

the design of reform

the public bath movement in america

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In 1904, the United States Bureau of Labor prepared an exhibit for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis on the nation's public baths.¹ The Bureau reported that nearly 80 percent of the ninety-nine indoor and outdoor public bathing facilities in America had been established between 1895 and 1904. An explosion of public bathing had occurred in schools, on beaches and in industry. Indoor public bathhouses counted for over half of the boom, increasing from six to forty-nine in those ten years.²

The decade which saw the establishment of public bathhouses also experienced the flowering of many other public institutions. By the turn of the century, many cities provided schools, libraries, museums, zoos, parks, playgrounds and summer concerts, as well as police, fire protection, liquor licensing, sanitary inspection, garbage collection, paved streets and sidewalks, hospitals, insane asylums and some direct poor relief. Made possible by the economies of scale that a densely populated city offered, the institutions embodied a new civic ethos which sought to gather the disparate urban groups into one great community. "The city-dweller has become a citizen," proclaimed Frederic C. Howe, "His social sense is being organized and his demands upon the government have been rapidly increasing."³ Reformers such as Howe hoped that all would use these new institutions and participate in a common civic life.

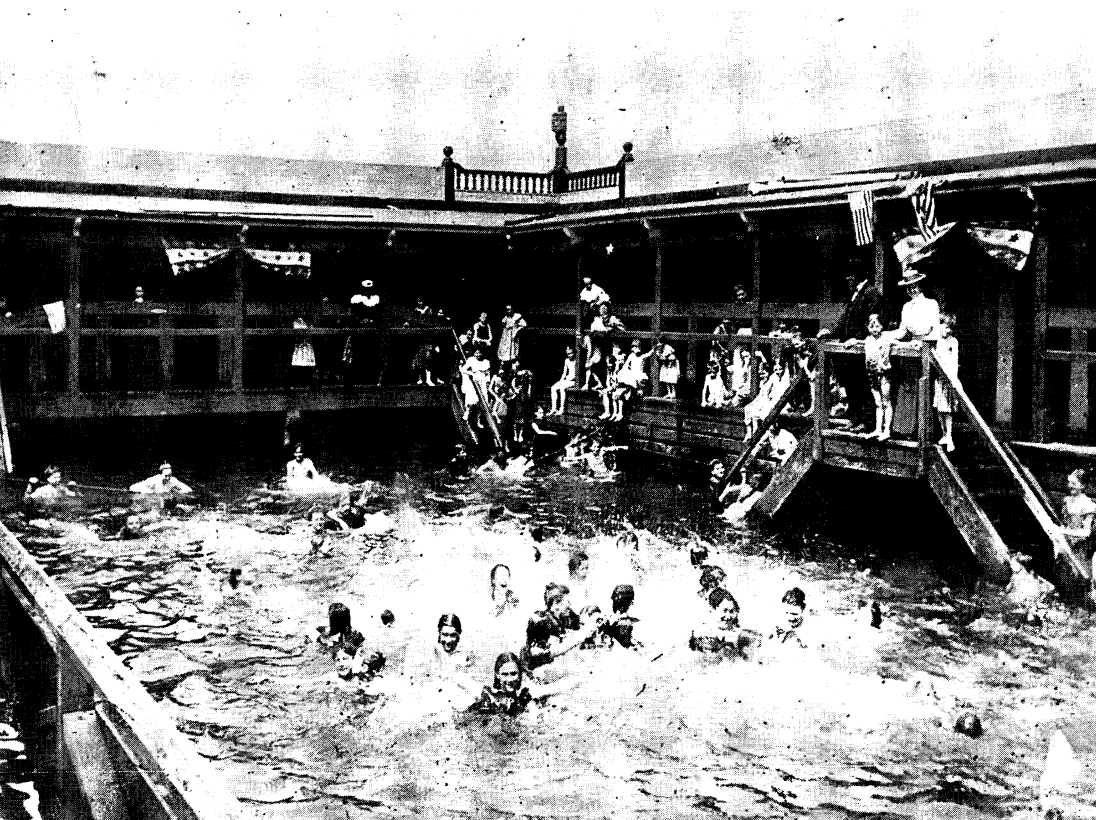
The reformers believed that in return for insuring the citizens' physical and moral well-being, city life required adherence to certain standards

and principles. Reformers created the new institutions not only to provide services but also to uphold the standards and teach the principles necessary for civic civilization to the entire society. The growth of public institutions at the turn of the century was as much the result of what Daniel Walker Howe describes as a characteristically “Victorian” defense of “threatened” values and beliefs as an optimistic embrace of the city’s possibilities for new levels of cooperation.⁴

Cleanliness was one such standard upon which all decent citizens would agree. To be clean was to be a respectable member of the community; to remain unwashed was to be a physical and moral menace. Building public bathhouses for the poor institutionalized the reformers’ faith in cleanliness and their desire to extend their baptismal rites of common citizenship to all residents of their city. Yet contrary to the promises of their founders, the bathhouses tended to emphasize, rather than to diminish, the distance between the “great unwashed” and the rest of society.

