

[Sign into the Guardian using your Facebook account](#)

theguardian

Search

Wild swimming in the city: come on in, the river's cleaner!

With David Walliams leading the way and plans for a floating lido on the Thames, the desire to plunge into our once dirtier urban waterways has never been greater

Oliver Wainwright

The Guardian, Wednesday 13 August 2014



Thames Baths ... the proposed floating lido on London's river near Blackfriars. Photograph: StudioOctopi/Picture Plane

When you're floating in the river Thames, gliding on your back below soaring bridges, the chances are you're dead. Around 30 corpses are dragged out of the river each year, from fast-flowing water that is subjected to a weekly surge of sewage, and ploughed by a daily barrage of boats. Swimming in the tidal stretch of the Thames, says the Port of London Authority, is about as sensible as rambling on the M25 – with the potential bonus of a bout of dysentery. Since 2012 it has been illegal to go for a dip between Putney Bridge and the Thames Barrier without permission from the harbour master.

So why are we flocking to the river, inspired by the wetsuited David Walliams, with swimming races attracting 10,000 entrants a year and plans for London to get a floating lido?

"The Thames is actually the cleanest it's been in living memory," says author Caitlin Davies, whose forthcoming book, Downstream: A History of Swimming the River Thames, charts 400 years of bathing among reeds, rushes and raw sewage. "From Victorian times to the 1930s, we had floating baths, temporary lidos, pontoons and even water slides all the way along the Thames. The river was much more filthy then, so it's strange that we're worrying about pollution now."

Her research follows a tidal wave of renewed interest in escaping the chlorinated confines of public pools, with the growing culture of "wild" swimming spurred on by a boom in triathlons. As London has sweltered, and queues for lidos grow ever longer, attention has turned to a proposal launched this year for a floating pool in the Thames, dreamed up by the young architecture practice Studio Octopi. Its latest scheme will be shown at an exhibition in September, Urban Plunge – showcasing a selection of designs for natural swimming in cities around the world.



Swimming on water ...

Berlin's popular Arena Badeschiff.

"We came up with the scheme more as a speculative provocation than a realistic proposal," says Octopi director Chris Romer-Lee, who first exhibited his Thames Baths project at a Royal Academy show in January. "But the amount of interest has been overwhelming, so we're pressing ahead with developing detailed designs." Originally conceived as a slice of the leafy Hampstead Heath ponds inserted into the gritty urban context of Blackfriars, it was a multilevelled complex of rock pools and a floating swimming tank, where river water would slosh over reeds and algal slime would tickle your toes.

Since then, the design team realised that a picturesque fringe of reeds wouldn't keep at

bay the 39 million cubic metres of sewage that splurge into the Thames each year, so they've opted for a floating pontoon filled with fresh water, which would cost half as much to build, at £5.5m. It now looks similar to Berlin's Badeschiff, a pool in a converted barge moored on the river Spree, which celebrates its 10th anniversary as a thriving hipster hangout this year. The plan has also moved upriver to Temple, joining the make-believe fantasy land of Thomas Heatherwick's garden bridge – both being things that might just happen, against all odds.

Ever keen to cement his credentials as the chief funster-mayor, Boris Johnson has got on board and commissioned a technical feasibility study into the possibility of a Thames lido. "We want kids to frolic on [the river's] banks and mudlark at low tide," he has written, summoning his usual folksy vision of an innocent bygone age. "We want Paris-style beaches and deckchairs and chaps coming round to sell you watches and tam-tam sets as you roast in the London sun."

While campaigning, Romer-Lee has unearthed a plethora of Thames enthusiasts, from an ex-army venture capitalist who used to swim to work every day from Battersea Park to Chelsea, to fishermen who claim to catch enormous eels, sea trout and even freshwater shrimps by HMS President, moored between Temple and Blackfriars. "In 15 years' fishing, they say they've never seen it as good as this," he says. "The water quality isn't that bad most of the time, it's just a problem when the sewers overflow" – something that London's £4.2bn "super sewer" should fix by 2023, if construction goes ahead.

The plan for this 15-mile mother-of-all drains is what first sparked the idea for the Thames Baths, recalling the spate of Victorian swimming enthusiasm when Joseph

Bazalgette completed his sewer network in 1875. As the public rejoiced in a marginally less putrid Thames, the Floating Swimming-Baths Company built a majestic iron and glass-domed pool at Hungerford Bridge, complete with arched girders from which bathers could leap. The river water was filtered and even heated (to a positively balmy 27C), and was allowed "to retain its natural salts and soft refreshing qualities" – and characteristic murk. As ever, it was an attempt to catch up with what had long been happening on the continent – Paris, Frankfurt and Vienna already boasted a thriving culture of floating river baths. It didn't really take off in London, and the structure was soon dismantled.



Leading the way ...

one of Copenhagen's four harbour baths.

These days, Copenhagen leads the way in urban open-water swimming, as it does in cycling and many other factors in those quality-of-life surveys, which it smugly tops on a regular basis. A decade-long clean-up programme has seen the city's harbour transformed from a polluted industrial soup to a place where locals flock to swim in crystal waters. There are four harbour bath complexes, the first designed in 2002 by architects Bjarke Ingels and Julien de Smedt, then in their 20s, with diving platforms and lounging decks. They attracted hordes of trendy teens and families, which in turn brought luxury waterfront housing and offices.

The harbour baths' alluring glamour has since inspired countless student projects, as well as a plan for a floating pool in New York, which goes one step further by proposing to filter the water of the East River to swimming quality through the walls of the pool itself. Launched with a bang on Kickstarter in 2011, the cartoonish, cross-shaped Plus Pool achieved its first crowdfunding target in six days, and attracted the expertise of engineering giant Arup, as well as a host of celebrity endorsers. "We were blown away by the reception," says one of its architects, Dong Wong, describing how the initial dream has become something very real, with a test module recently submerged in the river to test different filtration systems. The team has launched a buy-a-tile campaign, and plans

to open the pool in 2017 – if funds for the \$15m (£8.9m) construction cost can be raised in time.



Plus Pool, coming

soon to the East River in New York.

Back in London, the cachet of wild swimming has been seized on by developer Argent, which will soon install a natural bathing pond on part of its 54-hectare building site at King's Cross, providing an oasis among the cranes for the next two years. "We wanted to put a swamp in the middle of the city," say its architects Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hartenberg of Dutch practice Ooze, which previously made a garden in Germany that converts sewage to drinking water. But they found the water in the Regent's Canal, near King's Cross, too toxic for swimming. The pond was meant to be ready this summer, but site changes have delayed opening until the end of the year. "Luckily, London has many hardcore swimming societies," they say. So Londoners should just think of those plucky Victorians this winter – and take the plunge.

- Urban Plunge: New Designs for Natural Swimming in Our Cities is at Roca London Gallery from 11 September to 10 January.



Get the Guardian's Art Weekly email

For your art world low-down, the latest news, reviews and comment delivered straight to your inbox.

[Sign up for the Art Weekly email](#)

More from the Guardian

What's this?



Survivor: why mess with a



Baddies in books: Sauron,



How to eat: chocolate



Jake and Dinos Chapman

reality TV formula that has lasted 4,000 years?

27 Oct 2014

literature's ultimate source of evil

27 Oct 2014

27 Oct 2014

review – a hilarious, horrifying orgy of darkness

24 Oct 2014

More from around the web

What's this?

Promoted content by Outbrain



Cerebros and the art of drug smuggling
(Sphere)



Optical Illusions - Dance Style
(Goodnet)



Affordable London theatre
(Time Out - London)



Your Next Tattoo Made with a 3D Printer
(Shapeways)

Recommended by