The Protection of the Public Swimming Pools in Brussels-Capital Region

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ABSTRACT: None of the public swimming pools of the Brussels-Capital Region benefits from any heritage protection. Recent strict sanitary norms endanger this rather unrecognised heritage in being. An exhaustive study is meant to orientate the regional authorities towards a heritage policy. It reveals that the Brussels-Capital Region presents a complete overview of the swimming pool throughout the twentieth century. From the oldest public swimming pool in Belgium, Art Deco vessels and streamline design modernism from the interwar period to great architectural gestures of the 1960’s, those swimming pools reveal the architectural, typological and functional evolution from social and hygienic needs to sportive and educational ambitions, and later leisure activities. Once being fully understood, categorised and analysed, an objective dialogue of values gives the protection priorities: from complete to partial protection, to easy actions maintaining the respect of the esprit d’époque, or the reuse of abandoned parts such as Turkish baths and foyers.

INTRODUCTION

Since the federalization of Belgium into three separate Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) in 1989, the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) developed its own heritage legislation in 1992. Waiting for an extensive inventory of the BCR architectural heritage, thematic or typological cultural heritage approaches can be prioritised in order to prevent destructive actions, and to propose protection campaigns. Sport heritage e.g. is in danger mainly due to the necessary adaptation to ever increasingly stricter norms concerning security, hygiene, accessibility, social and sportive use … and often interventions that do not take into account the heritage values of the building.

It is for this reason, that the Royal Commission of Monumental Sites of the BCR demanded an extensive study to be carried out on all the seventeen public swimming pools situated in the BCR to orientate the regional government towards a heritage policy, coherent to this broadly unrecognized heritage. Indeed, the BCR presents an important architectural overview of the typological and functional evolution of public swimming pools throughout the twentieth century.

The methodology adapts the DoCoMoMo Full Documentation Fiche to the specific task, an objective heritage analysis: an extensive historical and visual description, the chronology of interventions, the identification of principal conservation problems, and conservation options. Through analysis of the historical context, urban and architectural analysis, the study reveals different categories of the architectural evolution and the use of the public swimming pool in the twentieth century.

An objective dialogue of the values exposing protection proposals and priorities completes the study.

EVOLUTION OF A TYPOLOGY

Typologically speaking, the public swimming pool evolves all throughout the twentieth century in function with the user’s needs and the evolution of architecture (materials, building techniques, style). The construction of swimming pools may be established in major stages, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, up to the present moment.
1. Nineteenth Century Heritage

The hygiene problem dominates the typology of the first public swimming pools from half of the nineteenth century. England is a forerunner in promulgating the law The Act to Encourage the Establishment of Public Baths and Washhouses, which encourages the construction of public baths (1846). In Brussels, the architect Wynand Janssens erects the Economic Baths in 1854, without a swimming pool however. The Royal Bath (Adolphe Vanderheggen, 1879) is the first covered swimming pool in Brussels; it is not, however, open to the working class. Fig. 1.

2. One must wait until the onset of the twentieth century to see the first covered establishments appear in Brussels that combine swimming with the use of public bathing. They are characterized by the use of glass, iron and cast iron, significant materials of the industrial age. Moreover, they initiate a certain typology that remains applicable until the end of the 1930's (forebody separated from the swimming pool hall, galleries for cabins around the pool, public baths, zenithal light).

Examples in the BCR:
- The communal swimming pool of Ixelles (A. Cooreman and J. Rau, 1904) is the oldest public swimming pool in use in Belgium. It is characterized by its industrial framework resting on cast iron columns and confirms the swimming pool typology. Fig. 2.
- The communal swimming pool in Saint-Gilles (A. Cooreman and J. Rau, 1905) was deeply modified in 1940; it looked quite similar to the swimming pool of Ixelles, though more monumental.

