

*A COMPARATIVE ESSAY ON BATHING
RITUALS AROUND THE WORLD AND
HOW CONTEMPORARY INTERIOR
DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ARE ABLE
TO HELP PRESERVE THEM*

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Introduction

“Well-being is more than an absence of problems; it is a positive state that is pursued by humans.” (Clark, 2009, p. 189) This Statement from Scott Clark, wellness and Japanese bathing author refers to both mental and physical health which are well known to have a direct correlation. As Clark says, our well-being is enhanced by taking active steps towards a healthier lifestyle which is often done through wellness practices. There are many factors that influence wellness including, diet, exercise and hygiene, but some of the earliest known ones involved bathing and relaxation. Bathing and wellness rituals have been practiced for centuries, whether that be in the Roman baths, Finish saunas, Japanese onsens, southwest American sweat lodges or the hammams of the Ottoman Empire. Historically, wellness rituals tend to have stemmed from nature and the elements in their purest form allowing them to exist in numerous variations. Many have a basis of hydrotherapy whereby water is given great importance and is recognised as having significant positive effects on people’s bodies and minds. The most common, widely practiced and ancient form of hydrotherapy is bathing, which in itself can be done in various ways and will be the subject of the essay. (Molvar, 2020)

This essay will assess three varying bathing cultures from across the globe, why they are vulnerable and how contemporary interior design and architecture are helping to keep them alive. Conservation can be defined as ‘careful preservation and protection of something’ (Merriam-Webster, 2020). This definition is apt when it comes to cultures which can be fragile and ought to be managed with great care. The words ‘preservation’ and ‘protection’ are key because ancient bathing cultures are facing potential decline and must be safeguarded from further fading. Bathing and wellness are in some ways a part of every human’s life and always have been, meaning that there are endless types of wellness practices in existence. I couldn’t possibly cover everything, nor could I give only a micro-view of, say, just one culture, so I will instead endeavour to convey the essence of three and draw upon design case studies and examples. I have chosen to focus on the Japanese sentō and onsen, Finish sauna and the Middle Eastern hammam because they all have bathing deeply rooted in their cultures but have interesting similarities and differences.

Chapter 1: Bathing in The Ancient World

Bathing culture predated scientific discoveries on the topic of hygiene by thousands of years and the importance of cleanliness was recognised from the outset with an association to power, spirituality and beauty. Bath houses were essentially the ancient form of spas, providing multiple facilities for activities such as exercise, massages, entertaining, while also being a social hub and a central part of society (Bushak, 2015). Ancient Greek Physician Hippocrates, an early bath enthusiast, was convinced that the root of all diseases lay in an imbalance of body fluids, which he said could be remedied with regular soaks, physical exercise, and massages. (Aaland, 1978)



Fig 1: The Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan. Image by Wikimedia, 2015

According to archaeologists, the earliest known public baths were the Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro in Sindh, Pakistan dating back to the third millennium BC. It had a large, seemingly watertight tank with wide descending staircases at either end and a draining hole. The ruins that remain today (fig 1) are in extremely good condition for their age and have provided historians with comprehensive information about the day to day lives of people in this era, and in particular, their bathing and religious rituals. (Bushak, 2015)

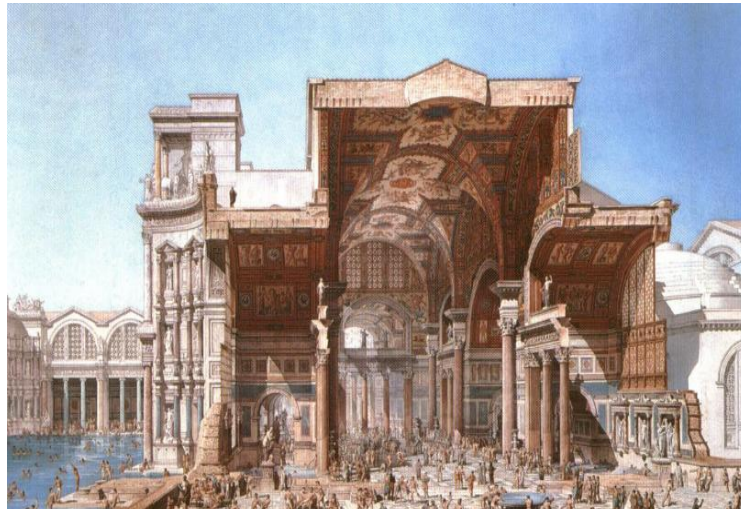


Fig 2: Artistic representation of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, the largest roman baths ever built, Image from: Colosseumrometickets.com, 2019

When visiting the baths, male bathers would work up a sweat exercising and then use a 'strigil' to scrape off their perspiration before moving between tepid, hot and then cold baths. Bath houses would offer services such as haircuts, pulling teeth and minor surgeries. These were the beginnings of wellness regimes as people would dedicate time to address multiple ailments at once. (Bushak, 2015) At the height of the Roman Empire public baths were sophisticated in design and often vast in scale with some accommodating up to 6,000 people at a time (fig 2). However, the empire's sharp decline and the force of the plague lead to the demise of bathing culture in ancient Rome. Despite this, the Roman's designs and culture were never totally eroded but instead taken up by Middle eastern countries to form the Hammam. (Aaland, 1978) Translated from Arabic, the word 'Hammam' means "spreader of warmth" and it does exactly that. It is the Turkish take on the steam bath and is often a very impressive mosque-like building with vaulted ceilings, lavish furniture and ornate stonework. The building features a series of rooms ranging in temperatures which allows for a process of gradually heating and then cooling the body. (Wallaya, 2020)

