LITHIUM

STATES OF EXHAUSTION

Eds. Francisco Díaz, Anastasia Kubrak, Marina Otero Verzier

Het Nieuwe Instituut

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The Architecture of the European Mineral Spa

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In his seminal work *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948), the architectural historian Sigfried Giedion sought inspirational architectural prototypes to combat the horrors of mechanization and war.[1] Giedion pointed to the public bath as an architecture for total regeneration, one that would be able to promote new cultures of collective holism. Today again we might look to the histories of the public bath as we seek ecological and social regeneration in the face of extractive economies and technologies. Within the European context, we find in the spa an architectural and urban typology.

Spas have always been architectures of power, where the elements are harnessed successively by empire, church, aristocracy, state, and capital. Largely dominated by neo-liberal capitalist regimes, contemporary spas could nevertheless be repurposed – following Giedion's reflections – as places for the equitable global distribution of power and the production of new spaces for shared enjoyment, architectures to combat the inexorable pace of extraction, production, and consumption powered by mineral bodies.

Mineral Springs

Before there was a spa town, there was a mineral spring: a source that remains at the center of the place. Plants and animals have drawn from it over millennia. Springing from below, pools and ponds, forming marshes and rivulets that connect to other bodies of water. These earthy waters continue to flow up, stubbornly resisting transformation in the neutral commodity of H_2O by the sheer unnerving funk of their taste and smell.[2] The water of a treasured source is not clear; its suspended mineral content gives it a scent and a hue. It stains the fabric with sulfur and oxides. It corrodes jewelry and pipes, and when we drink it or soak in it, it affects us.

These sources or *aquae* are the most visible landmarks identified by the ancient Romans on the *Tabula Peutingeriana* map of the empire from the 1st-century. Formalized and framed by the Roman Empire as it expanded, the mineral source, hot or cold, becomes the opportunity for the construction of a fountain, small baths, or large thermae at the heart of a new colony. The Roman Hammam Essalihine in Algeria was built over cold and hot mineral water sources and has been enjoyed continuously for two millennia. The Cluny Museum in Paris is a Roman thermae in ruin. Bath in England was a pre-Roman site of worship to the deity of the spring, later taken over by a Roman bathing and religious complex, now a museum. The waters remained in use through the Middle Ages, evolving into a spa town in the 17th-century, later rejuvenated as Thermae Bath Spa in 2006. In Aachen and Baden-Baden, Roman buildings were incorporated within active spas whose architecture continued to evolve.

The springs of Europe were not celebrated in the Middle Ages with distinct architectures. They served as healing centers where drinking and bathing were medicine

for the ill, tended and guarded by monks in compassionate service. Waters with unique compositions and qualities occupied the field of medicine more than hygiene. While public baths in medieval European towns and cities served, in fact, for hygiene, their buildings were largely indiscernible from the surrounding vernacular, and they used water sources as available. These bathhouses disappeared following outbreaks of the plague and other contagious diseases.

Wellbeing

In the 16th-century, the German physician and alchemist Paracelsus traveled throughout Europe seeking healing springs as he studied natural science, medicine, geology, and chemistry. His writings were widely read by doctors of the 17th-century, including Francois Blondel of Aachen, who introduced balneology as a medical and scientific discipline, prescribed both bathing and drinking cures to clients, and assisted in the design of bathing spaces in his region. The doctors of the wealthy begin to advise their sick patients to take 'water cures' at Vichy or Bad Ems in the 17th and 18th-centuries. Upon arrival after a long journey, they found minimal supports. It is from the desire for better accommodations to suit these affluent medical tourists that the architecture of the spa town rises.

When, in the hopes of curing her rheumatism, the French aristocrat Madame de Sevigne traveled to Vichy in 1676, she encountered magma-heated naturally sparkling water, rich in mineral salts and elements, including bicarbonate, lithium, calcium, iron, manganese, potassium, strontium, zinc, and fluoride. Under the doctor's direction, her daily schedule for a stay of some weeks included drinking glass after glass of water each morning at six o'clock, walking until evacuating, being sprayed with a hose for thirty minutes while supervised by a medic who read from Descartes to distract her from the ordeal, and, finally, being wrapped up in blankets to sweat in bed. She returned the next year to do it again, attributing her wellbeing to the waters.[3] Hotels of the spa towns grow under royal patronage, and with them come treatment buildings or cure houses, theatres, gambling houses, places of worship and merriment.