3. The interwar period confirms the democratization of public swimming pools, in both urban (between other constructions) and social (popular neighborhoods) aspects. The use of concrete spreads; the conceivers combine the concrete's structural advantages with architectural taste, but also with the smallness of the lots. Magnificent sections of public baths and Turkish baths embellish these buildings.

Examples in the BCR:
- The communal swimming pool of Saint-Josse was part of a communal social project (J. Bytebier and Ch. Schaessens, 1913-1933). The monumental but refined Art Deco and changing rhythm elevates this building to a masterpiece of the interwar architecture. Fig. 3.
- The Victor Boin swimming pool of Saint-Gilles was enlarged and entirely redesigned in Art Deco inspired by the streamline design (R. Ingelbrecht, 1940). The building breaks new ground with the pool hall's electric roof (demounted in 1980). Fig. 4.
- The Forest swimming pool (Ch. Riffart, 1920-1948) is adjoined to a school. The exterior facade is in a modernist style, while the inside is of a late Art Deco type style. It is the only one of the seventeen public swimming pools in the BCR to have gone out of use.

4. Period between 1945 and 1958

Commonly known as the years of The Reconstruction, this period in Belgium is characterized by the construction of important public facilities, prolonging the trend that was initiated during the second half of the 1930's, following the example of the Brussels' National Albertine Library and Central station. The swimming pools still are inscribed into the hygienic trend as they did at the end of the nineteenth century. They are located in dense urban popular areas, and offer public baths facilities to the underprivileged population. Foyers make now systematically part of the building concept in order to enlarge the social uses of the only swimming function.
Examples in the BCR:
- The Brussels Baths in the popular Marolles (M. Van Nieuwenhuyse, 1949-1953) is the first establishment with a learning swimming pool, the southern façade is completely glazed and has a nice bar with an amazing view. Furthermore, the building stands out for the way the two pools were superimposed, using bold construction techniques, directly inspired by La Sauvenière swimming pool in Liège (G. Dedoyard, 1938-1942).
- The Neptunium swimming pool in Schaerbeek (L. Senterre, in 1948-1957) has a monumental façade and an interior strongly inspired by the streamline design aesthetics.

5. Transition towards so-called landscape swimming pools
In order to better separate the visitors from the swimmers, the cabins are set aside from the direct outline of the pool, and set up in separate spaces, annexes of the swimming pool. This creates more space in the stands for visitors that replace the galleries of cabins. The double-door cabin system, one for entering with shoes on, and the other for exiting with shoes off, is imposed. They leave the dense urban area to reach the green periphery and open the façades.

Example in the BCR:
- CERIA-COOVI swimming pool in Anderlecht (A. Courtens, A. J. and M. Polak, 1948-1962) is a transitional type. If it is to be included in the architectural language of the previous period, of monumental modernism, it combines supplementary functions (gymnasiums) and opens out the pool hall on three glass sides; the cabins are completely separated from the pool by obligatory showers. Fig. 5

Figure 3 (left): Swimming pool in Saint-Josse, 1933; Figure 4 (right): Swimming pool in Saint-Gilles, 1940.

Figure 5: CERIA-COOVI swimming pool in Anderlecht, drawing by A. Courtens, A., J. and M. Polak, 1949; (Archives de l’Etat en Région Bruxelles-Capitale, Travaux publics, Urbanisme du Brabant, Série A/dossier 03/4570/14).
6. Following the Expo58 and its technological demonstration, the golden sixties propose innovative and daring architecture. From the beginning of the 1960’s onwards, the swimming pool grows towards a more recreational function, going on to set up a periphery, which benefits from a verdant context, permitting the landscape concept of four sided swimming pools with maximum sunlight, and an opening out onto a solarium. Their achievement is often the opportunity for architects and engineers to express an indisputable creativity in architecture and innovative techniques. Examples in the BCR:

- The Poseidon swimming pool in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert (J. Isgour, 1961-1964) represents the first swimming pool in the new architectural style stemming from the Expo58 with important technical innovations such as glass curtain wall. Figs. 6 and 7.
- The Longchamp swimming pool in Uccle (Ch. De Meutter, J. Koning, 1967-1971) is the first and only swimming pool with the four façades filled with glass partitions.
- The Louis Namèche swimming pool in Molenbeek-Saint-Jean (Brunswick, Wathelet, 1972) demonstrates a brutalist and tectonic use of concrete structures. Fig 8.