Chapter 2: Bathing and the Modern Day

Today, baths are normally a private activity but it is clear that bathing and cleansing regularly does more to benefit us than just removing the dirt on our skin. Taking baths amongst other things is recognised to relax muscles, reduce stress, enhance sleep and improve flu symptoms through steam. (Bushak, 2015) These days public bathing has remained an integral part of some cultures more than others. Japanese onsens are still widely used across Japan whereas many public bath houses across Europe have been transformed into leisure centres and public swimming pools which are for exercise as opposed to relaxation. (Molvar, 2020) Over time, with increased consumption, greater connectivity and transport, the world is becoming smaller and life faster, arguably leading to a growing desire to switch off and unplug. This desire has been answered for some by the Slow Movement which promotes a slower, more connected and mindful lifestyle, often resulting in personal sustainable development. It began with 'Slow Food', a socio-political movement pushing against the fast food industry and large-scale commercial food production with the aim of preserving cultural cuisines. (Slow Movement, 2020) Participants of the Slow Movement, known as 'downshifter', voluntarily adopt long term minimalism in their lives, often with a focus on reducing their ecological footprint. (Honore, 2004) Carl Honore, a Canadian journalist and self-confessed speedaholic turned downshifter, writes about the history of our relationship with time and the consequences of rushing through life. In his book he emphasises one of the Slow Movement's key aspects which is taking responsibility for our situations and acting upon them, because as the consumer, we have the ultimate power to make changes for good and shouldn't just wait for governments to fix something. (Honore, 2004) These ideas are shared with environmental philosopher Kate Soper who is concerned by our dangerous levels of consumption and the speed at which we live our lives. Her concept of alternative hedonism is that different ways of living can be more enjoyable than consumerism. (Soper, 2020) Movements such as Slow are great news for bathing cultures as the benefits of taking the time for peace and quiet are becoming more widely recognised and authentic bathing might just be an answer to slowing us down.

The best antidote to the constant sensory overload that we face today is perhaps wellness rituals that are immersive experiences that fine tune our sense of awareness and presence by flooding the body with textures, smells and sounds that are both familiar and unfamiliar. (Molvar, 2020) This is a very valid suggestion and it is more important than ever to take time out of our busy lives to rejuvenate and heal both mentally and physically. Wellness needs to become the norm again, as it once was in the ancient world. Spas and wellness facilities can be places of fundamental social interactions as we are all stripped down to our most vulnerable we are all equal, all human.

The 2010s saw a proliferation of 'self-care' and 'self-optimisation' which began with good intentions but quickly spiralled into a somewhat dangerous industry promising solutions to mental health issues with chemical packed creams and overpriced ginger shots. (Delaney, 2020) For something as personal and delicate as our health and wellbeing, we should not look to manipulative advertising but instead to pure, unadulterated experiences to enhance our physical and mental health. (Squire, 2020) Squire says that "travel does afford us the opportunity to temporarily step outside of ourselves, examine the strains of our everyday existence and reclaim some balance in untarnished surroundings" (Squire, 2020, p. 14). I think the same of authentic wellness rituals; there is something very reassuring and calming about partaking in simple acts of pleasure that have been performed for thousands of years as opposed to the latest tech enhanced wellness trend that is likely to vanish as quickly as it appeared. Though spas are not uncommon, authentic cultural wellness is not as widely or regularly practiced as they once were and as a result has left age-old traditional rituals vulnerable to extinction. (Wallaya, 2020) Globalisation has led to mixing and diluting of cultures that once were unique to a certain place. Wellness, being something that features in most cultures could be the key to their conservation if it is encouraged as an important part of life. (Withers, 2017)

Chapter 3: Bathing in Japan



Fig 3: Onsen in Hakone, Japan. Image from: Tour to Japan, 2018

Buddhist priests are thought to be the trailblazers of bathing culture in Asia which can be traced back to Indian Buddhist temples in 700s A.D where bathing was a religious ritual. It spread to China and Japan amongst religious circles until bathing was recognised for its health benefits at which point sick people started actively bathing as a form of healing (Aaland, 1978). The motivation for the association between holiness and cleansing is unclear to scientists but the desire to remove both spiritual and bodily impurities certainly predates germ theory of disease (Bushak, 2015).

Japanese bathing can be done in a variety of ways such as hot springs (Onsen), public bath houses (Sentō), individual soaking tubs (Furo) or even steam baths (Mushi-buro). However the most important action in Japanese bathing is to soak, and the most sought-after is the natural hot springs, of which Japan has the highest concentration in the world (Aaland, 1978). (fig 3) Etiquette in all types of traditional bathing is very important but it is particularly vital in Japan and people can get very upset if certain rules are not followed. For example, one must always wash the body before entering the bath to maintain the purity of the water. (Kashiwaya Royokan, 2019) (fig 4) Bathing in Japanese culture is a practice that requires mindfulness, elevating it to artistry, performed with the same care as many other everyday activities such as pouring tea or arranging flowers. Mindfulness plays a very important role in authentic bathing rituals as the practice of slowing down and focusing on methodical basic actions clears the mind of all other goings on and increases our awareness of our surroundings.