Poor Americans at the turn of the century faced a shortage of private bathing facilities. Although most middle and upper-class single homes in the 1890s had bathtubs, few tenements came so equipped, and few poor could afford the fifteen dollars for a tub even if bathwater were made free. The New York City Mayor’s Committee on Public Baths and Comfort Stations reported in 1897 that well over 90 percent of the

FIGURE ONE: A floating bath in the East River, New York City. By Jacob A. Riis, from the Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



families in the tenement districts of the four largest American cities had no baths.⁵

Without private baths, tenement dwellers washed in courtyard hydrants, hall sinks or in tubs shared with several other families. Investigators for the New York State Tenement House Commission heard slum residents complain that they rarely used the common tubs for fear that their neighbors suffered from skin disease. Considering the lack of privacy, clean facilities and water pressure to upper floors of tenements, Henry Moscowitz doubted that his fellow residents bathed more than six times a year.⁶

Some cities provided free “floating baths” each summer. Originating in Boston in the 1860s, the floating baths were wooden frames extended over a river, inside which people bathed (see Figure One). By 1889, New York City had fifteen of these structures, administered by its Department of Health. Despite their popularity with the thousands who flocked to cool off on hot summer days, the floating baths had numerous problems. They occupied valuable river-front space. The polluted rivers gave the baths the reputation of being “floating sewers.” The flimsy seasonal wooden structures needed almost constant repair. Most importantly, the floating baths were not available to the public year-round. The only remaining inexpensive solution to the bath shortage was to construct permanent indoor bathhouses.

Earlier attempts to establish indoor public bathhouses had generally failed. Despite a shortage of private baths, cities in mid-nineteenth century America did not feel bathhouses so necessary that they be erected at public expense. In England, an 1846 law enabled towns to tax its citizens to build public bathing facilities, and London opened thirteen bathhouses by 1854. American cities, however, left the building of bathhouses entirely to private charities. Philadelphia’s City Council in 1848 even refused to grant the Philadelphia Society for the Employment and Instruction of the Poor’s new bathhouse a special rate with the municipal water company, forcing the agency to abandon its hope of providing free public baths.⁷ Similar attempts by ill funded private charities to establish baths were also short lived.

The lack of fervor for providing indoor public bathhouses in mid-nineteenth century America reflected the belief that bathing, although beneficial to health, was not essential. Wealthy Americans enjoyed resorts built around hot springs, such as those at Saratoga, New York, and Yellowstone, Wyoming. At home, they chose from among a variety of therapeutic hot and cold tub baths, shower baths, russian (hot vapor) baths, turkish (hot air) baths, “needle” baths and “electric” baths. The needle bath surrounded the bather with a coil of perforated pipe that pinpointed jets of water over his body; the electric bath bathed one’s body in light rays.⁸ Bathing was to be encouraged—but few felt the

provision of baths important enough to be a public responsibility, on the order of police and fire protection.

Moreover, some felt that even if public baths were provided, the poor would not use them. The New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor's bathhouse, established in 1849, soon closed, reportedly from insufficient patronage to meet expenses. Its directors complained that they were "too far in advance of the habits of the people."⁹ Superintendent L. N. Case of the Detroit Water Works observed, "The class most desirable to reach . . . is not particularly fond of water as a lavation. The old saying that you can lead a horse to the water but cannot make him drink is very applicable in this connection."¹⁰ A rumor circulated in New York City that the poor so little wanted to bathe that those few slum dwellers who owned tubs only used them for storing coal. Indoor public bathhouses seemed in mid-nineteenth century America to be an expensive, unnecessary service which the poor probably would not use anyway.

