Fig. 1.

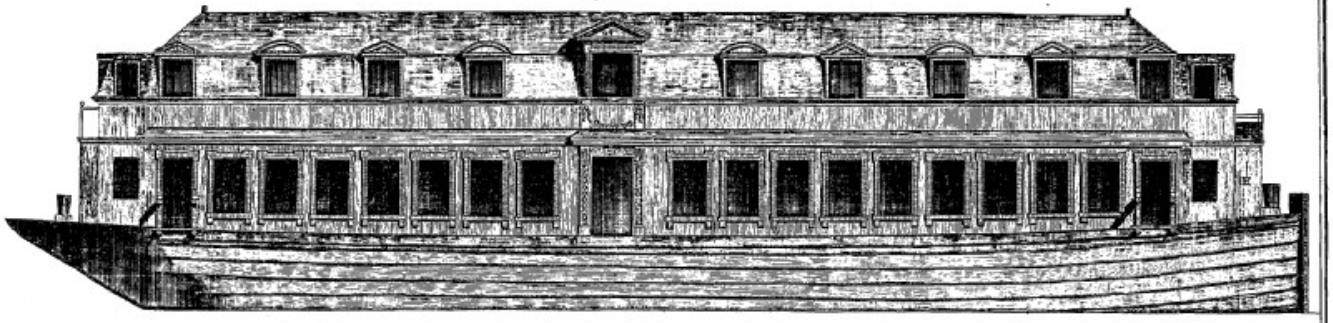
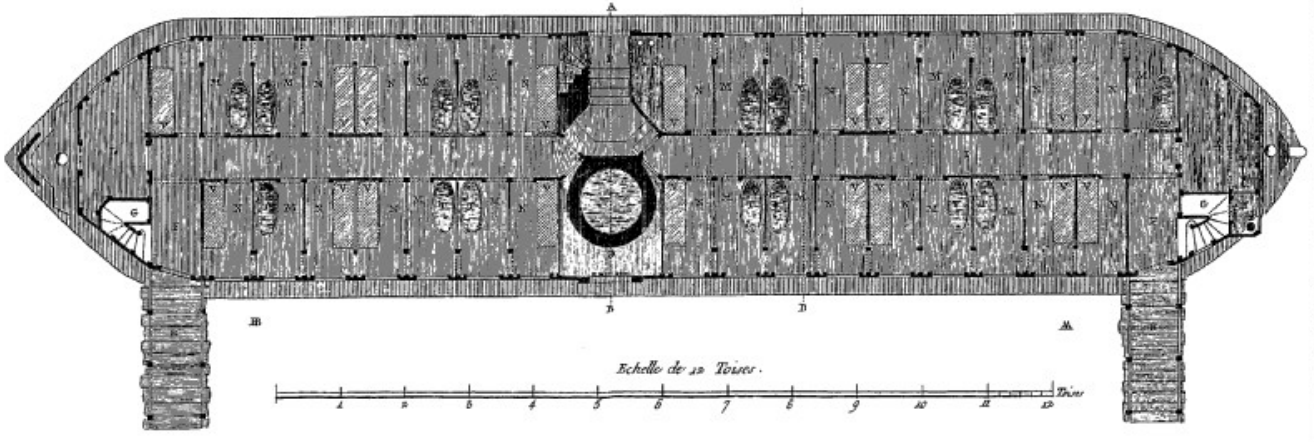


Fig. 2.



Perruquier Baigneur Étuviste, Bains de Poitevin établis sur la Seine, en 1761.

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Urban River Swimming – A Revitalizing Heritage

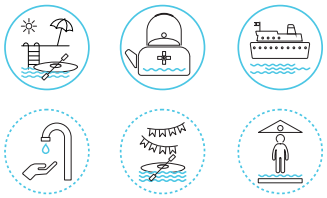
Tino Mager

Abstract
Urban river swimming is a centuries-old practice that embodies both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Historically, many rivers served as important public spaces for hygiene, leisure and social interaction and were deeply embedded in urban life before industrialization, pollution and privatization restricted access. Recorded in ancient depictions, medieval manuscripts or illustrations of floating bathhouses from the eighteenth century, swimming and bathing in rivers reflect evolving social norms, urban development and innovations in water management. It connects communities to the environmental roots of their cities and fosters a sense of shared identity and memory. As today's cities seek cleaner, more inclusive public spaces, recognizing and revitalizing this heritage offers a sustainable way to reconnect urban populations with natural waterways, enriching public life and re-imagining riverfronts as accessible, healthy and culturally resonant environments.

