to a beach, lido, or hot spring with our friends and family: a foray to the edge of the wilderness. Our identities lose articulation in our bathing costume, and we become free to re-create ourselves. We could make more of these opportunities to remove or loosen our identities.

This is something that public spaces of worship also attempt. As a sacred opening to contemplation, religious buildings and gathering spaces invite collective action, imagination, and play as much as the above civic examples. Overlappings and intertwinings of civic and sacred uses of buildings are well documented; the hammam is part of a civic-religious complex; the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome is a vestige of the Imperial Baths of Diocletian; medieval cathedrals have housed markets, livestock pens, and dancing. Where rituals of cleansing are explicitly addressed in holy texts of Jews, Hindus, or Muslims, the public bath itself has an overtly sacred role. In Finland, the sauna is a traditional place for giving birth and laying out the dead, and a child is taught to behave here as in church. The Koran admits of only two types of public buildings: the mosque (which contains a variety of social functions) and the hammam, the baths. The idea that the public bath is in some sense a sacred space recurs. It is a secular ritual, at once profoundly personal and shared.

However the public bath is framed, its cultivation allows us to continually renew its role as a free zone of peace and contemplation. Searching for meaning amidst the pleasures of the bath, we find instead our minds silently wandering on the peripheries of perception. Deep reflections are glimpsed through shifting mirror-mazes of light and water. Our private bathtub expands in the public bath, where we find ourselves in our broader home of human community.