By the end of the century, however, many viewed providing public bathhouses as a matter of utmost urgency. The big city's contagious diseases, ugly slums, relaxed moral codes and strange immigrant customs offered reformers new and compelling reasons for insisting that all should bathe. Moreover, the progressive civic ethos demanded that the solution to these problems was a public responsibility. Reformers believed that the poor must have baths, and that it was the duty of "those who [were] already washed," in the words of Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy, to provide them.¹¹

One impetus to the bath movement came from the desire to upgrade public health. City health departments in the 1890s began to feel the full impact of the germ theory of disease. Where previously doctors blamed disease upon a poor general environment, proof emerged in the 1880s that specific microorganisms caused such illnesses as typhoid, tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria, plague and dysentery.¹² The possibility that these microorganisms hid in layers of dirt transformed every unclean individual into a potential disease-bearer. Dr. Moreau Morris of New York warned that "the body exhalations of an unwashed sample of humanity sitting next to us in our crowded cars may communicate a deadly typhus germ without our consciousness."¹³ Seeing the lack of baths among the slum population as an invitation to city-wide epidemic, the *Philadelphia Ledger* proclaimed "Every dirty man or woman is a menace to the health of the community."¹⁴ The healthy city so depended upon the clean, healthy individual that the *Philadelphia North American* looked forward to the day when "public baths will be as common as public schools, and bathing, like education, will be made compulsory."¹⁵ Science mandated baths as essential for public health.

The second impetus to the bath movement came from the desire to upgrade public morality. Whereas earlier attempts to improve morality

had concentrated upon reforming each individual's habits, usually through religion, and later attempts to upgrade morality concentrated upon reforming the degrading environment, usually through replacing "bad" institutions such as the saloon, the bath movement at the turn of the century sought to reform both the individual's habits and environment at once. The reformers believed that a reciprocal relationship existed between moral character and a clean environment. Cleanliness was the result of moral habits—New York State official Goodwin Brown observed that it was a sure way to distinguish the "honest" from the "idle" poor.¹⁶ Yet at the same time, reformers believed that cleanliness encouraged morality, while a dirty environment bred moral decline. The poor's dirt was both a badge of immorality and one of its causes. Public baths, by promoting both the habit of cleanliness and a clean environment, could reverse the spiral of moral decline.

Reformers thus saw the baths not just as cleansing facilities, but as missions to the slums to spread the "gospel of cleanliness." The New York Tenement Commission insisted that "The cultivation of the habit of personal cleanliness [has] a favorable effect . . . upon character, tending toward self-respect and decency of life."¹⁷ W. L. Ross, manager of Philadelphia's Gaskill Street Baths, explained that "The object is not only to promote bathing facilities, but to elevate taste and morals."¹⁸ Reformers hoped that the bathhouse would soon replace the saloon as a community center. After all, reasoned New Yorker William Tolman, "It is morally better to give a man an opportunity to wash the outside of his body with water, rather than the inside of his body with whiskey."¹⁹ The Boston Bath Commission cited a decrease in the number of juvenile arrests as evidence of its baths' success.²⁰ As Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy proclaimed in 1898, "When physical dirt has been banished, a long step has been taken in the elimination of moral dirt."²¹

By promoting health and morality, baths had the power to transform "urban barbarism" into "civic civilization."²² "The advance of civilization is largely measured by the victories of mankind over its greatest enemy—dirt," Mayor Quincy noted. "One of the chief and most fundamental differences in conditions between the savage and the civilized man is that the former is dirty while the latter is relatively clean."²³ William P. Gerhard observed in his building guide for *Modern Baths and Bathhouses* that "All cultured nations have practiced bathing, chiefly at a period in their history when they flourished most, and that with the decay of civilization and culture, baths also disappeared."²⁴ The New York Tenement Commission described the lack of public bathhouses as "a disgrace to the city and to the civilization of the nineteenth century."²⁵ One bath advocate in Chicago insisted, "The greatest civilizing power that can be brought to bear on these uncivilized Europeans crowding into our cities lies in the public bath."²⁶

The gospel of cleanliness at the turn of the century thus represented

an attempt to bolster “Victorian” moral standards which reformers felt were becoming polluted by the diversity of behavior in their city. Cleanliness was necessary for participation in a common city life—Goodwin Brown declared that “Without a sense of cleanliness, a high degree of civic pride is impossible.”²⁷ Moreover, cleanliness had a physical rationale, provided by germ theory. It was proof that society indeed possessed enduring values upon which all decent citizens would agree. Providing for the poor’s cleanliness with a system of public bathhouses was essential for maintaining a healthy, moral, “civilized” society.

