



Reviving Urban Swimming in Europe: Navigating Complexity Between Natural and Cultural Heritage

Alba Balmaseda-Domínguez^{1b} & Yixin Cao^{1b}

Abstract

This article examines the revival of urban swimming in Europe, framing it as a site of negotiation between natural and cultural heritage. A comparative analysis of Paris and Berlin reveals two complementary models of urban swimming: an institutional, infrastructure-led approach in Paris, centered on the highly symbolic Seine River, and a grassroots, nature-based initiative in Berlin's disused Spree Canal. Paris offers comprehensive implementation, but faces questions of equity and resilience. Berlin's project emphasizes sustainable design and civic engagement yet remains constrained by historical and economic factors. The study concludes that achieving a balance between nature and culture in urban swimming requires addressing infrastructural, transdisciplinary, social and symbolic dimensions, as well as emphasizing the importance of clear communication, holistic strategies and ongoing research.

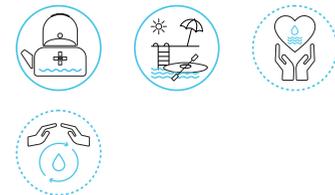
Policy Recommendations

- City planners are advised to design swimmable access to urban waters in line with the EU Bathing Water Directive and the Nature Restoration Law, aligning water quality standards, drowning-risk prevention, ecological integrity, and recreational objectives.
- Municipal and local governments, in collaboration with heritage stakeholders, should prioritise the reuse and upgrading of existing water infrastructures, ensuring safe and inclusive swimming opportunities.
- Top-down institutions are called upon to work in partnership with grassroots and community-based actors to address ecological and cultural dimensions in a coordinated manner, enabling nature-based urban swimming projects.

KEYWORDS

urban swimming
natural heritage
cultural heritage
water
cities

WATER ICONS



< Fig. 1 Baignade Grenelle, Paris (Source: Yixin Cao, 2025).



Introduction

Historically, cities developed along natural waterways (Wantzen et al. 2016) with people adapting to their "rhythmicity" in daily life (Jackson et al. 2022). However, industrialization and urban growth led to the global degradation of freshwater ecosystems (Bell et al. 2022), which were often altered, covered, straightened, shortened, encased, and used as sewers, resulting in "urban stream syndrome" (Walsh et al. 2005). These changes disconnected citizens from waterscapes and water-related practices (Wantzen 2022; Knoll et al. 2017).

To address this crisis, restoration efforts began in Europe and the US in the 1970s-'80s and eventually expanded globally (Smith et al. 2014). Since the 1990s, urban planning has increasingly embraced the value of freshwater ecosystems, both in research and policy (Radcliffe 2019), recognizing not only natural, but also cultural values (Anderson et al. 2019). This shift, together with deindustrialization, political will, the climate crisis and interest in urban bathing practices, has led to the revitalization of "blue spaces" (Bell et al. 2022) supporting diverse uses of urban waters, including swimming.

In Europe, the Bathing Water Directive (2006/7/EC) ensures systematic microbial water quality monitoring; the 2024 Nature Restoration Law promotes continent-wide freshwater ecosystem recovery; and the 2025 European Water Resilience Strategy further strengthens water management and access. Together, these regulations are paving the way for the revival of urban swimming in European cities. Yet, this process raises layered challenges. Urban swimming requires negotiations between natural and cultural heritage, involving

biodiversity, water quality, accessibility, justice, safety, modesty and adaptive reuse. How European cities navigate this complexity lies at the core of this inquiry.

Methods and Framework

The study combines document analysis, site visits, interviews and comparative urban research within a transdisciplinary framework linking environmental science, architecture and urban planning. The selected cases, Paris and Berlin, represent diverse urban waterways (rivers, canals), governance models (top-down, grassroots) and water-monitoring methods (sewage control, nature-based solutions [NbS]). Other European cities such as Brussels, Vienna and Budapest are still in the early stages of activism or planning, and therefore Paris and Berlin were chosen because their long-term projects, initiated in the late '80s and '90s, enable a more grounded analysis of nature-culture dynamics. The following sections trace the history and revival of urban swimming, discuss both case studies, and conclude with reflections on the research question.

The Rise, Fall and Revival of Urban River Swimming in Europe

Swimming has deep historical roots, but its emergence as an urban phenomenon is closely tied to the growth of modern cities. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urban waterways were central to public life and hosted floating baths and gender-segregated facilities, where hygiene, sport and leisure intersected (Ruby et al. 2019). Bathing became a social practice, shaped by changing ideas about modesty, class and gender



^ Fig. 2 Start of the Paris swimming crossing from Pont des Invalides, July 1929 (Source: *Le Miroir des sports*, July 16, 1929, p. 69. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

(Horwood 2000), exemplified by the 1940s introduction of the navel-bearing bikini symbolizing women's autonomy (Shaw 2022). By the mid-twentieth century, the European river channelization for navigation and flood control, together with industrial pollution, created spatial conflicts with traditional swimming zones and spurred public bans on river bathing. Meanwhile, hygiene moved from natural waters to domestic bathrooms (Le Bas 2000; Wiltse 2007), and sport/leisure shifted to artificial pools. As a result, the civic role of rivers declined, and they were transformed from vibrant urban spaces into infrastructures increasingly disconnected from daily life.