KEYWORDS

swimming
rivers
water quality
urban heritage
waterfronts

WATER VALUES



Policy Recommendations

- Recognize and protect river bathing as cultural heritage: Designate historic sites and practices as part of the city's intangible and tangible heritage to preserve their legacy and guide urban redevelopment.
- Integrate swimmable rivers into urban planning: Treat rivers as public recreational spaces by restoring access points and incorporating swimmable infrastructure into riverfront developments.
- Improve water quality: Invest in sustainable water management systems to meet hygiene and safety standards for swimming, using successful examples as models for urban river restoration.

< Fig. 1 Plate from Diderot and d'Alembert's *L'Encyclopédie, Arts de l'habillement* (Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1751–1780, via Gallica).

Introduction

Swimming in urban rivers has a long and turbulent tradition. While it was largely banned in the twentieth century, the idea and practice are currently experiencing a revival. However, in many places swimming in rivers is hampered by obstacles related to hygiene, safety and law. A deeper understanding of river swimming as heritage with intangible and tangible components can help to overcome these obstacles and create a closer relationship between citizens and their urban rivers and riverbanks. This article looks at the tradition of urban swimming and asks how the intangible and built heritage of this phenomenon can contribute to creating cleaner rivers with accessible riverbanks and new perspectives on urban public space.

River Swimming in the Past

Swimming is one of the oldest cultural practices. The ancient depictions of swimmers in the Egyptian Cave of the Swimmers probably date back 10,000 years. Greek mythology even places swimming in rivers before the age of men as it tells us of numerous occasions when gods, deities, nymphs and heroes swam or bathed in rivers.[1] The Romans not only built impressive thermal baths including pools (e.g., the Baths of Caracalla) but also used the Tiber for swimming activities (Horace n.d.). Visual and written sources from medieval and Renaissance times inform us about river swimming. A 1410 French translation of *The Travels of Marco Polo* includes an illumination of pilgrims swimming in the Jordan River (Polo n.d.), the illumination of "August" in *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry* (c. 1415) shows naked men and women swimming in the Juine River, and the manuscript of Laurent de Premierfait's translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* even shows swimming in a moat – an almost urban setting (Boccace n.d.). A chapter in Everard Digby's *De arte natandi* (The art of swimming), first published in 1587, is devoted to the ideal place for swimming; the chapter only mentions rivers as bathing places and features numerous woodcuts depicting swimmers in rivers (Digby 1595).

Although these sources do not contain any information about the construction of infrastructure, there is evidence of access points built as early as the Middle Ages. The Manikarnika Ghats in Varanasi (India) – riverside steps leading to the banks of the Ganges – were built in 1303 and modernized in 1730 to allow immersion in the purifying waters of the river (Varanasi Heritage Dossier n.d.). However, it is likely that purpose-built access to rivers for bathing or swimming was rare. However, access to river water was essential and facilities such as the various watermen's stairs in London, which date back to the fourteenth century, could be used for more than just mooring and provided entry points into the river. Among many others, Jonathan Swift and Benjamin Franklin may have used them for their river swims between Chelsea and Blackfriars (*Outdoor Swimmer* 2022).

In some cases, rivers in ancient times may have been polluted (Grattan et al. 2016), and the disposal of sewage and wastewater – in some cases from mining, metallurgy or tannery – has affected river water quality for centuries. However, industrialization and urban densification,

1. For example, Sisyphus swam through the Styx and Actaeon saw Artemis bathing in a river. Bathing and swimming are different, but it is clear from the mythological texts that bathing involved at least full immersion in rivers.



^ Fig. 2 Brühlsche Terrasse, Dresden, Germany (Source: Library of Congress, 1890–1905. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

the motorization of river transport, the privatization of land and increased policing meant that the use of rivers and riverbanks for swimming and bathing became more limited. In response to this, numerous urban infrastructures for swimming and bathing in rivers were built beginning in the late eighteenth century. A floating bathhouse was opened in Paris in 1761 (fig. 1), which used filtered and heated river water and could be entered for a fee (Billard 2016). Bern's still existing Marzili lido on the banks of the Aare was opened in 1782 and allowed sunbathing and swimming in the river. A pool fed by the river was added in 1822. In Dresden, a river bath on the Elbe was opened in 1785, where bathers could immerse themselves in the water of the river (fig. 2). An illustration in the Stationers' Company's Almanac of 1876 shows the "Westminster Embankment and Floating Bath" installed in the Thames River (British Museum n.d.). Similar installations could be found across Europe and beyond (fig. 3). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of these structures were dismantled and in some cases swimming in urban rivers was banned (e.g., in 1925 in Berlin). The rise of home baths and public pools, improved transport to beaches outside the city, increased pollution and river traffic almost brought this ancient heritage to an end.