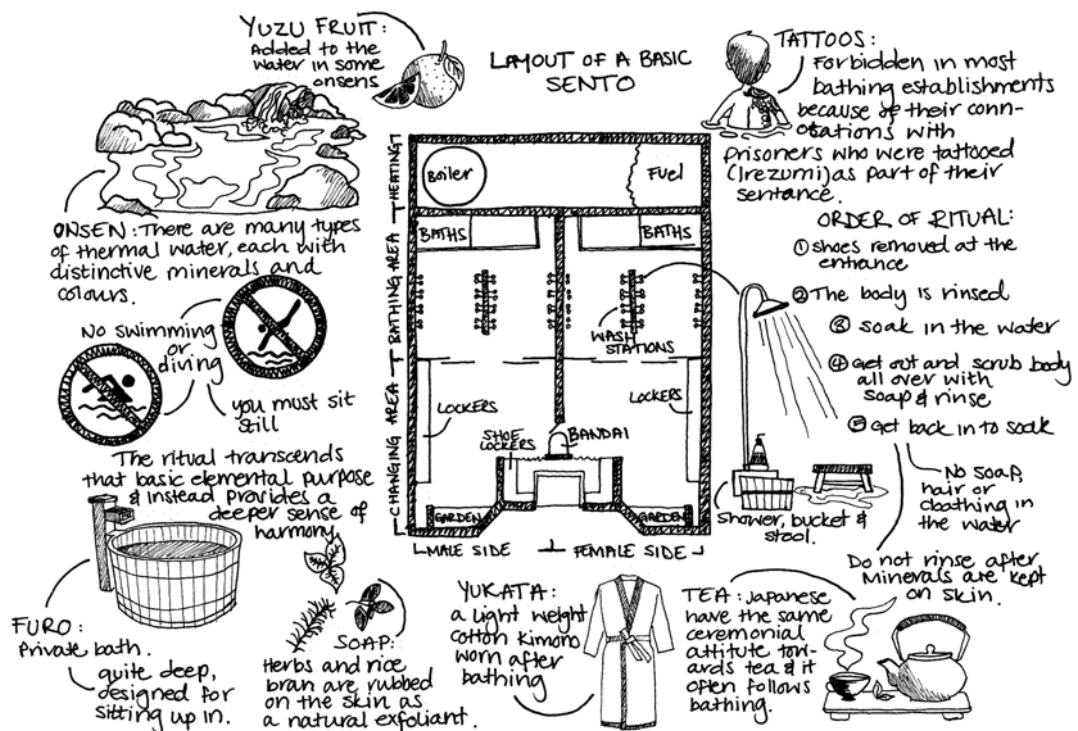


Fig 4: Annotated sketches to break down Japanese bathing rituals, Image by Author, 2021



Fig 5: The interior of a typical 20th Century urban sento which is dominated by tiles and has sit down wash stations. Image from Timeout.com, 2015

Central to Japanese bathing is the connection it provides to nature as well as community due to it being a sociable activity. To convey this ethos, the design of a sentō would have traditionally been done using natural materials such as wood and stone. However in the early 1900s traditional materials were often replaced by tiles which were thought to be cleaner and more modern but as a result lost this vital connection to nature. (Molvar, 2020) (fig 5) The increasing popularity of private bathrooms has led to the need to attract more bathers to bath houses, and some are doing this by offering a wider variety of experiences with some becoming more like modern theme parks. (fig 6) (Aaland, 2020) These places have lost the essence of authentic Japanese bathing and are instead noisy and chaotic and it would be detrimental if they next young generations saw this as the image of bathing.



Fig 6: laqua spa in Tokyo Dome City is a spa but also includes shops, a restaurant and roller coaster rides. Image from Laqua Spa

In his chapter on *'Well-being and the Japanese Bath,'* Clark (2009) examines the pleasure produced by the Japanese bath and says it is a "physical pleasure" that can be enjoyed by any human but argues that for a Japanese person, the experience "goes beyond the physical senses" due to it being embedded in that person's culture. (2009, p. 189) The partaking in a century's old ritual from one's own culture carries a certain weight that makes it ceremonial as opposed to a menial task. Clark asks the question: "Is the stimulation of the physical senses the basis of bathing pleasure, or is it something more?" (2009, p. 190), and then goes on to decide that the pleasure of a physical experience is influenced by different contexts, such as the culture or even physical environment. He reinforces this with a story of visiting a Japanese Onsen, later finding the temperature of the parked car extremely unpleasant compared to the hot baths despite them being roughly the same. Their pleasure was dependant on the context and the level of heat in the bath was not only expected but desired. However, he states that heat alone wouldn't have the same satisfactory effect and that the experience was defined by the sum of many elements such as the texture of the water, the setting, the natural minerals and the social aspect of the ritual. To prove this idea of context and physical stimulation of the senses, he notes that the heat in the car would in fact be welcome if it was a cold winter's day as opposed to a summer's afternoon in Japan. (Clark, 2009) This can be used to identify the importance of good design in these spaces to make us feel comfortable when we are exposed to temperature change and often not wearing much clothing.

