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## House & Home

# Communal bathing: how architects are awash with ideas

Growing interest in bathing houses is prompting architects to create structures dedicated to sensuous pleasure and social good



Public sauna in Gothenburg harbour, Sweden, by the German architect Raumlabor © Lasse Sehested Skaftø/Raumlabor

SEPTEMBER 16, 2016 by: **Emma Crichton-Miller**

Jane Withers is a self-confessed “ofuro-holic”, a part-Japanese term for a person addicted to bathing. Rather than soak in her tub at home, however, it is communal bathing and the architecture it inspires that Withers seeks, “the grandeur and scale of the buildings, the extraordinary materials used”.

In researching for her immersive exhibition, *Soak, Steam, Dream: Reinventing Bathing Culture*, currently at the Roca London Gallery, the design consultant and curator travelled the world. Stop-offs included a former Roman bath in rural Tunisia, now a hammam; a Japanese *onsen*, where sulphurous hot springs bubble into cold river water; and Moscow’s “great Sandunovsky baths, where the banya stove bellows flames like a dragon and bathers wear clogs to avoid touching the scorching tiles”.

As Withers writes in the exhibition’s catalogue, “historically bathing was central to community life, and the bathhouse was an institution for both health and pleasure”. In

the age of the private bathroom not only have we lost a congenial social space, she adds, but also “the sensorial dimension of an architecture of stillness and reflection designed to be seen while floating or through a veil of steam”.

Nevertheless, over the past few years, Withers has noticed a resurgent interest among architects in the poetic idea and social ideal of communal bathing. One landmark she cites is Pritzker prize-winning Peter Zumthor’s Therme Vals (1986-96), built over the thermal springs at Graubünden in the Swiss Alps. “These are the nearest you can get to the Roman experience, literally stone and water,” she says. The play of light and dark, the acoustics of stone, and the sensory qualities of the bubbling water offer the bather a completely immersive experience.

Moreover, Zumthor’s building was commissioned by the local commune as an inclusive social project. It is this conjoined pursuit of aesthetic and sensuous pleasure and social good that unites the architects in the Roca’s show. The Chilean architect Germán del Sol describes the experience of bathing in his Termas Geométricas (2002-09), built in Chile’s Villarrica National Park, as “a sensual rite of water and fire purification, which enlightens our senses and arouses our imagination”. His rust-red timber walkway zigzags for 450 metres over surging torrents, leading bathers to 17 steaming pools, each served by a shed with changing rooms. Grass-roofed communal areas provide shelter for post-bath socialising.



*Termas Geométricas, Chile, designed by Germán del Sol © Guy Wenborne*

In another volcanic landscape on the opposite side of the Pacific, Kengo Kuma and Associates has built the Kogohi Bathhouse (1999-2003) in Atami, a hot-spring area in Japan. There, a simple wooden platform and translucent canopy immerse the cleansed bather as directly as possible in the tropical surroundings. By contrast, in the hot springs of Takeda, the Japanese architect Terunobu Fujimori has allowed his fantasy to run wild. His *Lamune Onsen* (Soda Pop Spa; 2004-05), with its striped walls of charred cedar and white mortar, surmounted by towers sprouting pine trees, blends ancient Japanese temple architecture with European and African influences. The public is invited into a

fairytale kingdom where they can divest themselves of the formal constraints and stresses of daily life.

Where nature is less hospitable, the Nordics invented the sauna. Today, architects are reinventing it not just as a private space of indulgence but as an instrument of social change. In the harbour of the Swedish city of Gothenburg, on the end of a disused pier, the German practice Raumlabor has built a quirky, sculptural public sauna as the centrepiece of a public bath project. Its role is to spearhead local regeneration, with the recycled metal used for its construction a reference to the area's industrial past.

In Finland — where there are thought to be 3.3m saunas for 5.4m Finns — the architectural practice Avanto has collaborated with the City of Helsinki to develop a public sauna on the seashore in a former industrial area 2km from the city centre. It will form part of a future coastal park. With its terraced, wooden slatted cover and dark, cave-like interior, it offers a traditional smoke sauna and a wood-burning sauna, with access to the cool Baltic. As the wood greys with age, the building will merge with the landscape like a rock. Its Finnish name, *Loyly*, means both the steam that rises when you splash water on to hot rocks and a more elusive, less translatable dimension of the experience of being enveloped in a sauna's heat.



*Sauna Poleno by Prague-based H3T Architects*

In a more adventurous spirit, the young Prague-based practice H3T has, since 2009, designed a series of mobile saunas that pop up in urban and rural contexts, available for use by anyone who can provide the wood to fire them up. Floating Sauna (2009) was located on the pond in the Czech spa town of Pödebrady. The following year, Flying

Sauna was suspended from a bridge so that it hangs above the river Elbe and can be reached only by boat.

Perhaps dearest to Withers' heart, however, is the idea of the public bathhouse — whether Ottoman hammam or Victorian bathhouse. As water scarcity becomes a global concern, communal bathing offers a sustainable option for those who love to soak. In the exhibition she has included Something & Son's temporary Barking Bathhouse experimental spa, installed as part of the Create arts festival for London's Cultural Olympiad in 2012. The prefabricated black timber huts included a wet sauna, with multiple rooms, a relaxation area and a sheltered outdoor "beach" strewn with pebbles. Visitors were charged a £2 entry fee. With no windows, the interior was illuminated only by natural light filtering through the walls. Andrew Merritt, co-founder of Something & Son, says: "We wanted to create a semi-religious experience." A far cry from the spa at the gym.

*'Soak, Steam, Dream: Reinventing Bathing Culture' can be seen at the Roca London Gallery until January 28 2017*

*Photographs: Lasse Sehested Skafte/Raumlabor; Guy Wenborne*

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