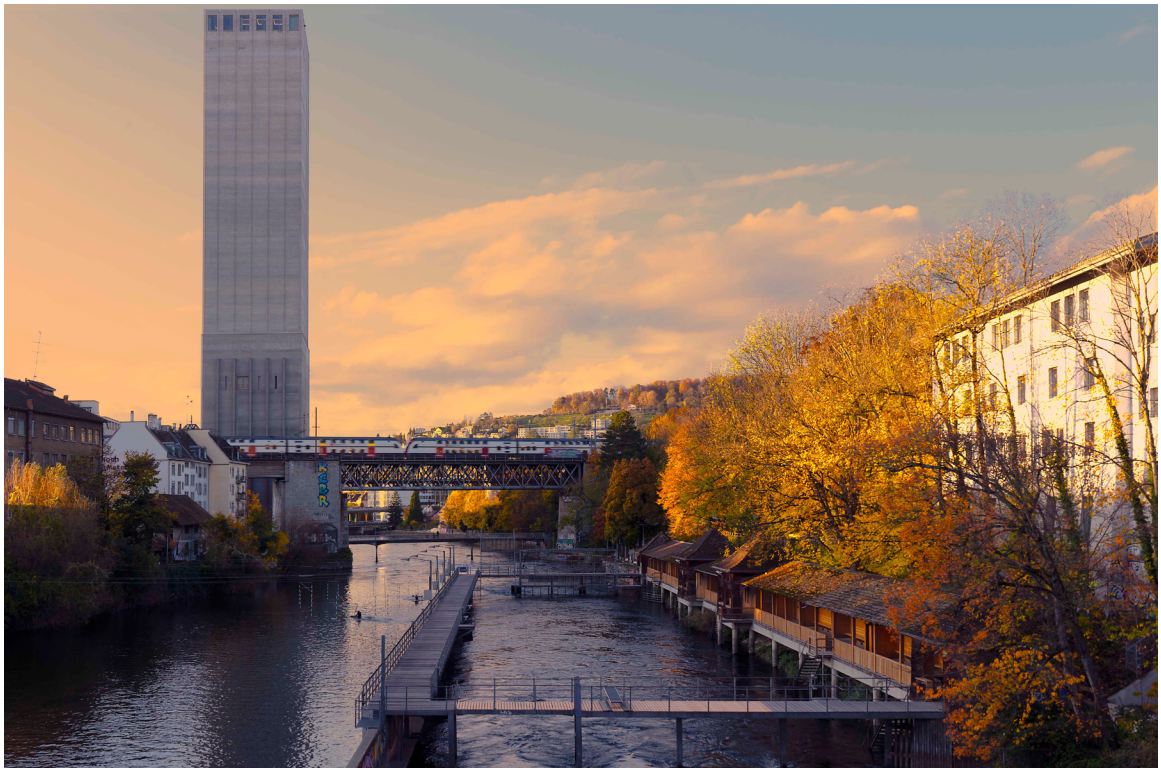


^ Fig. 3 The floating swimming bath in the Thames at Charing Cross, London, published in the Illustrated London News on 17 July 1875 (Source: Henry James Crane, 1875. CC BY 4.0, via Wellcome Collection/Wikimedia Commons).

Heritage Aspects of Urban River Swimming

To what extent can swimming in urban rivers be considered heritage, and what are the key aspects of this heritage? Would it make sense to revive this heritage, or are current circumstances regarding swimming and the use of rivers and their banks more beneficial than historical ones? While the above glimpse into history shows us that river swimming was once a matter of course, the spectacular nature of the swimming events at the 2024 Olympic Games in the Seine reveals how alien the idea of urban river swimming has become. Even though the practice has largely disappeared from view, river swimming is still common – albeit to a much lesser extent and usually not at historical locations. It is not even limited to places with clean upper reaches of rivers such as in Basel or Munich, but is currently also possible in Berlin, Groningen, Prague and Vienna, for example. In a few cases, historical facilities have survived – for example, in Rostock, Zurich and in Dessau, where the Flussbad Rehsumpf has recently been restored and is a rare tangible testimony to river bathing culture and the Lebensreform movement (fig. 4).