In her book '36 Views of Mount Fuji', Cathy Davidson recounts an experience bathing at a Japanese sento where she learns of the care and attention the older Japanese ladies take when scrubbing their bodies; she frequently reminds herself to slow down to their pace. On seeing a 'western' person attempt the ritual, one of the older Japanese ladies helps Cathy to wash her hair, showing her how to do it properly, in the traditional way. (Davidson, 1993) This account demonstrates a number of things that are intrinsic to Japanese bathing culture, such as it being a practice that has to be carried out in an almost ceremonial way and is learnt from elders but is also a very sociable event. From her detailed description, it is clear that both parties are experiencing more than just physical sensual pleasure out of this particular moment, one as a newcomer and the others as frequent attendees. I think this example is reason enough to preserve these cultures; we can learn so much and in turn enjoy these experiences more when exposed to them and taught to do them properly. Clark claims that his "own "practice" with Japanese bathing has resulted in increasingly similar experiences to those of Japanese people. "It is this participant-observation, the experience of bathing in Japan and understanding the cultural components of bathing, that make it possible (for me) to discuss their bathing pleasure." (Clark, 2009, p. 196) Therefore, the more we know about a culture or a specific ritual and the more we have 'practiced' it, the more pleasure and good we will get out of that experience.

Chapter 4: Bathing in Scandinavia

Bathing customs across Scandinavia share the central focus of heating and cooling the body with steam, water and ice, harnessing their extreme climates to invigorate and cleanse the body. I will focus on the Finnish Sauna which is possibly the most widely known form of Nordic bathing. (fig 7) Today, there are more saunas than cars in Finland which is on average one sauna per household, demonstrating just how central it is to the Finnish way of life. (Global Wellness Institute, 2016) 16th Century Europe saw bathing cultures take a hit as public facilities began to be destroyed having gained negative reputations. (Bushak, 2015) As well as soothing the aching muscles of farmers, the sauna was originally used for a variety of other everyday functions such as drying food, childbirth and healing the sick. However after centuries of purely practical usage, the sauna had gained spiritual significance as a result of the respect and necessity for it and an old proverb stated that “one must conduct himself as one would in church.”. It was most likely this strict reference that protected the Finnish Sauna from the same corruption that effected most other European bathing customs. (Aaland, 1978)

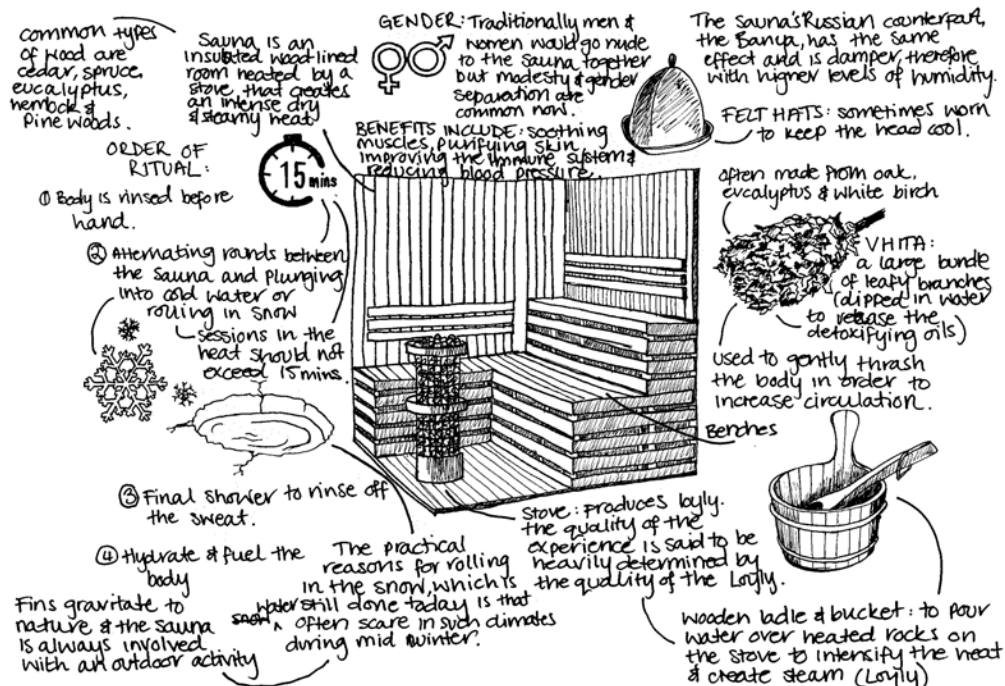


Fig 7: Annotated sketches to break down the Finish sauna as a ritual, Image by Author, 2021



Fig 8: Savusauna being purged of smoke before bathers enter, Image by M. Aaland 2018

The oldest type of Finnish sauna, the savusauna isn't much more than a small log hut and a pile of hot rocks. The lack of chimney means the smoke fills the building, heating the space and filling it with natural, earthy aromas and gradually escaping through small holes in the structure. (fig 8) This type of sauna is thought the best by most Fins and sauna enthusiasts because of its rich aromas and even, gentle heat as a result of the heat source being extinguished before use. (Brue, 2003) Loyly is the vapour produced by the water being sprinkled on the heated rocks and is considered to be different in each sauna. (Sauna Times, 2020) Estonia has a very similar type of smoke sauna to the savusauna which dates back hundreds of years but most locals do so in private making it difficult for outsiders to experience the culture. As a result of this, their particular type of sauna is greatly at risk of dying out and so they are now protected by UNESCO. In order to promote it, a couple have set up a sauna called Rangi Saun in their back yard and encourage tourists to experience the Estonian sauna in the most authentic way. (Molvar, 2020) It is the combination of an organisation like UNESCO implementing laws and small scale projects like Rangi Saun that might kick start a comeback for these practices.