The first successful indoor public bathhouse in the United States opened in New York City in 1891. The “People’s Baths” resulted from a coalition of private charities which included the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), the New York Mission Tract Society, the Protestant Episcopal City Mission, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the New York Academy of Medicine, the Charity Organization Society and the St. John’s Guild. Pooling resources, the agencies under AICP leadership erected a bathhouse at a cost of \$27,000.²⁸ The building’s cream-colored facade sharply contrasted with its dingy tenement house surroundings. An inscription above the large arch over the doorway proclaimed “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness.” The bathhouse’s opening moved one amateur bard to pen an ode of praise, which concluded:

The man who is clean from his scalp to his toes,
Should always be jolly, wherever he goes.
To be clean without leads to pureness within,
Where lurks germs, the vilest of terrible sin.

So hurra! Yes, hurra! that this bathhouse is built,
At sin and at filth to make a brave tilt.
May the AICP by this right royal gift,
Save many a soul now wrecked and adrift.²⁹

Two innovations helped the People’s Baths to succeed. Unlike earlier bathhouses, it had showers in place of tubs. Dr. Simon Baruch, whose tour of European bathhouses provided the basis for the AICP’s bathhouse design, explained that the public shower-bath was more thoroughly cleansing and less likely to communicate disease than tubs and was much less expensive to operate. Showers used less water, less space and took less time for each bather than tubs, allowing the AICP to bathe more patrons. Unlike tubs, Baruch argued, showers required neither scrubbing nor changing of water between bathers, nor did they wear out and require replacement. The second innovation introduced inexpensive, easily cleaned cement and iron building materials in place of wood. Architects designed everything to be hosed down frequently. Each shower-bath cost the AICP between three and four cents. The 70-80,000 patrons each year, paying either a nickel to use one of the 18 first floor showers or else

using one of the nine free basement showers, enabled the AICP nearly to break even.³⁰

With the success of the People's Baths, other New York City charities, such as the Baron de Hirsch Fund, DeMilt Dispensary and the Riverside Association, also built bathhouses. Reformers soon clamored for the New York City government to build municipal bathhouses. Mayor William L. Strong appointed a Mayor's Committee on Public Baths and Comfort Stations in 1894. Secretary William Tolman declared, "Now that these philanthropies have demonstrated the need and the demand for cleansing baths, they have done their duty and the city should undertake that work which is clearly a municipal function."³¹ Doctor Baruch added, "It is the duty of a municipality to prevent disease. It is the duty of a municipality to prevent immorality. I believe that money spent on baths raises the standard of health and morality."³² But the New York City Council had yet to see the need for municipal baths and defeated a bill that would have established a New York City Bath Department with six bathhouses.

The state government of New York therefore acted before the city did. State Commissioner of Lunacy Goodwin Brown was so impressed with the sanitary results of replacing tubs with showers in all state asylums that he drafted a bill, which became law in 1892, authorizing local governments to use public money for municipal baths. When few towns took advantage of the provision, the state in 1895 enacted a new law, also drafted by Brown, compelling each municipality of over 50,000 people to establish a system of free public bathhouses. The law required each bathhouse to have hot and cold water and to be open not less than fourteen hours each day. Generally cities were slow to comply with the law—the first municipal bathhouse in the state opened in Buffalo in 1897, and by 1904 only thirteen had been built statewide.

Philadelphia's experience with bathhouses paralleled that of New York. Municipal bathhouses did not follow the initiative taken by private charity. Although Philadelphia's poor mobbed the three indoor bathhouses built by the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia between 1898 and 1903, the city of Philadelphia built no year-round indoor baths. Attempts to rally municipal support on behalf of a system of public bathhouses for the poor fell short of reformers' goals.³³

Attempts to rally philanthropic support for bathhouses also usually disappointed the reformers. William Tolman had hoped that wealthy "merchant princes" would donate bathhouses to cities, just as they endowed schools, theatres, and museums. Some philanthropists did endow municipal baths. Baltimore's Henry Walters, best known for endowing the Walters Art Gallery, also funded four public bathhouses. Many other philanthropists, however, would not endow institutions exclusively for the poor. They echoed Pittsburgh industrialist Henry Phipps' complaint in 1902 that he was "tired of trying to wash the great unwashed," (though the next year Phipps did help to endow a municipal bathhouse).³⁴

