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Curator Jane Withers discusses her exhibition that presents proposals to reclaim our rivers and harbours

An exhibition at the Roca London Gallery presents a series of architectural proposals to reclaim natural water sources in London, New York and Copenhagen for recreational use. We spoke to curator Jane Withers about how we can better exploit our rivers and harbours.

ICON: Tell me about the exhibition?

JANE WITHERS: Urban Plunge began to take shape in my mind last summer. I was already familiar with Copenhagen's wonderful harbour baths and, when I came across Studio Octopi's Thames Baths proposal, I realised that a ripple effect was beginning – with schemes for enabling river swimming and harbour baths cropping up in several cities.

Besides the sheer thrill of a water-level urban perspective – swimming in the heart of the city, with Wall Street as a backdrop or views downstream to Tower Bridge – these natural river baths and floating pools are interesting because they challenge the way we use and think about the future of our urban waterways. The bigger question is, why shouldn't we reclaim these vast but under-utilised public spaces at the heart of our cities?

I: Tell me a bit about the projects you have featured?

JW: The five main projects featured in Urban Plunge share a common spirit in terms of enabling a wild swimming experience in an urban environment. What's also interesting is their very different approaches.

Words

Debika Ray

Images: Lucy Reynell, Kasper Egeberg and George Messaritakis



In the 19th century, there were floating pools at Charing Cross and Westminster and swimming clubs all along the river



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Thames Baths' romantic bathing pools at Blackfriars and Temple Stairs recall the wilderness of marshes and reed beds of pre-industrial London, while in New York, + Pool's design mimics Manhattan's grid, a giant chunk of the city floating in the East River.

Of Soil and Water: King's Cross Pond Club was conceived as an art installation and explores how we can re-introduce natural cycles into the urban environment. It promises the tantalising vision of urbanites shedding their city armour to bathe in a man-made natural pond in the middle of central London's largest construction site.

In contrast, Copenhagen Harbour Baths are sculptural wooden promenades that create new links between land and water, social in-between spaces much like beaches. This is part of the city's vision for the transformation of the harbour from an industrial port to a recreation zone, which has been enabled over the past 15 years by modernising the sewer system to improve water quality.

House of Water – also for Copenhagen – is a futuristic concept for an artificial island devoted to water pursuits and learning about water. It looks as if a curvaceous iceberg has been planted in the city.

I: What is the role of architecture and design in protecting our water source?

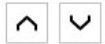
JW: These projects demonstrate the role architecture and design can play in reclaiming these under-utilised spaces for public used. By creating more human-centric urban water experiences, they encourage us to revalue our environments.

At the moment many urban waterways are neglected and abused because we don't consider the actual water space as an amenity, but as a blank waiting to be bridged or turned into a boat superhighway. These proposals help us imagine different ways to enjoy urban water environments.



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I: What do such projects say about the future of our waterways?

JW: These projects have the potential to help us reconnect to the lifeblood of our cities and fundamentally shift the way we take care of our urban water environments. It's strange that we sited our cities on rivers to live around freshwater and then turned them into sewers, polluting, barricading and burying them so they are cordoned off from human use.

But Copenhagen has managed to transform the harbour from an industrial no-gone zone to an amazing recreation space by investing in modernising the sewer system so the water is swimmable. Why shouldn't this be possible in other cities?

I: Will we soon be swimming in the Thames again? And how can we make sure that happens?

JW: Hopefully sooner rather than later. These ideas aren't really new – it is only in the last century that we have stopped swimming in our city rivers. In the 19th century, there were floating pools at Charing Cross and Westminster and swimming clubs all along the river. The Thames today is cleaner than in living memory, and if improvements to the sewer system go ahead, the river quality should be swimmable.

More immediately, there are other possible approaches such as filtering the water or using biological plant cleaning processes as already used in natural bathing ponds across Europe. The London mayor has commissioned a feasibility study to look at possible locations for floating pools on the Thames and I think vocal public support can make a huge difference to making this a reality.

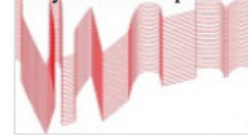
Urban Plunge runs at the Roca London Gallery from 13 September 2014 until 10 January 2015



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