Fig 9: Burger King Sauna in Helsinki, Finland, Image by A.Rang, 2018

Industrialisation brought the desire to have a more convenient, efficient and fire-retardant version of the smoke sauna which could be easily incorporated into new architecture in the rapidly expanding cities. The culmination in electric saunas led to its global popularity and mass production yet it has also resulted in the diminishing quality of the sauna. Even in Finland poor quality saunas are used for the sake of attracting ignorant tourists and their cash. Adam Rang, a Scandinavian sauna enthusiast, manufacturer and writer comments with disgust on Burger King's inclusion of a branded sauna in one of their Helsinki branches. (fig 9) The 15 person sauna allows you to partake in the centuries old activity while consuming a burger and milk shake, watching TV and playing video games all for €300. Not only does it mock the healthy connotations of the Finnish sauna but it also violates some of the fundamentals of the tradition including the rule of no eating in the sauna as well as the requirement for a cold body of water to plunge into afterwards. (Rang, 2018) This is an example of a bathing culture which has been manipulated and taken too far out of its authentic context with the intention to make money out of it. The rapid evolution and mass production of poor-quality saunas overseas have shown that cultural transplants require great care and many saunas are far from Finnish standards. (Aaland, 1978)

Mikkel Aaland is a Norwegian-American writer, photographer and documentary maker who has travelled the world experiencing, researching and documenting bathing rituals around the globe. His earliest and most notable book is *Sweat* which was published in 1978. This book has had a particular influence on this essay through its explanation and comparison of all three bathing cultures that I have focused on. He describes the ins and outs of each ritual and examines their progression throughout history. He remains an active historian and campaigner for sweat bathing and is in the process of producing a documentary series called *the perfect sweat* to complement and expand on his book. He has made multiple appearances on the Sauna Talk podcast which is dedicated to the sauna and authentic Scandinavian sweat bathing. In one of the episodes, Aaland notes that there are great similarities in both Finnish and Mexican steam rituals despite both being developed in different climates and sides of the globe centuries before travel was possible. (Sauna Times, 2020) This demonstrates the extent to which sweat bathing is innate to so many cultures around the world as it developed of its own accord without influence from other cultures. On his travels, the only places Aaland failed to find any evidence of sweat bathing were around the equator where the climate is hot enough to make you sweat sufficiently without the need of a dedicated room. (Sauna Times, 2020) It is worth noting that despite some differences in materiality and tools (The Mexican sweat lodge is often built from mud and animal skins in a dome shape) (Wallaya, 2020), both the Mexican and Finnish sweat bathing rituals share a fundamental aspect in common which is their recognition for the spiritual importance of sweat bathing.

Interior stylist and writer Emma Fexeus describes Scandinavian design as being the torch bearer for sustainability and conscious living. In this part of the world, oblivious consumerism is limited and instead, the main focuses of both the designer and customer are natural materials, high quality and craftsmanship. (Fexeus, 2013) There is no doubt this applies to Scandinavian bathing culture which has nature at its core and values high quality materials and experiences. Real Finnish Sauna enthusiasts such as Aaland are extremely particular about the conditions, equipment and environment in which they perform this age-old ritual.

Chapter 5: Bathing in the Middle East

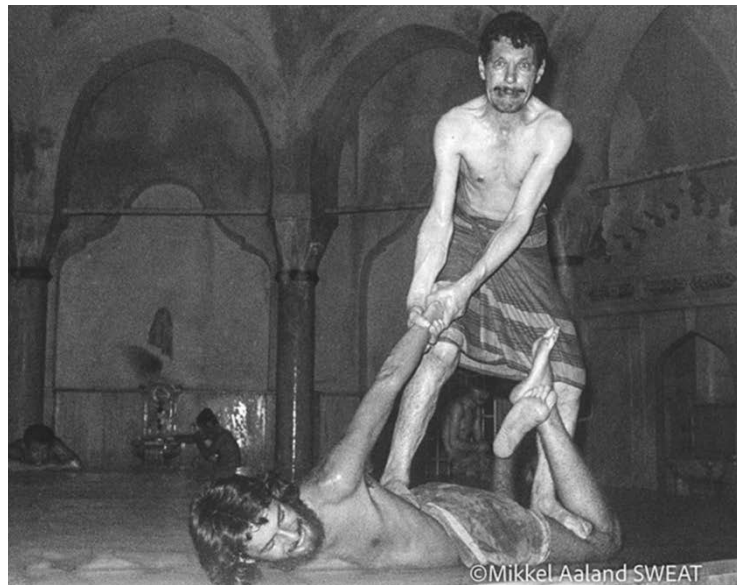


Fig 10: Muscular Tellak performs the rigorous massage on a bather, Image from Mikkelaaland.com