The rise of environmentalism in the 1970s set the stage for river restoration in Europe (Smith et al. 2014). A key turning point was the 1986

Sandoz chemical spill in the Rhine, which prompted the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine and cross-border cooperation (Wilken 2006). Since then, EU directives¹ have advanced freshwater quality and ecological status setting quality standards to protect public and environmental health. The EU Bathing Water Directive BWD (1976; revised 2006), establishes microbiological criteria for managing bathing water quality in designated bathing sites (EU 2006). Improved water quality and regulatory frameworks, combined with diverse efforts to reclaim urban waterways as public assets, have fostered a twenty-first century revival of urban bathing, heralded with the establishment of the Big Jump initiative in 2002.² However, practical challenges still compromise the feasibility of urban swimming in European cities.

1. Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (91/271/EEC), Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC), and Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), EU Bathing Water Directive (76/160/ECC; revised 2006/7/EC).

2. Founded in 2002 by the European Rivers Network, the Big Jump is an event that has since engaged over 200,000 people across 2,400 events in 34 countries to celebrate and protect Europe's rivers, lakes, and wetlands: <https://bigjump.org/>.

Heavy rainfall events often overwhelm the old drainage systems, triggering combined sewer overflows (CSOs) that release pollutants directly into freshwater ecosystems (Quaranta et al. 2022), posing acute public health risks for bathers. The potential safety hazards, along with concerns about drowning risks in open water environments, have resulted in the official prohibition of river swimming in major European cities, with the notable exception of cities in Switzerland (Maghakian et al. 2024).

Case Studies

Paris

Accessing the Seine for swimming has long symbolized ecological renewal and urban regeneration. In 1988, mayor Jacques Chirac famously promised to swim in the Seine within a few years (Lestel et al. 2023) a pledge fulfilled only 36 years later, during the 2024 Paris Olympics, highlighting how urban swimming remains a politically charged and technically complex goal. River bathing was common in Paris from the seventeenth century until the 1960s³ (Mouchel et al. 2021), despite bans starting in the nineteenth century (Lestel et al. 2017) (fig. 1). Floating “bateaux-bains” such as Bain Deligny (1785–1993) played an essential role, offering filtered and disinfected swimming spaces, while competitions like Traversée de Paris à la Nage (1905–1945) reinforced the bond between swimming and Parisian identity. Simultaneously, public pools like Piscine Molière (1929) and Piscine Pontoise (1934) offer open water bathing in regulated indoor settings, with Pontoise still operating today as a public facility (Bouleau et al. 2024).

By the 1970s, public health concerns over pollution and waterborne disease, combined with increasing urbanization and river traffic, led to a near-total ban on river swimming (Teyssere et al. 2013). Since the 1980s, wastewater management has improved water quality in the Seine and the Marne, though they still fall short of EU BWD standards (Mouchel et al. 2021). In 2015, when Paris formalized its plan for the 2024 Olympics, the goal was to revive the Seine for bathing, banned for nearly 100 years, as a symbolic legacy (Moutiez 2021). Since then, between 1.2 and 1.4 billion euros in local and state funding has been invested to modernize water management infrastructure and improve river water quality (Bouleau et al. 2024). On 5 July 2025 the first river swimming season opened, offering three sites, Port de Grenelle, Bras-Marie and Port de Bercy, which quickly became extremely popular (Ville de Paris 2025). The sites include lifeguards, real-time water-quality monitoring, safety measures and facilities such as showers and lockers (fig. 2). The Grenelle site also features a children’s pool (fig. 3). All facilities are free of charge, and swimming is strictly limited to designated areas. A maximum number of bathers is permitted at any given time, and each visitor is provided with a safety buoy. Initially set to close on 31 August, the season was extended into September at Grenelle and Bercy. Beyond the Seine, Paris has also been offering swimming in canals such as Saint-Martin and the Bassin de la Villette.