Chicago's experience differed from that of New York and Philadelphia. Instead of building bathhouses itself, the Municipal Order League (later the Chicago Free Bath and Sanitary League) pressured the Chicago City Council to provide municipal baths from the very first. In February, 1893, Dr. Gertrude G. Wellington, anticipating the crush of people in Chicago for the World's Columbian Exposition, and noticing the vast army of workingmen already in the city to build the fair, asked Mayor Washburn to provide both temporary baths for the fair months and three permanent indoor bathhouses, one each on the west, north and south sides of the city. Her letter mentioned five reasons for building baths: 1) That the poor of the city, especially on the West Side, were without bathing facilities, 2) "That men are vicious when dirty as well as when hungry," 3) That the act would make him (the mayor) very popular, 4) That it will help prevent typhoid, cholera and crime, and 5) "That it will inspire sweeter manners and a better observance of law."³⁵ With the help of Jane Addams, the reformers mobilized the press, immigrant organizations such as the *Turnverein* and the residents of the district, and successfully presented their case before the City Council. In January, 1894, Chicago opened the first municipally-run indoor bathhouse in America. The city named the bathhouse after Mayor Carter H. Harrison, following Wellington's shrewd suggestion that naming baths after political figures gave politicians added incentive to support future baths. Indeed, Chicago would soon not only have bathhouses named after politicians, but a politician, "Bathhouse John" Coughlin, nicknamed after his baths. Discovering that more municipal bathhouses would be built through political pressure than disinterested appeals, Chicago's reformers succeeded in establishing municipal bathhouses before their eastern counterparts. By 1910, the city operated fifty bathhouses.

The pattern of bathhouse reform across America was similar. Like many other reform movements of the period, it was a national network, sharing expertise through letters and social work journals such as *Charities Review* long before it had a national organization (the American Association for Hygiene and Public Baths was not established until 1912). Reformers either tried to build their own bathhouses, as in New York City and Philadelphia, or they joined with immigrant groups to pressure city governments for municipal baths. Chicago's experience demonstrates how successful the latter groups could be.

The bath advocates worked to establish not just bathhouses, but also to place shower-baths in schools, mines and factories. Baltimore and Chicago led the way in establishing baths in public schools. Reformers sought to make bathing part of the school routine, hoping that a clean child would attempt to change his dirty home environment.³⁶ One advocate of industrial bathhouses, Brooklyn drop-forge owner J. H. Williams, installed twelve showers on the premises for his men. "As it is

acknowledged that habitual bathing prevents disease and promotes health and morality, baths for working people affect all classes of society,” he explained. “Employers are therefore under moral obligations to provide such facilities.”³⁷

The reform leaders were generally upper-middle class social welfare professionals, many of them women. The Chicago Free Bath and Sanitary League’s Dr. Gertrude Wellington proclaimed women “the natural housekeepers of a great city.”³⁸ The New York Mayor’s Committee on Public Baths and Comfort Stations was chaired by social work specialists William G. Hamilton of the AICP and Dr. Moreau Morris of the New York Tenement House Association. The reformers were generally the same class of people that pushed for public museums, libraries and theatres. Chicago’s Municipal Order League advocated not only bath-houses but also the paving of all streets in the Loop and the building of kiosks in city parks for summer concerts. Pittsburgh’s baths were maintained under the auspices of the Allegheny County Civic Club. The bath advocates seemed optimistic about society’s potential to realize traditional goals using the new scientific techniques. Their movement demonstrated the desire to maintain a standard of morality and respectability—symbolized by cleanliness—through the most modern, efficient means which they could find—a system of public shower-baths. The reformers believed that public baths could help bring society closer to their vision of the ideal city, free of corruption, immorality, dirt and disease.

Yet despite their popularity, neither the municipally- nor privately-run indoor bathhouses became the civic institutions which the reformers hoped. Usually built exclusively for the poor, the bathhouse designs had little in common with the stately public schools, parks, libraries and museums built for the rest of society. Although some reformers hoped that the bathhouse would replace the saloon as a community center, its actual design discouraged lingering and offered patrons little reason to visit except to get clean.

The desire to wash large numbers of patrons as cheaply as possible gave urban indoor public bathhouses throughout America a similar look (see Figures Two, Three and Four). In general, the bathhouses were small, scattered throughout the city, each catering to its own neighborhood. This not only brought baths to the people’s door, but also insured that the different races, classes and ethnic groups would not mix.

The buildings generally were of two stories, with light brick and stone trim. The light colored facades were to contrast the bathhouse with its dingy tenement neighborhood, to act as a model for the neighborhood. Reformers directed each bathhouse attendant to wash the sidewalk in front of his/her bathhouse in the hope that its neighbors would cleanse their walks. Still, the exteriors were deliberately quite plain, compared with other public buildings. A bathhouse “exterior must