Enjoyment

In Imperial Europe, the spa offered extra-urban experimental sites of enjoyment for aristocrats and gentry. The 18th-century spa drinking hall was the social centerpiece, where the health-seekers assembled to fill and refill their cups from sculpted spigots. The hall was ringed with adjoining rooms for gambling, reading, games, eating, drinking coffee, and other amusements. Immersion and shower bathing in water-based treatment rooms occurred in the 'cure house,' a separate building. Lodgings for visitors and a theatre for their entertainment would complement the scene. The spa town expanded functional programs, and their buildings were increasingly developed as a kind of model city combining hygiene with leisure. The construction of the spa's outdoor spaces through landscaping and planning grew in importance alongside romantic philosophies of the 18th-century. The Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was an advocate of cold-water bathing and fresh air, and his writing supported a revival of the natural as good, healing, and clean. The importance of the outdoor daily walks in the towns gain support by carefully designed parks and gardens, networked and planned in an ensemble of pathways leading to landscape follies, fountains, outlooks, bridges, open-air pavilions, funiculars, monuments, and colonnades. When Park of Springs was created at Vichy in 1812, following Napoleon's orders, its radial geometries set a new standard for open space design in the spa town.[4] A further empirical edict by Napoleon III in 1861 developed a 13-hectare riverside strolling park in an English style.

Control

Following the French Revolution and alongside industrialization and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the spa became a social destination for an increasingly middle-class visitor. Its users were able to travel affordably via growing railway networks. The spa town

more consciously reflected and absorbed the lessons of environmental degradation in the industrial city, experimenting with forms that might remedy that condition. Sunlight and open spaces imagined what design for health might be in a world of contagion. If Pasteur's germ theory explained how a water pump in the industrial city could spread cholera, death, and disease, the spa faucet served as an instrument of control for the spreading of health. The formal expression of the spa constellates the rise of industrialization and mechanization alongside trends in medicine and philosophy. In the 19th-century, industrial capitalism embraced exhaustion and excess as leisure time cleaves itself from work time. A trip to the spa to regenerate the white-collar worker will make them fitter, more ready to work.

As in the Roman era, the spring itself becomes designed as a feature at the spa in increasingly ornate displays of poetry and function. Each source of water will become celebrated with its own pavilion, a secular temple to the *genius loci* that protects an ever-flowing fountain. The pumps and the faucets extracting the earth's medicine are a show of power as much as abundance, claimed by the state or patron to whom it is dedicated. This control manifests through the work of the engineer in a tap that can be turned on and off. Of the dozens of mineral springs tapped beneath the spa town of Mariánské Lázne (Marienbad) in the Czech Republic, the most famous, bearing the names Rudolph, Caroline, Ferdinand, Ambrose, and Cross, are protected by ornate, dedicated pavilions, and colonnades.

The cities of this era developed the institutional architectures of the school, prison, hospital, and opera, framed by tree-lined avenues above ground and services below, as we find in Haussmann's Paris. If, as understood by Michel Foucault, these institutions were designed by the bourgeoisie for the management of populations under the rising functions of the state, rather than the aristocracy, we see the spa town starting to follow suit in terms of the planning and scale of the building. Foucault's work makes evident the double condition of the spa as a space for control and leisure. In *On Other Spaces*, written in 1966, the French philosopher offers an argument for spa buildings and towns functioning as heterotopias of purification.[5] In his later writings, spas are instruments of biopolitical regimes which institutionally inscribe bourgeois capitalist spatiotemporal rhythms onto bodies.[6]

As experimental forerunners of a new kind of urbanism, the cohesive density of the medieval town is opened up and expanded into the countryside. The spa becomes a testing ground and, at times, an inverse mirror that addresses the ills of contemporary city life with the expanding ambition and control previously reserved for the palace. The casino, cure house, treatment facility, museum, arcade, opera, thermal baths, assembly room, dance hall, grand hotels, become developed as buildings on their own, surrounded by green space. The buildings become individual players in a proto-suburban ensemble: a city set into a park, the prototypical garden city. While Neoclassicism dominates many iconic spa buildings, it gives way at the end of the century to exuberant exposed steel structures celebrating industrial production like Vichy's Hall of Springs.