However, while the city celebrates the return of swimming to the Seine, many swimming pools are being forced to close due to high maintenance costs. These risk making swimming

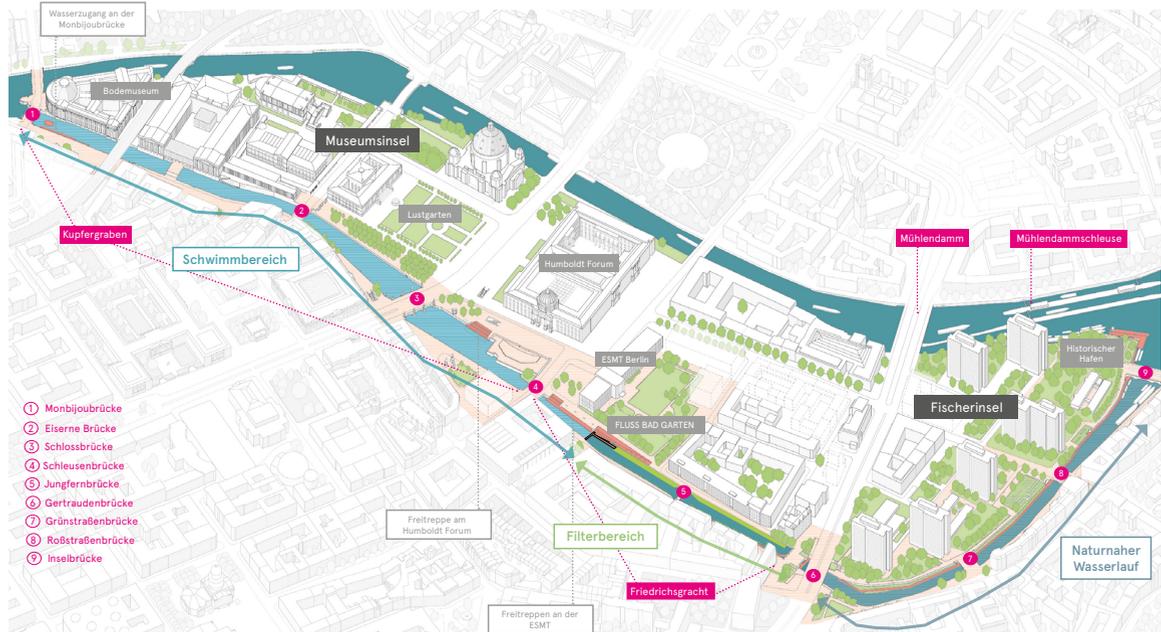
3. Robert Doisneau (2005) includes a photo of bathers at the Pont d’Iéna and scenes from the 1946 heatwave, when people cooled off in the river. *Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française*. “La Chaleur à Paris.” INA. July 16, 1969. Video, 1:35. <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclairage-actu/video/caf97038749/la-chaaleur-a-paris>.

increasingly centralized in natural settings, while neglecting existing infrastructure. River swimming sites are also vulnerable to closures caused by CSOs triggered by rainfall, a phenomenon expected to intensify. Additional opportunities could be created in canals, or even

in public fountains, where water quality is easier to monitor and NbS could be implemented for treatment. Despite these challenges, Paris's efforts represent a significant step forward and an inspiring model showing how urban swimming can be reintroduced.



^ Fig. 3 Swimming areas in Paris: Bras-Marie with access platform, lifeguards and buoyed bathers in front of Pont Marie (top); Port de Grenelle with buoyed bathers and a floating children's pool (bottom) (Source: Jean-Baptiste Gurliat / Ville de Paris, 2025, top; Joséphine Brueder / Ville de Paris, 2025, bottom).



^ Fig. 4 Design of Flussbad Berlin (Source: Flussbad Berlin e.V., 2019–2023).



^ Fig. 5 Visualisation of the Flussbad Berlin project (concept status 2011) (Source: realities:united, 2011).

Berlin

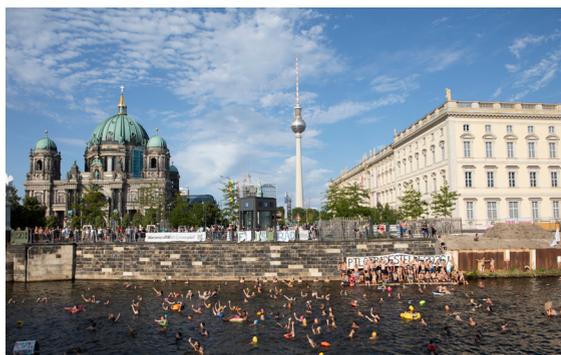
Flussbad Berlin is a grassroots project initiated by Jan and Tim Edler⁴ in 1997 to turn the neglected Spreekanal into a public pool (Hugron 2019). The 1.9-km canal, running alongside

Berlin's Museum Island, once served as a medieval moat, a flood channel and, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a hub for floating river baths (Wasser- und Schifffahrtsamt Berlin 2008). By the late twentieth century, it had become underused and disconnected from urban

4. Jan and Tim Edler are German artist-architect brothers who co-founded the Berlin-based studio realities:united in 2000, known for the award-winning Flussbad Berlin project.