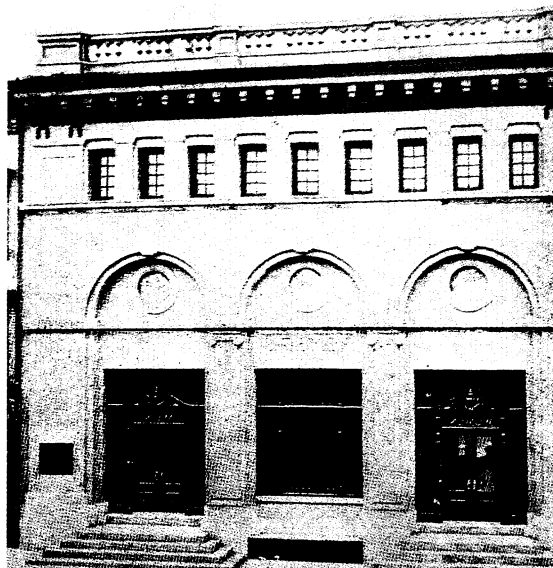
be modest," Dr. Baruch recommended, "so as not to repel the poor and lowly by [its] architectural pretensions."³⁹ The buildings seldom employed classical orders or attempted associations with the Roman baths.

The plainness of the bathhouses resulted not just from wanting to avoid scaring off the poor with grand facades but also from the reformers' desire to build at minimum cost. Despite the New York People's Baths' success, no other bathhouse built in a tenement district in America came close to breaking even financially. Most municipally-run baths were free; the privately-run ones generally charged no more than a nickel. Less money spent on buildings helped to minimize losses. Some also felt that the poor deserved no better than the least expensive facilities possible. When New York City's relatively ornate Seward Park Baths flooded in 1904 just four days after it had opened, the attendant blamed the mishap on vandalism, grumbling that the place was "too good for the class of people who used the baths."⁴⁰ This attitude, coupled with the wish to save money, gave the bathhouses a businesslike, though not unpleasant, appearance.

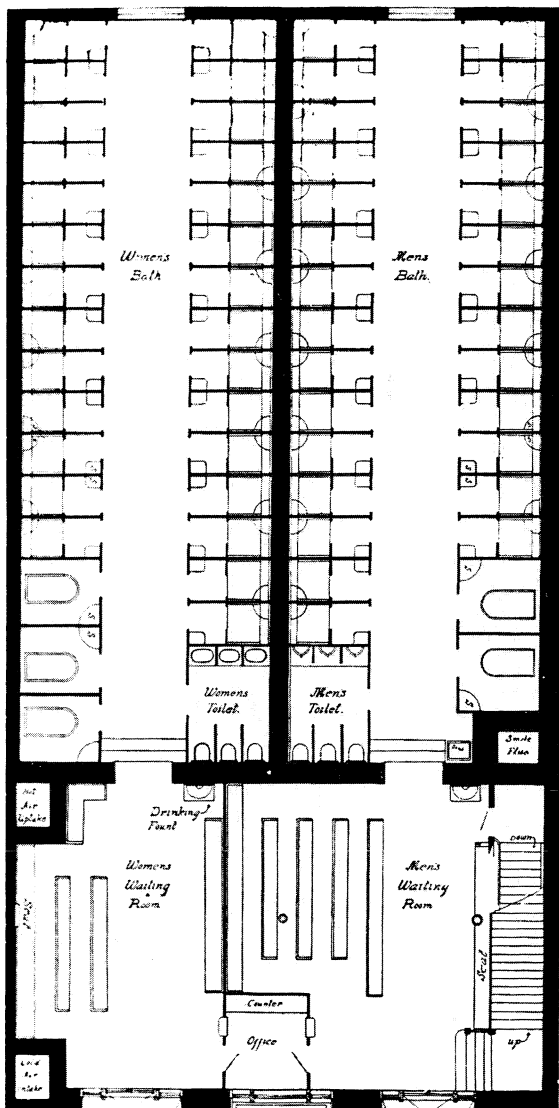
Architects designed the bathhouses solely for speed and sanitation, to process efficiently a steady flow of patrons. Nearly all bathhouses followed the example of New York City's successful People's Baths, using concrete interior materials and showers to the exclusion of tubs. New York's Dr. Baruch insisted that as well as being less expensive to maintain, a shower-bath was refreshing and invigorating, unlike the "dangerously relaxing" tub bath.⁴¹ Dr. Moreau Morris explained that "These baths are for cleansing purposes only, and by the use of the individual spray-bath a degree of personal cleanness is attained that cannot be secured by any other means so thoroughly, so efficiently, so quickly, and so economically."⁴² Harold Werner, architect of New York City's West Sixtieth Street Baths, noted that "ease of communication and rapidity of handling the bathers were the prime considerations" in his design. No tubs were used, Werner added, because they were "a source of jealousy and confusion."⁴³

Bathroom design also encouraged efficient bathing through the use of partitions and screens. Generally, each bather had his own two-chamber compartment—the first for the shower and the second for his/her clothes. (In New York's People's Baths, however, the bather used a single compartment with a rubber sheet to cover his/her clothes.) Men were separated from women not only in the baths but also in the waiting rooms and entrances. Philadelphia's Gaskill Street Baths even barred men from using the same laundry facilities as women. Builders placed wire mesh over the top of each bathing compartment, reportedly to prevent patrons from thieving (see Figures Five and Six).

