The Bathhouse
An investigation into public bathhouses became a personal fascination of mine when understanding the potential future of the Marineterrein. The City of Amsterdam wants to designate the Marineterrein as public place that keeps the history of the site alive, whilst encouraging water recreation and culture. The Marineterrein is currently finding ways to encourage swimming on the site. However, new programs should also attract visitors in the winter and act as a meeting place for all Amsterdammers.

This booklet investigates historical relevance, socio-cultural values and the architecture of the bathhouse, spanning various geographic regions. The marineterrein’s connection to water and location in the centre of Amsterdam, lends itself the opportunity to re-interpret the typology of the bathhouse within a contemporary city as a new social commons.
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Roman baths were recognized as urban monuments and their presence was an indication of successful urbanization. The baths were so integral in daily life, that people would often visit them once a day after work and before dinner.

There are two types of recognized baths, the thermae and the balnea. Thermae were relatively large public institutions which included bathing area and a palaestra, adopted from the Greek word for gymnasium, and consisted of both a sports area and social room. The thermae is described as large, symmetrical and monumental. Architectural elements found in Greek gymnasiums, such as the portico were inspirational details in Roman baths. Balnea are large or small public baths that did not include a sports area. Balneae were often neither symmetrical or as monumental as the Thermae.

Overtime, other activities were also added to the baths including lectures, poetry-reading and music. These activities either occurred in adjacent rooms or directly in the baths where there were good acoustics. The large thermae and modest balnea were equally important in daily life as a platform for social interactions.
Plan of the Baths of Caracalla, Rome, 212

(A) Apodyterium: dressing room
(P) Palaestra: gymnasium & social hall
(T) Tepidarium: warm room & bath
(S) Sudatorium: steam room
(C) Caldarium: hot room & bath
(F) Frigidarium: cold room & bath
(N) Natatio: swimming pool
The Hypocaust System

The hypocaust system was developed in 100 BC and was used to heat the baths. It consisted of a room with a hollow floor and hollow walls. The floor was held up 60 - 100 cm using small pillars made of several layers of tiles, called pilae stacks. Floor thickness varied, but the average depth was 20 cm. The hollow walls were often made of terracotta tiles and were grooved to allow for plaster to adhere in order to mount the decorate interior tiles.

The development of the hypocaust system allowed for the ability to have controlled gradual temperatures. This system characterized the Roman bath as it became known for its sequence of interlocking rooms with distinct temperatures. Rooms requiring hotter temperatures were located near to the furnace. Initially water was obtained from wells and cisterns and it wasn’t until aqueducts were introduced into towns that water was more generously provided. Communal baths became more popular as it was easier to heat larger pools than individual bath tubs.

Waste water systems were also integrated into the baths during this time. Grey water would either drain to the sewer or onto the floor, creating steam and washing the floor before disappearing into the floor drain.
Fig. 15. Plan and two sections of a hypocaust-heated room, with praefurnium, flues, tubulation, etc. 1 = stokery, 2 = damper, 3-4 = praefurnium, 5 = praefurnium vault, 6 = praefurnium floor, 7 = flues in room corners, 8 = pila, 9 = suspensura floor, 10 = pila "capital", 11 = tile slab, 12 = flues laid in grooves, 13 = flues placed diagonally, 14 = room floor, 15 = flues built into the wall, 16 = flue exit, 17 = tubulus, 18 = flue opening in suspensura, 19 = heating duct, 20 = suspensura, 21 = "baffles". (Degbomont 1984 pl. 2.)
Islamic Hamam

