

THE PLEASURE OF DIVING IN PUBLIC SPACES: THE EXPERIMENTAL URBAN SWIMMING LABORATORY

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Water should be accessible, touchable, splashable.

William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*

Three years ago during a trip to Europe our group discovered the pleasure of urban swimming in Amsterdam, an experience we then repeated many times in other cities. These unforgettable moments of joy led to the creation of *The Experimental Urban Swimming Laboratory*. Our agenda is to share and promote this universal pleasure.

Urban swimming is a practice and a movement arising in industrialized Western countries. Its power is explained by the joy of splashing. People have been swimming in cities for millennia, and this practice is being revived after its slow disappearance since the mid-twentieth century. Urban swimming generates many questions about city-dwellers and water. It questions our senses, as well as notions surrounding the kinds of public playgrounds we want, environmental public policy, the effects of climate change, the regulation of public spaces, and acceptable forms of leisure.

OVERCOMING REGULATIONS

In France it is prohibited to bathe in urban rivers, resulting in a fine of fifteen to fifty euros, for “hygienic” and “security” reasons. Apart from ignoring a few little signs, it may not seem like urban swimmers are infringing on any laws: there are no fences. The fine reflects the fact that we have become estranged from the idea of swimming in urban areas, and that today it appears unimaginable and improper. Despite the ban, our group may publicly announce the swim ahead of time, or spontaneously go for a pleasure dip. The goal is to show that



The Freedom to Plunge. Event held by The Experimental Urban Swimming Laboratory at Bassin de la Villette, Paris, 2015. Photo by Nicolas Rochette

it's possible to swim in so-called "illegal" areas. There is no need to stay quartered in a busy public swimming pool in an uncomfortable swimming cap.

Each collective swim in Paris has generated a variety of reactions, including: "awesome," "cool," "is it allowed?" "isn't it too dirty?" "you're crazy," "it's dangerous," and "unbelievable." Everybody reacts in different ways. Most are surprised by the possibility of swimming in a space normally considered dirty. Some decide to face their fears and succumb to the temptation of cool water, joining the group for a bath. City dwellers enjoy a glimpse of the holidays, creating a pause in the hellish pace of everyday life. This impression is strengthened by a crowd of swimmers wearing underwear due to the spontaneity of the act. There is also another dimension of enjoyment: taking off your clothes and revealing yourself, your body, in a public space. All these bodies without clothes instigate a moment of insouciance.

Urban wild swimming is transgressive. Do we want to keep it that way? What kind of public space do we really want? What kind of management or regulations do we need in the future to frame the kind urban distractions we seek? Do we wish to have laws so that we can break them? Or would we rather remove regulations around behaviour in public spaces? The issues of risk and responsibility must be considered.

RE-ENCHANTING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

In the water, a new contemplation of the city unfolds. An exciting example is the *Flussbad* project in Berlin to create a 745-metre natural swimming pool in the Spree Canal alongside Museum Island, a UNESCO

world heritage site. This will create a new sensual experience in a historic landscape, giving "new depth of meaning to Museum Island, which has long been one-sidedly cultivated as a historic pictorial landscape soon to be augmented by a replica of the historic City Palace."¹

Urban swimmers become aware of the urban landscape as they build their own emotional attachment to the place. This feeling will be different every time, depending on the atmosphere, hour of the day, the week, or the season. These experiences can create a collective memory of wonder and engagement, encapsulating a precise moment in time and space.

As a direct consequence of being in contact with water, people reach greater awareness of nature within their cities. By swimming you feel the temperature of the water and see the wildlife. You touch the seaweed, smell the naturally murky water, hear the sound of splashing. All of your senses reconnect with the elements, as well as your childhood body and behaviours. It might be one of the most powerful experiences capable of creating new connections between people and nature in the city.



Diving in the Urban Landscape. Event held by The Experimental Urban Swimming Laboratory at Bassin de la Villette, Paris, 2015. Photo by Nicolas Rochette

Furthermore, water as a resource is one of the biggest issues of our time. For many centuries, rivers were used by industry as a bottomless pit, without regard for wildlife or water quality. One of the most evident results was that the practice of swimming in cities, and even in the countryside, has become seen as unhygienic, and replaced by the sterile environment of the heavily chlorinated swimming pool. Converting the urban landscape for urban swimming and as a site of pleasure is and will be a long and tedious process. The challenges are

both environmental and perceptual. For instance, a project in London, the new King's Cross Pond Club, "offers a contrasting urban swimming experience. It's a cycle: the number of people bathing each day is limited by the plants' cleaning efficiency, humans in equilibrium with nature's abilities, a symbolic act for the balance of living in a sustainable city."² This project shows that new models of urban swimming are within reach.

NEW PUBLIC SPACES FOR PLEASURE

Following a collective urban swim, people change their approach towards the practice and the place where it occurred. Discovering the joy of playing and swimming in the river opens many possibilities, and arouses new desires. It generates a vital re-appropriation of the concrete jungle by its people and reveals lost potential uses.

Urban projects connected with water demonstrate one way to activate and unfold underutilized areas. It is a medium that attracts all kinds of people around a common aquatic playground. The experience of collective urban swimming serves as a pretext to engage discussion regarding the future of the space and our occupation of it. Indeed, as Christie Pearson and Sandra Rechico have expressed, "pools are valuable as landmarks within communities for the gathering spaces they offer and the public play activities they support. They are also valuable as a system within the city, linking communities together and celebrating our shared water resources."³

Wild urban swimming places could have the same significance as pools in the city, but connecting more intimately to urban metabolism and the non-human. In this spirit, city makers (architects, landscapers,



Swing made by the Experimental Urban Swimming Laboratory, Pantin, 2014. Photo by Nicolas Rochette

planners, engineers) have to integrate the urban swimming issue into urban projects in different ways, depending on the cultural context and quality of the water. Today, accessibility to public swimming amenities is at risk, with more and more private pools developing on public property. Many potential free water playgrounds exist untapped: puddles, fire hydrants, water jets, water mirrors, wading pools, and baths, as well as urban wild swim sites, which are the least regulated. There is a great need to rethink these practices and enable the use of these watery spaces. Could amenities such as buoys, water toys, and inflatable mattresses be provided to entice people to dive in?

CONCLUSION

Urban swimming and bathing is universal and historical, and getting wet is one of the pleasures we share. There still remain some vibrant urban swimming cultures around the world. Today, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, mainly built on sea coasts, oceans, lakes, and rivers. With the inevitable heat-waves accompanying climate change, urban wild swimming is a direct response: a global solution using urban pleasure to reconnects us to water, public space, our bodies, and a shared moment of true happiness.

¹ Flussbad Berlin, "Urban Renewal and Swimming-pool Precinct, Berlin, Germany," www.flussbad-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/booklet/120215_Flussbad_Booklet-en.pdf.

² Harriet Partridge, "From Lidos to Plunge Pools: Urban Swim Projects around the World," *The Financial Times*, 5 September 2014, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/876a63e8-32a4-11e4-a5a2-00144feabdc0.html.

³ Christie Pearson and Sandra Rechico, "Wading," exhibition catalogue for "The Wade Collective," 2007.