^ Fig. 6 Second Flussbad Pokal, public swimming competition at Museum Island in Berlin (Source: Espen Eichhöfer, Ostkreuz, 2016).



^ Fig. 7 Second swimming demonstration in the Spree Canal in front of the Humboldt Forum, protesting Berlin's 100-year swimming ban (Source: Annette Housechild, Ostkreuz, 2025).

life. Flussbad Berlin reimagines the Spreekanal as both a swimmable waterbody and an ecological corridor, using NbS, where the canal itself becomes a CSO-treatment landscape. From the outset, the Edler brothers envisioned more than a swimming area: a three-part system with a riparian zone at Fischerinsel to support biodiversity, a central aquatic plant-based filtration area to clean the water, and a swimming section at Kupfergraben near the Bode Museum. These ecological features align with broader EU directives, including the EU BWD and the 2025 Water Resilience Strategy, that promote NbS for water purification and urban adaptation (fig. 3). Initially deemed unrealistic, the project gained

momentum after winning the Holcim Awards in 2011–2012 and establishing the Flussbad Berlin e.V. association (fig. 4). Since then, the group has conducted feasibility studies, tested biological filtration systems and organized events such as swimming races (fig. 5) and demonstrations (fig. 6) to reclaim the space for public use.

Although institutionally supported, the project remains controversial. Critics view swimming beside UNESCO-listed Museum Island as indecorous, while others emphasize substantial costs and technical complexity, particularly regarding upgrading Berlin's sewer infrastructure, as was undertaken in Paris. Still, Flussbad Berlin is a prime example of how swimming can encourage ecological and cultural reconnection in the heart of the city. Unlike the city's extensive network of lakes and public pools, the project may bring a central waterway to life through ecological design, thereby expanding bathing infrastructure and promoting hybrid solutions. Despite this, implementation remains incomplete as no physical transformation of the canal as envisioned in the project has begun, suggesting a clash between ambitious social-ecological visions and institutional or heritage constraints. Nevertheless, the project continues to inspire cities to reconsider neglected water infrastructure and envision more adaptive and inclusive urban futures.

Conclusion

The EU's 2024 Nature Restoration Law, aiming to restore 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers by 2030, is expected to make urban swimming a growing priority for policymakers and communities, guided by the EU BWD, further reinforcing the role of urban waters as a driver of socio-spatial transformation (Balmaseda 2023).

The examples of Paris and Berlin demonstrate how this revival involves navigating complexity at the intersection of natural and cultural heritage. Paris is a rare example of full implementation, symbolically tied to the 2024 Olympics with huge government-led investments. Its three swimming sites are carefully designed, safe, accessible and free of charge. However, one question is whether it is possible to balance the promotion of swimming in urban waterways with the preservation and adaptive reuse of existing human-made facilities to serve the whole city and its diverse population. Another question is whether NbS can effectively filter combined sewer overflows (CSOs) during heavy rain so that bathing-water quality remains high in urban waterways. In many European cities, CSOs are a routine problem in conventional sewage systems, which are expensive to maintain and increasingly prone to overflowing as climate change brings more intense rainfall (Cao et al. 2025).

In contrast, Flussbad Berlin emerged from a grassroots initiative to transform a disused canal using NbS. Its innovative and inclusive model combines ecological filtration, public engagement and cultural heritage. Yet despite its promise, the project remains incomplete. Its location, on the UNESCO-listed Museum Island, and its cost, have raised concerns about heritage protection and economics, slowing down its implementation. The central challenge here is to align institutional coordination and investment with ecological renewal and heritage revitalization. Together, Paris and Berlin offer complementary models that could inform future urban strategies for the reintroduction of urban swimming. Berlin demonstrates that NbS can be incorporated into architectural design, emphasizes the importance of civic engagement and shows how disused infrastructure can be revitalized. Paris under-

scores the transformative power of political will supported by robust infrastructure to restore the Seine's social practices and symbolic value after a century-long ban on swimming in the river. The most promising approach lies in combining these two models.

Beyond implementation, urban swimming also raises issues of communication and perception. Framing it as a simple "return to nature" obscures real risks. During heatwaves, misperceiving polluted water as safe can increase exposure to pathogens and other contaminants. Open-water swimming in rivers also involves the risks of drowning and injury, requiring training, supervision and safety infrastructure. Urban swimming should therefore be treated as an additional public amenity, conditional on robust water-quality management, evidence-based risk communication and life-saving capacity, rather than a replacement for ecological restoration. The central challenge is to restore urban green-blue spaces and govern them as public, inclusive and universally accessible commons, addressing broader socio-environmental challenges such as equity, access, long-term maintenance and climate resilience. Future research should follow emerging projects in Brussels, Vienna and Budapest, which may signal a transition toward mixed-governance models that unite political commitment, ecological design and community participation in urban water restoration.

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