The typical bathing experience involved taking a ticket, waiting for one's number to be called, then within the next twenty minutes, picking up a towel and a two-inch bar of soap, undressing, receiving a



FIGURES TWO, THREE AND FOUR:
 The Pitkin Avenue Municipal Bath,
 Brooklyn, New York, a typical urban
 bathhouse. Upper left: Interior. Up-
 per Right: Front facade. Right: First
 floor plan. From G. W. W. Hanger,
 "Public Baths in the United States,"
U.S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin 9
 (1904), plates 146, 147.



specified amount of water, often under the control of the attendant, for a specified amount of time, then dressing and leaving. The temperature of the Dover Street, Boston baths reached no higher than 73°F., “discouraging the tendency to indulge in the enervating soak that a hot shower provides.”⁴⁴ The New York Mayor’s Committee assured its readers that to orchestrate the flow of patrons in the People’s Baths, police maintained “perfect order” while a “competent matron” looked after the women and a “man of experience” looked after the men.⁴⁵ Smoking, swearing and intoxicated people were prohibited from bathhouses; so was “loitering and loafing.” Ironically, at a time when New York built Pennsylvania Station modeled on the luxurious Roman baths of Caracalla, the designs and experiences in American public bathhouses most nearly resembled those of a railway depot.

Despite the apparent constraints, the poor flocked to the baths. Between 1898 and 1908 the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia reported a seven-fold increase in patrons.⁴⁶ Posters, billboards, newspaper ads and coupons for free baths brought thousands to the baths each year. The baths especially provided relief on hot summer days. In Chicago, indoor public bath attendance in the four months from June through September often equalled that for the other eight months of the year.⁴⁷ Although Irish immigrants and native white Americans were said to harbor a “repugnance” to public bathing, Jews, Russians, Slavs, Germans and Italians crowded the baths, especially before the sabbath and holidays. Baltimore’s Argyle Street Baths, built for Blacks, reported heavy patronage.⁴⁸

Many more men bathed than women. In New York City’s municipal baths the ratio of men to women was two to one; in Chicago it was four to one. The imbalance reflected the bathhouses’ design, which usually included more showers on the men’s side of the house. Bathhouses which opened different days of the week for each sex, instead of having separate men’s and women’s sides, generally gave men more time than women. Chicago’s Harrison Baths opened to women but two days a week. Also, new bathhouses built exclusively for men far outnumbered those built just for women. This suggests that some reformers saw public bathhouses as primarily for workingmen.

Once inside the bathhouse, however, the men and women were treated the same, except that the women’s experience may have been slightly less vigorous. The women’s side was more likely than the men’s side to have a few tubs. Baltimore’s Walters Bath Number One, built in 1900, had eighteen showers for men and five showers, two tubs for women. Also, Chicago’s baths maintained their hot water at 105°F. on women’s days, 100°F. at other times. Still, the bathhouses seemed designed to give women as well as men a brief but thorough cleaning.

Perhaps the more rigorous aspects of the baths contributed to their appeal. Patrons could be reasonably sure that the public baths were

clean, unlike the common tenement house tubs about which they complained. Each bather—if only for ten minutes—had privacy, something which he/she would seldom find at home. The replacement, at Jane Addams' insistence, of 19 showers with a 20' × 30' plunge bath at Chicago's Harrison Baths proved unpopular, reportedly because the patrons did not want to bathe together in so small a space.⁴⁹ Public bathhouses offered the poor an inexpensive means to get clean, allowing them privacy, hot water, and clean facilities in good repair not available at home.

The baths also offered the poor a source of recreation. Although the vast majority of indoor bathhouses were administered by city health departments and designed solely to clean large numbers of people as quickly as possible, usage patterns and accounts of bathhouse behavior suggest that the poor used bathhouses for recreation as well. The superintendent of one Philadelphia bathhouse lamented that his patrons used the baths as "playhouses" rather than setting about the "serious matter" of getting clean.⁵⁰ That indoor bath attendance increased three-fold in summer over winter, even when outdoor bathing facilities were also available, suggests that some patrons were at least as concerned with cooling off at a nearby place as they were with getting clean.