Urban river swimming and (former) urban river pools hold historical significance as public bathing, recreation and water management sites within urban river systems. They reflect urban development, societal norms and technological advances, with heritage values encompassing social, cultural, historical, technological, architectural and environmental dimensions. From a sociocultural perspective, river pools served as early public health infrastructure, providing swimming and hygiene facilities before widespread indoor plumbing. The floating river baths established from the eighteenth century onward (as in Dresden and Paris) served the public hygiene needs of large sections of the urban population. These pools



^ Fig. 4 Urban river swimming in the Unterer Letten river pool, Zurich, Switzerland (Source: Elias Kopf, 2019. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, via Flickr).

reflect historical changes in public attitudes to health, the body and leisure in urban life. They also served as communal gathering places, especially in densely populated neighborhoods, becoming sites of collective memory and social interaction. The design and use of these pools mirrored contemporary gender roles and moral expectations, with segregated spaces and behavioral regulations reflecting societal norms and class structures (Florian 2024).

Historically and technologically, river pools represent significant engineering innovations. They involved creating safe swimming environments within active river systems using weirs, enclosures or flow diversion methods, illustrating advancements in civil engineering and urban water management. The pools were closely linked to early efforts to enhance public sanitation and combat disease, positioning them within narratives of modernization and public health reform. The diverse architectural elements like changing rooms, viewing platforms and ornamental entrances were deliberately integrated into urban landscapes, often near parks, promenades and transport routes. They balanced what would now be termed "ecological integrity" with recreational and practical needs. Beyond their scarce material legacy, (former) river pools hold intangible cultural heritage, associated with local folklore, rites of passage and social movements. Their memory is preserved in artistic forms like etchings, photographs and postcards, while archaeological remains offer insights into past urban practices and technologies.

Revitalization

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in river swimming as part of urban regeneration, with initiatives in cities like Paris and Berlin aiming at cleaning and reopening urban rivers for public swimming. These efforts commemorate historical uses while aligning with contemporary ecological and social objectives, demonstrating the enduring relevance of river pools in the evolving urban environment. Current projects such as Flussbad Berlin, Thames Baths (London) or Urban Plunge (Sydney) build on this tradition and offer a vision of urban rivers as clean and usable public spaces that offer individual citizens space and opportunities for enjoyment. They seem radical to many, but they build on what took place for centuries before traffic, pollution and privatization took over the rivers and their banks. The Flussbad Berlin, for example, is intended to be built in front of the reconstructed Berlin Palace, exactly where a traditional river bath was anchored until the 1890s. Before they were neglected, rivers supported the development of cities, and in many cases, rivers were their *raison d'être*. They provided water and food, the opportunity to bathe and cleanse, and were literally the lifeline of urban settlements.

A key aspect of revitalizing the urban riverfront is understanding this former lifeline as a constituent heritage for urban living spaces. A clean river can be achieved and can help to create an understanding of the connection between city centers and their surrounding landscapes. The physical connection to natural waters through river swimming as an urban practice is a valuable contribution to understanding the intertwined relationship between urban culture and its embeddedness in the extra-urban ecological context. In addition, swimmable rivers provide inspiration for the future development of cities where rivers and riverbanks are rediscovered as public space, in contrast to their popular use as industrial and transport areas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If the heritage of urban river swimming is understood as a vector in the development of riverfront urban spaces, the tangible and intangible heritage of river swimming can facilitate equitable and accessible riverfronts that provide clean rivers and a sense of well-being and amenity, while offering opportunities for new urban designs and lifestyles.

An ambitious project that embraces urban river bathing as a shared heritage is the regeneration of the Rijnhaven in Rotterdam, a late nineteenth-century harbor basin at the heart of the renewal of the former port facilities on the south bank of the city. In addition to housing around the former harbor basin, jetties and floating parks will enable a new, central role for the water, improving the quality of life. The centerpiece will be a beach that is already under construction, allowing people to swim on the former industrial site and bringing the city one step closer to an ecologically oriented future. According to the authorities, the water quality is suitable (Gemeente Rotterdam n.d.). If it is possible to swim in the lower reaches of Europe's busiest river, then it can be a reality just about anywhere. In addition to ensuring the necessary water quality and providing access, this also requires negotiations with other uses of the river, such as shipping and fishing, which may of course also constitute forms of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

With a history stretching back centuries, urban river swimming embodies both a tangible and intangible heritage that has shaped

the development of cities and their relationship with water. Once central to public health, leisure and social life, river swimming declined with industrialization, urban pollution and changing land use. However, its heritage endures in built structures, community memory and artistic and other representations. It also connects cities to their spatial origins. This article highlights the multifaceted heritage value of urban river swimming, from early access points and floating bathhouses to the sociocultural norms embedded in their use. Recent regeneration efforts in European cities mark a revival of the practice, not as nostalgic gestures, but as visionary urban interventions that reconnect citizens with their rivers. By recognizing river swimming as an important part of urban heritage, planners and communities can reimagine riverfronts as inclusive, ecological and recreational spaces. Embracing this heritage offers a blueprint for a healthier, more connected and culturally resonant urban future.

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