7. The building boom at the end of the 1960’s and at the beginning of the 1970’s. It corresponds to a national political desire to equip the country with sport infrastructures accessible to large numbers of people: to bring sport to everyone! Hundreds of pools are thus constructed over only a few years (in Flanders: three hundred new swimming pools between 1968 and 1976). Most often, the architecture boils down to a question of constructive rationalism (prefabrication, standardization) due to imposed budget restriction and is generally conveyed by modest and neutral architectural qualities. Examples in the BCR:

- The Nereus swimming pool in Ganshoren (M. Van Campenhout, 1969-1972) is temporarily closed due to leaks.
- The Calypso swimming pool in Watermael-Boitsfort (C. Goelhen, C. Du Bus, 1970) constitutes an interesting alternative to the more anonymous standardised hangars of Ganshoren or Evere thanks to an architectural research in the set of roof volumes. Fig. 9.
- The Brussels Baths in Laeken (Ch. De Meutter, J. Koning, 1972) still proposes public baths because of their location in the middle of a popular and dense neighbourhood. Moreover, their architectural side is exemplary regarding the aesthetical use of different concretes and carved blue stones. The smart inferior disposition of sport hall - open space - swimming pool - green patio - children’s’ swimming pool, all linked by one corridor, is imposed by the narrowness of the building plot. Fig. 10.
- The Triton swimming pool in Evere (R. Van Den Looven, R. Huyghebaert, 1979) presents a strict game between bricks and concrete.

8. After the drastic decrease in the building of swimming pools because of the oil crisis of 1973, and in order to continue attracting different publics, the swimming pool must evolve. It proposes more recreational and relaxing activities (toboggan, paddling, jacuzzi, sauna, yoga, etc.). Examples in the BCR:

- The Espadon swimming pool in Etterbeek, rebuilt after a fire (Altiplan, 2002) answers to the latest and highest standards. Fig. 11.

**PROTECTION NEED**

The swimming pool is an architectural typology characterized by evident constraints brought about by a high level of technical performance. As with the hospital typology e.g., the swimming pool must apply a maximum level of hygiene management and spatial rationalism. Consequently, it should be flexible enough so as to adapt itself to the ever increasing, constrictive norms. An ordinance from the government of the BCR establishes the operating conditions concerning the swimming pools on October 10th 2002. As none of the swimming pools in the BCR are protected, the necessary adaptation to present day standards is often manifested, unfortunately, through a dichotomy with the maintenance of heritage values. A flexible approach towards the conservation principles of the heritage, as well as a dialogue of all the values and current facts and intervenients should direct the interventions. Sometimes, the concept of the ‘authenticity of materials’ should make concessions concerning the often more general principles of the ‘authenticity of concept’, easier to handle by the managers and decision makers. It is difficult to guarantee the maintenance of authentic materials in the exacting environment of swimming pools. The constant and elevated degree of moisture and the emanation of chlorine aggresses the materials (glass, tiles, wood) and structures (iron, cast iron, concrete, curtain walls). The application of hygiene standards and the mandatory separation of “bare-foot” and “shoed feet” passageways, as well as the obligatory shower and footbath, cannot be achieved without important interventions on significant elements, like the cabins and the organisation of the pool’s direct surroundings. Also, the tiles are often discoloured or cracked, the thin jointings finally suffering the same deteriorating damage. The above may lead to infiltration problems in the pool itself. It is important to guaran-
pee the visual homogeneity of the tiles. Even in the face of economic problems, the water treatment, heating and ventilation techniques should respond to the strictest standards concerning the subject. Since 2003, the Brussels’ Institute of Environmental Management (IBGE), who sent out the ordinance of October 10th 2002, encourages the sustainable development and a green peace label by subsiding solar energy in the BCR public swimming pools.

