



## Urban Plunge: New Designs for Natural Swimming at Roca Gallery

Launching to coincide with the London Design Festival (13-21 September 2014), Urban Plunge looks into an emerging urban swimming movement through new designs for river and harbour baths in cities like London, New York and Copenhagen. Curated by Jane Withers and showing at the Roca London Gallery, Urban Plunge aims to challenge attitude to the urban water environment and showing how water can enrich urban experience.

The exhibition showcases five architectural interventions that envisage imaginative new ways to enjoy clean natural water environments in the heart of our cities: + Pool, New York (Playlab & Family NYC); Thames Baths Project, London (Studio Octopi); Copenhagen Harbour Baths, (JDS Architects); King's Cross Pond Club, London (Ooze & Marjetica Potrč) and House of Water, Copenhagen (Tredje Natur).

Jane Withers, curator of Urban Plunge for Wonderwater, talks with T-R-E-M-O-R-S about the exhibition and Waterwonder, an initiative to develop projects around the world aimed at raising awareness of global water issues and design for a sustainable future.

**How did this Exhibition come about?**

**Jane Withers:** I had been thinking about doing a project around visions for the regeneration of urban waterways for sometime. When I came across Studio Octopi's Thames Baths project as part of the open call for London As It Could Be at the Royal Academy of Arts last summer, a proposal for a series of river baths along the Thames, I realised there was amazing potential for the wild swimming zeitgeist and precedents like the bathing stations in Copenhagen's harbour to challenge the way use and abuse urban waters, and help us think differently.

Urban Plunge is about encouraging us to think more imaginatively about these vast but neglected open spaces at the heart of our cities. At the moment urban waterways tend to be thought of as blanks in the city waiting to be bridged or used as boat super highways. We barricade and pollute city rivers, and a culture of fear seems to have grown up around them.



The exhibition showcases a series of international architectural and design projects that aim to transform urban rivers into public leisure spaces. Harbour baths, river baths and manmade natural ponds, can open up new worlds between city and water, in between spaces that seem to exist in a different time frame from the suited and congested urban environment. The exhibition took more concrete form when it was commissioned by Roca London Gallery after conversations with the team there around their pioneering approach to thinking about how we engage with water and promoting a more holistic approach to sustainability and the water environment.

### **Why is it important to change our swimming habits and plunge into our city's waters?**

Swimming in city waters is a wonderful way to experience the metropolis, and also a way to reconnect with nature and natural cycles in the city. In the 1930s the Lido movement swept across Britain as a means to create cleaner safer swimming environments. Now ironically we are challenging this through a return to swimming in

natural waterways. I think this is part of a larger urge to reconnect with the water environment and think about the place of nature in the city. By creating enclaves of relative purity in contaminated surroundings, it helps us think differently about water quality and how we treat it.

**Arguably in many Eastern cultures, water is an element that is more integrated in everyday life however this relationship may be strained due to growing urbanisation. Do you think lifestyle revolving around water makes people appreciate it more or less?**

I do believe that how we value water in our everyday lives has larger repercussions in the water environment. Since industrialisation we have taken water for granted as this clean clear abundant liquid on tap. We still give very little thought to it. But with growing consumption and water scarcity that has to change. Even if we still think we live in a culture where water is comparatively abundant, many of habits – for example in importing much of our food - impact on water scarce regions in the world and we have to think of water in terms of global as well as local impact.



**Will we soon be swimming in the Thames again like in the Victorian times? Is the Thames Baths project a plausible scenario?**

I think we will, and hopefully sooner rather than later. The Thames Baths concept was intended as a provocative vision but one the architects believe is feasible. There are different approaches – while Copenhagen cleaned the whole harbour, +POOL is taking a different tack by cleaning a small piece of the East River by filtering water through the walls of the pool. They are already testing the filter system and publishing the results of the water quality testing daily on line. Other projects in the exhibition – Of soil and water: King's Cross Pond Club opening at the end of the year, or Flussbad in Berlin – propose using plants as a natural biological water cleaning system. In

the case of the Thames, public perception of water quality is one of the biggest challenges as the Thames today is actually a lot cleaner than it was. The mayor's office are currently undertaking a feasibility study to look at if and where swimming pools might be sited on the central London stretch of the Thames.

**You have talked before about the intelligence of design on influencing, transforming and constructing the core of your work. What do you consider intelligent? Is it about potency?**

Many of the ways we currently use and abuse water date back to the 20th century and an era when we had little sense of the impending crisis. Now the challenge is to rethink how we use water in terms of an increasingly water stressed future. We built our cities around water resources but with industrialisation and growing urbanisation we turned them into sewers, polluting, barricading, and burying what should be some of our most valuable urban resources and amenities. As with many climate related issues there is a lot we can learn from past habits, where we used water more responsibly but also more pleasurably.

### **What is next on the Wonderwater agenda?**

There are a number of projects in the pipeline for the next two to three years, currently we are working on another edition of the Wonderwater Café developing the messages around water and food production and future food security, this will take place in London next year – dates and venue soon to be announced.

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