The Islamic hamam was inspired by the Roman baths, in particular due to its geographic proximity to the Mediterranean. Although the tradition of Roman baths disappeared, the hamam grew in popularity well into the Medieval period. Similar features are recognizable by the procession from hot to cold spaces and detailed decoration, such as intricate mosaic floors. In Turkey and the Middle East, the hamam was a vital social institution that promoted public health, offered a place for men and women to meet separately, and was a place of relaxation, rejuvenation and solitude. The hamam revolves around the spectacle of sweating, and receiving a scrubbing and massage. With the introduction of modern plumbing, hamams have become relatively obsolete. Currently, they are mostly used for ceremonial events, such as bridal preparations as well as a historical cultural experience for tourism.
Historically the hamam contained three main spaces; the change room, the hot room (sicaklik) and the boiler room (kulhan). Heat was generated in the kulhan and passed through a channel called cehennemlik. The sicaklik is the main room and contains a belly stone, called gobek tasi, which is a platform raised 45-50cm. It is often octagonal or rectangular shape, where the user lies and receives their scrubbing. Typically accessories found in the hamam is a scrubber, towel, bath wrap and wooden platform shoes to avoid slipping. The rooms feature a domed roof which have star-like or circular shaped windows. At the top of the dome is a hexagonal or octagonal roof lantern. Often, inscriptions contain information about its date of construction and the builders name. Most hamams share general features, but decoration and details were often regionally specific.
Japanese bathing transcends generational, economic and social boundaries. There are three types of Japanese baths, (i) onsen, (ii) sentō, and (iii) furo. The onsen is fed by a natural hot spring, the sentō is an urban bathhouse, and furo is a private bath found in homes and originally made of wood.

The first onsen is estimated to be 3000 years old and was recognized, as early as the 6th century, to have powerful therapeutic and a religious (Buddhist) connection. The success of the onsen was related to geographic accessibility to hot springs, which exist throughout Japan.

Sentōs gained popularity in the 15th century, and in Kyoto intersections would often be named according to the local bathhouse. The sentō became successful because of hygienic needs which later became more about socializing then bathing. Often, large groups would rent out sentōs for private baths, drinking and parties. The gesture of communal cleaning and social mixing reconstructed social hierarchy and rendered social status obsolete. The success of the sentō relies on affordable prices for frequent visits, and the efficient use of hot water for low fuel costs.

However, much like European bathing trends, new homes became outfitted with private baths, which led to the decline in neighbourhood sentōs.

“There was a also a cultural and hierarchical stratification narrowing that arose out of the social mixing that was promoted within the sentō culture, which has had lasting effects on the Japanese social status quo.” (Merry, 2013, p.26)
Japanese Bathing Typologies \(^{11,12,13}\)

1. Shoe Lockers
2. Garden
3. Change Room
4. Baby Bed
5. Lockers
6. Sinks w/ mirrors
7. Pool
8. Boiler

Typical Floor Plan of Japanese Sentō \(^{14}\)

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Critics of sentōs argue that the traditional sentō is not able to diversify and funding is difficult. However, the sentō is being re-invented, not out of need, but instead owners stress the social aspects of neighbourhood baths. Sentō advocates are trying to revive the bath house as a place of inexpensive social interaction. This has given rise to the evolution of the super-sentō.

Super-sentōs are large modern complexes that include programs of bathing, as well as jacuzzis, dry saunas, infrared tubs. However, they also provide diverse entertainment such as restaurants, bars and game corners. Super-sentōs can be described as "cater[ing] to the Japanese post-modern love for all things comfortable, affordable, and sensually stimulating" (Mary, 2013, p.39). These complexes cater to the mass market, including Japanese locals and tourists alike. They are marketed as one of the cheapest forms of cultural entertainment and historical experiential value and are also advertised as way for Japanese youth to meet people amongst the chaos of large cities.

Right Image: Naoshima Bath art & bathing facility created by artist Shinro Ohtake.
In the mid-1800’s, several bathhouses emerged in Western Europe that offered separate pools, Russian-Roman baths, and cold plunge pools for men and women. In Liverpool, the Frederick Street Bathhouse, even provided a library to stimulate the mind, which was reminiscent of Greek ideals. British diplomat, David Urquhart, a key figure in introducing the Turkish bath into society, suggested that besides health benefits, the baths were a space where social classes could have contact with each other.

However, with the rise of industrialization came the spread of urban slums and diseases such as cholera. The public bath was beginning to come under surveillance of medical authorities. The new model for public baths quickly became the antithesis of historic bathing culture, which had for so long revolved around the social. Instead, the public bath was about efficiency, the division of classes, individual bathing cells and separation. The 1911 Hygiene Exhibition marked a turning point when the bathhouses became a purely function facility in Western Europe.