Hammams had their heyday in the 14th Century during the ottoman empire when the Turks built them throughout the Middle East and North Africa. (Bushak, 2015) Prior to their establishment Arabs only bathed in cold water and never in tubs which was thought of as bathing in one's own filth, so instead buckets of water are poured over the body. Many ancient Hammams used the romans hypocaust heating systems but regions with natural hot springs utilised these by creating pools that people could soak in. This wasn't considered dirty because the water naturally bubbled and circulated. (Aaland, 1978) Cleanliness and purification are inherent in the Muslim faith, which explains why they have such a prevalent bathing culture. Baths were often close to the Mosque because physical purification is fundamental to the Moslem faith and it was thought that the hammam cleansed the body and the mosque cleansed the soul. (Wallaya, 2020) (fig 10)

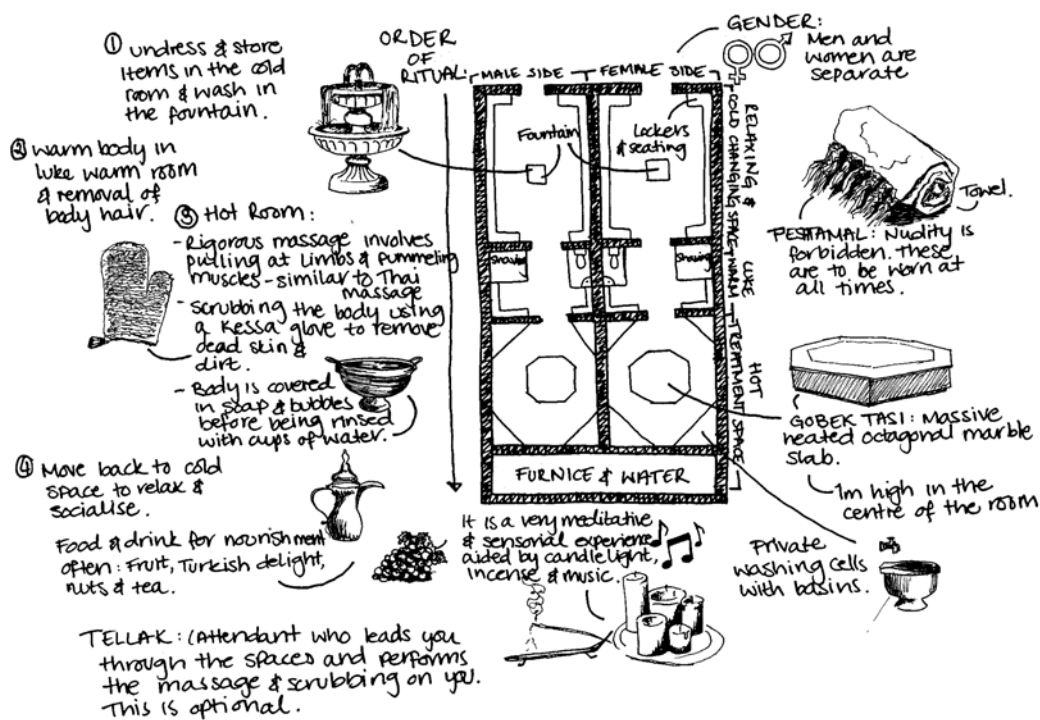


Fig 11: Annotated sketches to break down bathing in the Hammam, Image by Author, 2021

The atmosphere of the hammam, is a step above the basic aesthetic of many public bath houses. The intensely ethereal experience requires great respect and repose which is why there are some fairly strict rules and expectations while in the hammam. (fig 11) The two firmest being that genders are separated and nudity is forbidden. (Wallaya, 2020) All of these bathing customs are known to be very egalitarian in terms of who is awarded entry and when stripped nearly bare most indications of status are removed. However, in the hammam, obvious divisions in wealth could be identified by the wealthy wearing several inch-high jewel studded clogs. (Aaland, 1978) They were and still are very sociable places and in particular for women who weren't allowed to socialise in any other scenario. In his book *Sweat*, Aaland quotes Abu Sir, an early Arab historian who said "Your town is only a perfect town when there is a bath in it,". (Aaland, 1978) The use of the word 'perfect' implies that nothing else is required so this is testimony to just how central these places were to societies.



Fig 12: The Cagaloglu Hammam in Istanbul, Turkey (Built in 1741), image from Cagalogluhamami.com, 2018

The most important expression of Islamic art is architecture which is why the two most important buildings in a community (The mosque and hammam) are often built on large scales and with the most ornate design. (fig 12) It is forbidden to create images of living things as it is seen as an attempt to rival Allah. So instead, beautiful architecture is dedicated to him out of reverence. (Wallaya, 2020) Baths were often built by wealthy individuals as a way to please Allah and even make up for their sins but in the mid 1800s, the hammams began losing their wealthy patrons and fell in decline. In conversation with Aaland, the director of Istanbul Technological University in 1974, Dogan Kuban says that hammams are declining drastically as a result of the large expense of maintenance and basic running costs. (Aaland, 1978) It is saddening that a culture as rich and old as the Turkish bath may be lost because of a lack of funding and such beautiful and historical buildings face abandonment. However, not all experts on the hammam share the same gloomy prediction as Kuban. Sabiha Tansug, a writer and lecturer on the hammam from Istanbul believes it is so fundamental to the Muslim religion that it won't diminish easily and that it is "an indispensable detail of daily life." (Aaland, 1978, p. 23) This is an encouraging point of view and if shared by many in Islamic societies then there could be a good chance of the hammam regaining its historic popularity. Perhaps the magnificent architecture, if recognised to need lawfully protecting, could be the saviour for the rituals that take place within.

