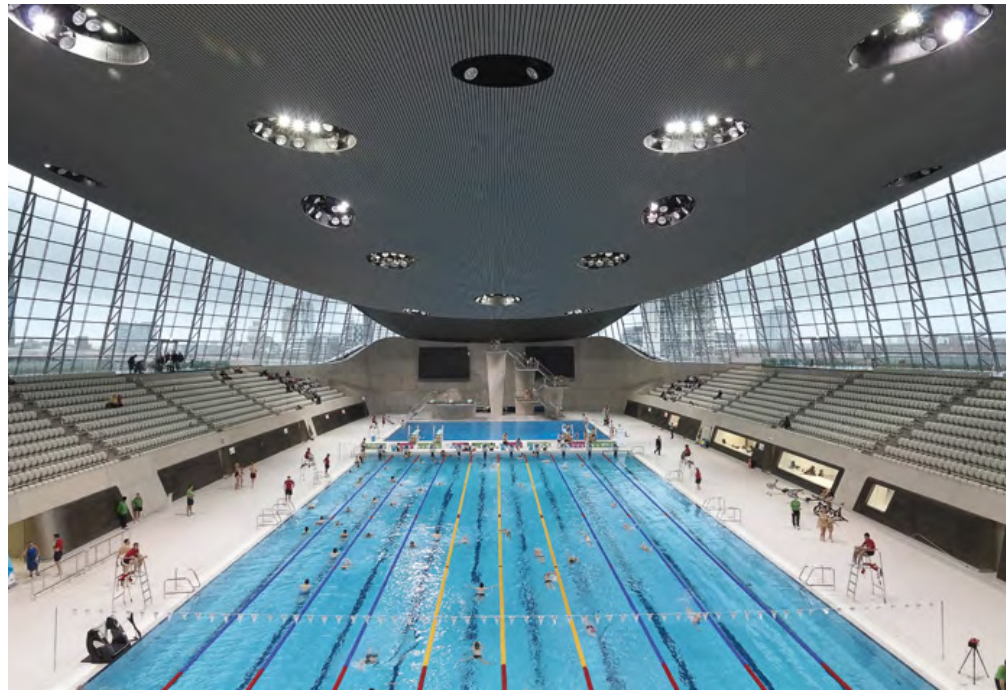


# THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC POOL

Benjamin Hirte

New York's summer is a long, humid stretch from May to the end of September. In the hottest weeks it can be a hell hole. One of the first things I did when I arrived in July 2018 was to register for lap swim (7–9am!) at the Lower East Side Hamilton Fish Pool. The swimming area is generous and free, like all New York City municipal outdoor pools. Most of them stem from the New Deal Era. Politicians understood early on that pools and bath houses can take some of the possible stress off of neighbourhoods in the sweltering heat. These pools, however, are only open from July through August. The public sector is desolate, despite all the big money in



Zaha Hadid Architects, London Aquatics Centre, opened in 2011

the city. This leaves municipal recreational spaces with not enough budget to finance long term regular staff.

My half an hour in the Hamilton Fish Pool every morning was a raging mass of waves and shrill blue from the pool paint. As opulent as the park area was, the water was murky and strewn with little pieces of cracked lacquer. It

was crowded with eager splashing sport swimmers, and the water level was low, basically made for non-swimmers. An epic battle. After the laps I would get changed outside, somewhere near the shower area and sit around in the shadow for a bit. This could lead to a chat. As a proper European new to the city, I felt like giving advice on how to run things better in the US. I just couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of public pools opening for only two summer months. Why not charge a couple of dollars and have it run for four or five? The answer was prompt and clear: "If you give them one dollar, next year it's going to be ten", showing a deeply rooted distrust in city government.

In the winter many artists go to the Y (the YMCA sports club) all around the city, most of them with a medium-sized pool. It's a non-profit organisation, which nowadays caters to something akin to a middle class, if that actually still exists in New York. The monthly membership fee is affordable, provided you can prove low income. The Y is therefore not luxurious, and has a long-standing charitable tradition, serves its communities, and that is its



Rudder & Grout, North Sydney Olympic Pool, opened in 1936



charm. I miss my Y on 14th street. After a swim, I would often end up in the community area in one of those large leatherette chairs donning YMCA heraldic colours and read while listening to all kinds of people from the neighbourhood. There was this group of old guys who spent whole afternoons crowded around a table after their weekly basketball game, and after that, heading to the diner next door.

It is easier to understand how valuable places are that allow for some kind of diverse public after seeing such institutions in the US under constant duress. I have always taken Vienna's Social Democratic bulwarks for granted. Vienna has its own problems as a city – its nepotism, microaggressions, haunted by the spectre of its grand history – but social and public infrastructure is not yet one of them. Since 1919, the city has been governed by the Social Democratic Party, except

threat now from various public–private partnership stunts, but so far, Vienna has managed to hold on to the idea of city-owned property. Public transportation and institutions are mostly well-run and affordable. The renovated *Stadthallenbad* (municipal swimming pool) is an eerily crisp, well-maintained, freshly painted landscape with a large steel basin.

Public pools are a complex blend of personal and public space. The locker situation, the lane sharing, and the distinct corporeality of water sport create an unusual social situation, like those found in contact sports. If nothing else, there is a need for interaction that is at the base of a functioning commons. Pre-Covid, I visited a lot of public pools for swim laps while travelling. They exemplified core ideals of the respective city's civic life and its aspiration towards city development. I still get weekly updates from Pasadena's Rose

London to Zaha Hadid's Aquatics Centre, lying prostrate like a dead whale in the bleak dystopian post-Olympic desert. A landscape straight out of a J.G. Ballard Novel, all watched over by Anish Kapoor's signature tower skeleton. Inside Hadid's pool, under a digitally curved dome, I found myself encased by an absurd line up of huge, colourful, plastic aircushion slide castles for children. The showers and lockers already felt slightly neglected – pointing to the slow doom, illustrating the disproportion between its creation for the bombastic short-term use for the 2012 Olympics, and the impossibility to fill those structures with an actual usage and daily visitors. After that I went to the adjacent Stratford Shopping Centre. Coming to a new city, swimming is like a side entrance to an aspect of civic life, revealing the inner workings of its immune system.

I often thought sports and arts are an odd couple, given the art world's particular fetish for the death drive, but we live in a society; and societies, just as artists, have to take care of themselves.

*BENJAMIN HIRTE is an artist and lives in Vienna.*

## THEIR MAJESTY

**Bianca Heuser**

Among domesticated animals, horses have to be the most majestic. Through more than five millennia of domestication, they have retained an air of nobility that most other animals qualified as pets, livestock, or beasts of burden were never granted by their human tamers and breeders. What is at the root of their almost mythological standing among other creatures of these three categories, which all apply to the horse?

If the reasons are due to their size, cows, for example, should enjoy a similar reverence, but even in Hinduism,



Roland Rainer, Stadthallenbad, opened in 1974, Vienna  
General renovations by driendl\* architects, 2010–2014

for the fascist years. Here too, social housing, cultural institutions, and, of course, public pools are under greater

Bowl pool on their futile attempts to stay open during the Covid limbo. A symbolic cul-de-sac was my trip in