Image: Poster for the 1911 International Hygiene convention in Dresden, Germany.
The Thermenpalast was an unrealized utopian project, set in Berlin, designed by Hans Poelzig, Karl Stodieck, and J. Goldmerstein in 1928. It disregarded 19th century standard bathhouse conventions such as division and privacy. It was conceived as a centrally planned structure with social exchange and play at its focus. Thermenpalast's architectural gestures reflected its grand ideals and proposed to accommodate 17,800 bathers a day.
Amsterdam Badhuizen

The first bathhouse in Amsterdam was founded in 1797 and was intended for the wealthy. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the first private volksbadhuizen (people's bathhouses) appeared. As previously mentioned the early 20th century focused on the relationship between public hygiene and health in urban centres. Therefore, in 1911 the first municipal bathhouse was open to the public and in 1920, Councillor de Miranda adopted the “Bathhouse Plan” and commissioned the construction of seven new “volksbadhuizen” and six new school swimming pools. The bathhouses were commissioned with the goal of (i) achieving regularity and self-discipline, (ii) uphold cleanliness and hygiene, (iii) encourage domesticity and family life of working-class families to simulate that of the bourgeoisie. Civil groups, encouraged bathing as they believe economy and society were best served by healthy and disciplined workers.

In the years to follow, the integration of showers and bathrooms in home became more prevalent, and innovation allowed for lower costs and greater access. In 1933, Amsterdam city council specified that all new homes should provide bathing facilities. It was at this point that the use of public bathhouses declined. Some bathhouses still exist today under different programs. The Badhuis Javaplein is now a restaurant and the bathhouse on Boerhaaveplein now acts as a theatre and the Funenkade bathhouse is now Brouwerij ‘t IJ.
Left Images: Photo of men’s & women’s waiting rooms in Diamantstraat bathhouse. Top Image: Photo of furnace in Diamantstraat bathhouse. Bottom Image: Propaganda to encourage residents to use the bathhouse every week.27
In the mid-18th century, many cities focused on river baths as an alternative option for bathing because obtaining a central water supply was difficult and most cities didn’t have the financial means to construct public bathhouses. In Germany, Flussbäder, or river baths, were seasonal facilities and provided bathing services, but also swimming lessons for children.

In the early-to-mid twentieth century, the use and commissioning of river baths declined as there was increase stress on waterways for industrial use and a decline in water quality.

In recent decades, there has been a revival in river/harbour baths as previously industrial ports are transforming to social and cultural districts. The contemporary river bath functions as a leisure destination in an urban context and extends public space onto the water.
In the last few decades, bathhouses have seen a revival. However, the bathing culture that was once considered a social institution, regardless of class or background, has now become a spa culture. The spa is targeted towards those searching for a glamorous lifestyle and an escape from the outside world. Often, contemporary bathhouses and spas facilitate experiences for exclusive demographics. Although gay bathhouses still exist today, they first became popular in the 1950's when homosexuality was not yet widely accepted in public. The bathhouse provided a place for men to have sex and find companionship.

Advertisement for gay bathhouse in New York City.
Main Floor Plan of Therme Vals Spa, Switzerland.  

The Therme Vals, in Switzerland, by architect Peter Zumthor, is a contemporary example and reference to the Roman baths. Its programmatic layout is very similar, and primitive elements such as stone, glass and steel are used. Nonetheless, Vals caters to a more exclusive experience and suggests self-reflection and rejuvenation instead of a place for socializing.
However, bathing typologies that have remained an open and social experience are the Finnish sauna and public baths in Budapest. Finnish saunas are often built into homes or are places by water, where users rotate jumping in the water and warming up in the sauna. It is a truly social experience between family and friends, and can even draw larger crowds for performances!

The Romans first colonized Budapest so that they could take advantage of the thermal springs. In the Turkish period (1541-1686), new baths, known as Fürdő, were built for bathing and medicinal purposes. Thermal baths became so common that in 1934, Budapest was officially recognized as the City of Spas. Gellert Baths is perhaps the most famous bath with its art nouveau interior, however many of the baths are known for their social atmosphere, including improvised games of chess.
Conclusion

The Roman baths, Islamic hamam, Japanese Sento, Finnish sauna and Hungarian Fürdő are specific in their cultural and historical context, however they all share the common function of acting as a sphere for social interaction. The baths also provided activities beyond bathing, such as libraries, performances, celebrations and games.

The bathhouse of the future can learn from social and architectural elements found in past typologies, such as procession, program, natural lighting, elemental features and a reconnection with the natural environment. There is an opportunity to re-think a contemporary bathhouse on the Marineterrein. The bathhouse can provide a new social public space, which breaks down social hierarchies, and offers a program that goes beyond the act of bathing.
References