Chapter 6: Comparison and Conservation

Bathing cultures can roughly be divided into sweaters or soakers with Turks, Finns and Russians favouring sweat bathing and Japanese opting to soak. (Brue, 2003) However, for all of them, bathing goes beyond physically cleaning the body and in most cases is a fundamental part of society and social life. They all have a deep appreciation for the purity, sacredness and power of water proved by the Japanese rule that you must be completely clean before entering the bath and there must be no soap or clothing in the water. (Ostrow, 2002) As well as this they are all processes made up of multiple steps and in particular they all start by respectfully preparing the body for the rituals by pre cleansing or rinsing beforehand and then nourishing it with food and drink afterwards.

Nudity and gender separation vary for all of these customs and depend on the setting and visitors in this modern day. However, it is most probable that all of them originally insisted on nudity as this fits with the idea of ultimate purity. I think that these are things that are appropriate to evolve and change with societies, however in general I think that etiquette and rules are necessary to ensuring the authenticity of a ritual. All but the Mexican Sweat Lodge are intensely social places which is interesting because throughout history they have been foundations to society. (Bushak, 2015) Although ancient Rome notably used bath houses to discuss work, most others do not encourage this as it should be a place of escape and relaxation. (Brue, 2003) In contrast to this, finish saunas are so intrinsic to their culture that it is not uncommon for offices to have a sauna which can be used for meetings; There is even a sauna debating chamber in the Finnish parliament. (Bosworth, 2013) (fig 13) For many Fins who can't get enough of the sauna, carrying out work or networking while sitting in a place known for relaxation and discussion makes perfect sense for a potentially stressful or crucial business scenario.

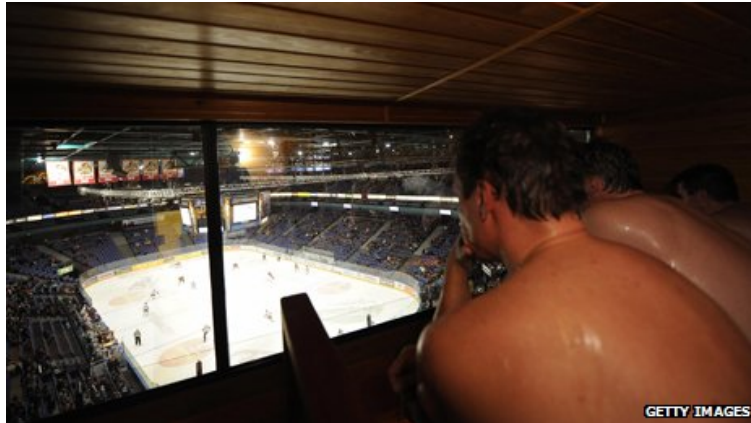


Fig 13: Ice hockey can be enjoyed from a sauna in helsinki, GETTY IMAGES, 2013

Interestingly, of these three bathing customs, the sauna is used most alongside exercise. While Japanese baths and the Hammam are both proven to soothe muscles, their purpose is one more of relaxing the mind and soul. (Bosworth, 2013) Having been fairly inconspicuous throughout its history, the Finnish sauna began to take off in the 1930's when Finnish Athletes found great success internationally and publicly advocated for the sauna as an essential part of their training. (Aaland, 1978) Other sporting nations took note of this and Saunas began to be built at the Olympic games for all to use including the Tokyo 1964 event. Following this, in the 70's the sauna's popularity outside of its native Finland was greatest in Japan, a country with its own intrinsic bathing rituals. This proves that the two offer differing results and experiences as the Finnish sauna was eagerly adopted and thrived alongside the Sentos and Onsens without competition. (Aaland, 1978) It seems fitting that the Olympic games, an ancient tradition was the key to advocating and spreading these bathing cultures which were also once ignited by ancient civilisations.

One of the most detrimental threats to bathing cultures around the world was the modern domestic shower which rapidly took over and became a fashionable status symbol. (Clark, 2009) Today, 95% of households in Japan have bathrooms which has lead to a shrinking customer base and the closure of many public baths, despite them being hugely popular places in the past where people felt a sense of connection to their communities. (Block, 2020) It could be argued however that this is just life, societies evolve, ideas are shared and people like what they like. In my view, this doesn't change the fact that we must still preserve these old traditions in order to allow for the possibility of their future come back.



Fig 14: Koganeyu Sentō, Tokyo by Schemata Architects. View of bathing area. Image by Y. Kono. 2020

Schemata Architects have successfully resurrected the Koganeyu Sentō in Tokyo (fig 14) in order to encourage the younger generations to gather and socialise all while rediscovering this ancient part of their culture. Schemata followed the traditional layout of the sentō and respected its rules, particularly when it came to separating the male and female areas with a wall; but by leaving a gap at the top, communication as well as the passing of soap from one side to the other is possible. (Zaxarov, 2020) This shows a sensitivity towards the cultural rules while also understanding and predicting the needs of the coming generation which is social inclusion and interaction. The building, originally built in 1985 now has modern additions to attract younger bathers including a bar serving beer which takes the place of the traditional bandai (reception desk) and allows men and women to reconvene after bathing. (Block, 2020) In terms of materiality, Schemata has created a clean, urban and calming aesthetic with the use of small cream porcelain tiles throughout (including the bar to link the spaces), brushed metal and birch plywood in the changing rooms, providing a warm and comforting environment. Schemata manages to cleverly marry this modern aesthetic with traditional sentō decorations such as a story telling mural of mount fuji by artist Yoriko Hoshi spanning across the top of the male and female bathing spaces, and a noren (traditional fabric split curtains) dividing the changing rooms designed by Ichihiro Tanaka. (Katsikopoulou, 2020)