With the onset of World War I, European spa life halts and then continuously declines as a fashionable destination and a cultural *locus*. Spa towns such as Vichy are frequently repurposed in wartime as military headquarters. Following the Russian Revolution, new centers of mass leisure emerged in the Soviet sanatorium.[7] An annual two-week holiday at the sanitorium was mandated by Lenin in 1922 to all citizens as an anti-imperial collective regeneration, with massive steel-reinforced concrete as the revolutionary material. The many surviving Soviet-era spas spread from Poland to Uzbekistan are inspiring in their ambition for egalitarian inclusivity.[8]

Regeneration

With the continuity of global public bathing cultures fractured by capitalism, colonialism,

mechanization, and technologies of isolation, these centers for regeneration promise a remedy for exhaustion. However, to what extent might these places offer us the elusive emancipatory architecture of *jouissance*, sought by Henri Lefebvre in his 1973 book *Towards an Architecture of Enjoyment?*[9] The spas can also inspire reflection on histories and practices of an expanded notion of the commons: access to clean air, sunlight, and water. They experimented with cultural rituals and architectural forms dedicated to the subterranean aquatic spirits of the place, offering them a form of protection. Both historic residues and living practices, in the architectures and cultures of the spa, we glimpse material and theoretical foundations to be reclaimed as we seek to build new architectures of enjoyment based on new relationships to power, regeneration, community, embodiment, and connections with all forms of life.[10] ⊘

1. "The bath and its purposes have held different meanings for different ages. The manner in which a civilization integrates bathing within its life, as well as the type of bathing it prefers, yields searching insight into the inner nature of the period. Bathing, in whatever fashion performed, is concerned with the care of the body. To maintain the balance of this delicate instrument, to dwell in harmony with our organism, is a prime necessity of life. Some periods have viewed bathing as part of a broad ideal: total regeneration. Other periods have seen it as a mere ablution to be performed in swiftest routine. One age may weave bathing into the well-being of the whole man. Another age may see it as an isolated act, or neglect it altogether. The role that bathing plays within a culture reveals the culture's attitude toward human relaxation. It is a measure of how far individual well-being is regarded as an indispensable part of community life. This is a social problem." Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 628.
2. Ivan Illich, *H20 and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1985).
3. Katherine Ashenburg, *The Dirt on Clean* (New York: North Point Press, 2007), 120.
4. Ian Bradley, *Health, Hedonism & Hypochondria: The Hidden History of Spas* (London: Tauris Parke, 2020), 147.
5. "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. Moreover, there are even heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to these activities of purification – purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic, such as the hammin of the Moslems, or else purification that appears to be purely hygienic, as in Scandinavian saunas." Michel Foucault lecture notes 1967, published as "Des espaces autres," in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, no. 5 (1984): 46-49. Translated by Jay Miskowiec.
6. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Routledge, 1973; originally published by Presses universitaires de France, 1963).
7. Tijana Vujosevic, "The Soviet Banya and the Mass Production of Hygiene," *Architectural Histories* vol. 1, no. 1 (2013): p.Art.26.
8. Maryam Omidi, *Holidays in Soviet Sanatoriums* (London: Fuel Publishing, 2017).
9. "What it weighs upon is weightless, but it crushes what it rests upon: the body, the everyday, usage and wear, symbols of depression, femininity. Bound to pleasure and the body, humiliated like them, overwhelmed, exploited, reduced by the many stratagems of false praise [...] That there is no architecture, or to put it in simpler terms, that there exists no morphology of enjoyment, that it is barely conceivable and almost unimaginable, is terrifying." Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, edited by Łukasz Stanek, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 59.
10. "In our living condition we are constituted by the effects of forces, with their diverse and mutable relationships that stir the vital flows of a world. These forces traverse all the bodies that compose the world, making them one sole body in continuous variation, whether or not we are conscious of it. [...] We usually call 'intuition' the extra cognitive mode of decoding that is proper to affect's power of assessment. However, this is a word so worn out in our culture [...] that I propose to replace it with 'body-knowing' or 'life-knowing,' an eco-ethological knowing." Suely Rolnik, "The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life," *E-flux*, no 86 (2017).