Indoor public bathhouses remained popular as long as they provided cleansing and recreational opportunities not available elsewhere. They quickly declined as other recreation and cleansing possibilities emerged



WAITING-ROOM OF THE PEOPLE'S BATHS—NEW YORK.

FIGURE FIVE: From Frank Tucker, "Public Baths," in Robert W. DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, eds., **The Tenement House Problem** (New York, 1903).



FIGURE SIX: A shower stall in the People's Baths—New York. From Frank Tucker, "Public Baths" (see Figure Five).

in the twentieth century. In the same decade in which cities erected bathhouses, they also established public bathing beaches. Chicago, Boston, New York City, Cleveland, Detroit and St. Paul all opened new beaches to bathers in the 1890s. City-dwellers preferred hanging out on the beach with friends to the bathhouses' ten-minute shower as a source of recreation.

Meanwhile, tenement house reforms diminished the necessity for public cleansing facilities. New York's Model Tenement House Reform Law of 1901, though not requiring bathing facilities, mandated that builders provide water for each floor (later amended to each apartment) in a tenement. Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, Balti-

more, Cleveland and San Francisco soon followed with similar laws requiring a water-closet for each family or each three rooms.⁵¹ These laws encouraged builders, since they were required to install plumbing anyway, to install bathtubs. Eighty-six percent of the new tenements built in New York City between 1901 and 1910 had bathtubs.⁵² The spread of individual family tubs was further encouraged by the development in 1920 of a technique to mass-produce the one-piece, double-shell enamel tub (the type used today), reducing its cost approximately 20 percent. By 1934, only 11 percent of the dwelling units in New York City were without baths or showers.⁵³

The rapid decline of public bath building suggests that both patrons and reformers saw the bathhouses as no more than a stop-gap measure until each family would have its own bath. Patrons preferred the convenience of their own bathing facilities. Reformers also preferred that each family practice cleanliness at home, where it would feel individually responsible for keeping its facilities in good repair. Lawrence Veiller, instigator of New York's 1901 Tenement House Law and a driving force

nationally for housing reform, observed that privately owned facilities deteriorated much less quickly than public ones.⁵⁴ Both patrons and reformers believed that each family was better off with its own bathtub; soon society could afford to provide it.

The movement for public bathhouses stemmed from the amalgam of “Victorian” didacticism and “progressive” civic faith that also produced a number of other public institutions at the turn of the century. Like the museums, libraries and parks, the baths were to embody and teach “Victorian” values to the poor, exerting a moral influence that would help them to rise out of poverty. The reformers’ “gospel of cleanliness” demonstrated the desire to promote a standard for respectability and “civilization”—a benchmark for participation in civic life. The reformers claimed that the poor could conform to those standards and share in that life.

The few public bathhouses built in middle class areas most nearly substantiated the reformers’ civic rhetoric. Brookline, Massachusetts, built its municipal bathhouse in 1895 for \$40,000, about four times the cost of the Harrison Baths in Chicago. The large red brick and stone trim building was located near the public high school, at the center of town (see Figure Seven). The bathhouse included a gymnasium, and had marble stairs leading into its 26’ × 80’ swimming pool lined with white glazed brick and adamantine mosaic. The well-appointed, centrally located structure, like libraries and museums, was designed to instill in its patrons a feeling of public order and achievement.

The majority of bathhouses, however, located in tenement areas, offered their patrons a bare-concrete shower-bath, designed only to “sanitize” them as quickly and efficiently as possible. The baths resulted not just from the reformers’ compassion but also from their desire for control; they built baths not just to ameliorate the condition of the poor but also to help contain it. Reformers hoped that the baths would insure a relatively sanitary urban population until society enacted extensive housing reform. Instead of extending a soapy hand out to the poor, inviting them to share in a common civic life, the bathhouses’ design and experience suggest that the reformers’ foremost consideration was to prevent the contamination of the rest of society by crime, immorality and disease.

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notes

1. Thanks to John Higham and Neil Harris for comments on earlier versions of this essay, and to the Smithsonian Institution, Division of Community Life for assistance in reproducing photographs.

2. G. W. W. Hanger, “Public Baths in the United States,” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin*, 9 (September, 1904), 1254-61. All statistics and descriptions of bathhouses, unless otherwise noted, are from this report.



FIGURE SEVEN: The Brookline, Massachusetts Municipal Baths, a middle-class bathhouse. From G. W. W. Hanger, "Public Baths in the United States," **U.S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin** 9 (1904), plate 142.

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