All of the swimming pools have undergone changes, some more interventionist than others. The replacement of frames by PVC, the addition of toboggans and other accessories, the replacement of pool and hall ornamentation are disturbing elements to the optic of the respect of the authenticity of materials and the original concept, because the majority of these interventions are not easily reversible.

Figure 6 -7: Swimming pool in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, curtain wall southern façade inside and outside, 1964.

Figure 8 (left): Swimming pool in Molenbeek, 1972; Figure 9 (right): Simming pool in Watermael-Boitsfort, 1970.

Figure 10 (left): Brussels Baths in Laeken, 1972; Figure 11 (right): Swimming pool in Etterbeek, 2002.
ACTUAL SITUATION

None of the swimming pools in the BCR are protected as historical monument. In comparison, the Flanders Region has three protected pools (Gent, Badhuis Van Eyck, protected in 1995; Aalst, Capucinelaan, 1997; Antwerp, Veldstraat, 1998), the Walloon Region has one (Liège, La Sauvenière, 2005).

- The BCR represents in its small territory all the architectural and typological tendencies of the public swimming pools since one century.
- The best preservation is the continuation of its original function, the maintenance of its social value.
- All the swimming pools are in use, except those of Forest and Ganshoren; the reopening of Ganshoren is rapidly doable; Forest’s is now converted into an artistic centre, following a disastrous transformation in a disco. The swimming pool of Uccle suffered major damage after a criminal fire in the spring 2008.
- All the swimming pools have undergone numerous interventions: reparation works, renovations and adjustments to meet standards inherent in a building of high technical performance, and in use by the mass on a daily basis.
- Several swimming pools are in the process of undergoing heavy renovation (Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, Schaerbeek) or are on the brink of important interventions (Saint-Josse, Anderlecht); it is therefore a matter of urgency.
- Most of the swimming pools have abandoned or modified the areas of the public baths and Turkish baths. These sections are generally in a terrible state but still made with numerous original materials.
- The swimming pools’ management is divided among too many administrative groups (Town, Region, Community, etc), which are not in political agreement.

Nevertheless,

- Most of the swimming pools make an effort to maintain the feeling of the specific time period, especially at the level of the pool’s hall itself.
- The swimming pools are known conserve their main formal characteristics and spatial qualities.
- Most of the swimming pools have preserved their changing cabins (doors, handles, tiles) and their “wet feet” / “dry feet” passage ways.
- The cafeterias are intact but often closed (security standards, rentability); some have been refashioned in the style of today, and hence have lost their authenticity.
- Complying to today’s norms (government ordinance from the BCR, 10/10/2002) implies visual sacrifices.
- Some dispensations are desirable, and should be made possible (fire brigade).
- Several swimming pools are under discussion to profit from patrimonial recognition as historical monuments.
- In order to respect a necessary flexibility, separate protections (e.g. the swimming pool showers or the Turkish baths, the pool hall) are to be foreseen.

HERITAGE VALUES AND PROTECTION PRIORITIES

The seventeen studied pools demonstrate a typological and historical filiation that is rarely as well represented in such a small radius. In our opinion, recognition, such as the formation of a typological body, is desirable. However, there are some priorities:

1. Several buildings should be protected in their entirety.
   - The swimming pool of Ixelles is distinguished in the selection by its historical value; it is the oldest Belgian swimming pool in use. Furthermore, it has been known to preserve the majority of its characteristics (industrial framework resting on sixteen cast iron pillars, public baths). It confirms to a typology that was applied up until the 1950’s (foyer separated from the pool hall, a circling balcony for the cabins, public baths). Fig. 12.
   - The swimming pool of Saint-Josse is characterised by its Art Deco style and the even more strikingly authentic in sight of the pool hall, the pool showers and Turkish baths, reflecting the social concerns of the time.
   - The Brussels Baths inscribe themselves resolutely in the modern and functionalistic movement. As well as their aesthetic and spatial qualities, the building stands out technically for the superposition of its two baths. It has furthermore preserved its original public baths and cabins, but important works are projected. Fig. 13.
   - The CERIA-COOVI swimming pool in Anderlecht is the first pool on four free façades, with three glass sides. It marks the transition between the so-called urban swimming pool and the landscape swimming pool. Equally, it bears a remarkable testimony to classic modernism, fitting into an architectural ensemble in the greenery representative of the period following the 2nd World War (school campus CERIA-COOVI).
   - The Longchamp swimming pool in Uccle displays a technical prowess and an exceptional conceptual insight to the architecture between the 1960’s and 70’s, notably the roof made from a hyperbolical paraboloid which allows optimal natural lighting on all four façades. Fig. 14.

2. Several other swimming pools should be classified for their more significative and spectacular elements.
   - The Victor Boin swimming pool of Saint-Gilles still holds onto a section of Russian-Turkish baths that date back to the first building (1905), as well as the atrium-foyer and swimming hall dating from the second intervention (1940). Fig. 15.
The former swimming pool of Forest is characterized by a more modernist outside, while the most important parts inside are in Art Deco style, embellished by the use of quality materials and of colors which create a luxurious effect. Abandoned since 1984 and after a laborious transformation into a disco, the building is now used by a collective of artist who, little by little, restores the nobility of the place. It is a unique swimming pool for the fact that it has kept its technical fittings from the time of its construction (important from an industrial archaeological point of view).

The Neptunium swimming pool of Schaerbeek is characterized by an exterior in monumental modernist style while the interior shows strong reminiscences to the streamline design. The entrance hall and the stairwells (ironwork, lights, lettering), the swimming hall, the cafeteria as well as works of art (mosaic by G. De Vlamynk, sculptures by S. Hensen and R. Harvent) are elements to be especially protected. Fig. 16.

Figure 12: Swimming pool in Ixelles, Polonceau roof structure, built in the 1930’s; (Archives de la Commune de Ixelles – service architecture (Travaux publics). dossier n°8).

Figure 13 (left): Brussels Baths in Brussels, cross-section; (La Technique des Travaux, n° 11-12; (November-December 1957, pp. 336-341).

Figure 14 (right): Swimming pool in Uccle, picture during the construction; (La Technique des Travaux n° 345, January-February 1974, pp. 9-18).

Figure 15 (left): Swimming pool in Saint-Gilles, detail from the Turkish baths, 1904.

Figure 16 (right): Swimming pool in Schaerbeek, detail of the iron work of the stairwells, 1957.
The status of being classified as a historical monument imposes severe conservation constraints on the protected parts and permits an allotment of up to 80% of subsidies, it guarantees a restoration selon les règles de l’art.

3. Easy and evident conservation actions may contribute to the maintenance of the esprit d’époque. The ironwork (railings, balustrades, handrails), doors (glass, wooden), lights, lettering, clocks ...may easily be up kept and well conserved.

The most important actions may concern the restitution of paying counter (often implying the reorganization of the entrance hall), the upkeep of the tiles and original fittings.

To begin again to use of the foyers (in line with the security standards), the areas of the public baths and Turkish baths implies more costly interventions but would certainly be worthwhile. It seems that with an innovative and focused management, it would be possible to make profit of these abandoned sections by adapting them to contemporary needs, meanwhile, preserving their authentic value.

CONCLUSION

Hoping for a political platform for concerted protection and interventions at a regional level, the heritage interrogation (the values assessment) is an objective contribution which must matter with other concerned partners, for offering a coherent policy, exemplary in the subject of long term and everyday heritage management of the public swimming pools that need attention.

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