Fig 15: Gothenburg Public Sauna by Raumlabor Berlin. Built with the help of locals. Images by Raumlabor 2014

In some cases, rather than creating a wellness facility to preserve the tradition itself, the ritual is used to enhance something else. A fantastic example of this is the Gothenburg Public Sauna (completed in 2014) by German architectural firm Raumlabor Berlin (fig 15), which has sparked the regeneration of the declining docks. (Alafouzou-Petridou, 2020) The architects successfully proved their theory that the introduction of a public bathing facility could alter the perception of this dilapidated area. To the Finns, a sauna is an intimate space for leisure which also provides the opportunity for communication amongst different groups of people. (Apuzzo, 2014) The use of thousands of thin larch strips of wood in the interior makes for a very warm and comfortable space and the windows, which is somewhat unusual for a sauna provide quite dramatic sources of light as well as fantastic views of the surrounding areas. (Alafouzou-Petridou, 2020) I think the fact that the architect has managed to create a sauna with an authentic ethos despite being in a modern and unusual shell is testament to what can be done with clever, considerate design.



Fig 16: Geosea-Geothermal sea baths, Iceland opened in 2018, Image by Icelandic Times, 2020

Today where public bathing isn't necessarily seen as a top priority, the cost of a trip to the baths is often a big factor. Geosea-geothermal sea baths in Húsavík (fig 16), Iceland is dedicated to ensuring a long future of bathing and bringing the local community together and so has given out life-time free passes to all local residents. (Molvar, 2020) Similar to this idea, Löyly, a public sauna in Helsinki offers a very modest entry fee of €19 considering the quality of the facilities and experience. (fig 17) (Rang, 2018) The sleek mountain shaped structure, built on the edge of the Baltic sea is a popular social hub with a restaurant, bar, lounge and 4 saunas, including the first modern urban smoke sauna and the option to plunge straight into the icy waters after a sweaty session. (Molvar, 2020) The design of the building is not only aesthetically very pleasing, but it is technically extremely successful and as sustainable and eco-friendly as possible. Adam Rang, writes about Löyly being at the cutting edge of traditional Sauna design and an inspiration to all other Scandinavian nations who still have much to learn from the mighty Finnish Sauna. (Rang, 2018)



Fig 17: Avanto Architects, Interior by Joanna Laajisto Creative Studio Helsinki, Finland 2016, Images by Avanto Architects 2018



Fig 18: Ginzen Onsen by Kengo Kuma & Associates, Yamagata, Japan, Images by Daici Ano, 2008

When it comes to designing a contemporary interior inspired by age old cultures or traditions, one of the most important elements is materiality. Kengo Kuma's 2007 Ginzan Onsen Fujiya hotel and spa in Japan is beautifully serene and has an almost hazy, glowing interior filled with textures which are created by the way soft lighting interacts with the bamboo and rice paper that dominate the spaces. (fig 18) (Pearson, 2007) Here, the architect has designed a contemporary space which has no visual connections to the modern day and could easily mistake a visitor for being transported thousands of years back in time. Nature is the central theme to the design which is completely apt for a Japanese spa. Authentic materiality was also a key feature in Catherine Martin's design of the hammam in the Tierra Santa Healing House in Miami (fig 19). (Faena, 2016) However in this project, the extensive use of marble along with the aromas and treatments are where the majority of the cultural influence come in. The overall design is very modern and simple but create a dramatic effect which results in the marble standing out further. This is a project that has managed to successfully recreate the traditional opulace and ethos of a middle eastern hammam despite being on the third floor of a vast contemporary hotel in the centre of Miami. Both the interior design and the authentic treatments available are devoted to creating a luxurious and educational experience for visitors.



Fig 19: Hammam in the Tierra Santa Healing House in Miami, Image by N.Koenig 2017



Fig 20: The Therme Vals Spa, Peter Zumthor, 1996 Switzerland, Images by F.Guerra, 2016

The ancient world remains a constant source of inspiration, especially in spa design. Both Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals Spa (fig 20) and the various AIRE Ancient Baths by Alonso Balaguer Associated Architects (fig 21) are influenced by ancient Roman bath houses, but the resulting aesthetic is very different. Both are sensory experiences of hot and cold, light and shadow and elemental materiality. The New York AIRE baths, located in a former textile factory built in 1883 are an underground water world of steam, candles, exposed brick and metal and baths and treatments take direct inspiration from the ancient bath house such as a soak in a bath of wine. (AIRE, 2012)

The Vals Spa is a cavernous, quarry-like labyrinth of spaces, which from the grass roof look like the foundations of an architectural site and reveal glimpses of the half-buried bathing spaces below. The simplicity and minimalism of the baths emphasises the Roman-like scale and its success is proved by it being heritage listed only a few years after its completion, giving it the recognition, it deserves and ensuring a long future. (Frearson, 2016)



Fig 21: Aire Ancient Baths is a Spanish chain of wellness retreats in restored historical buildings in the centre of cities across Europe and USA. Image by AIRE, 2020



Fig 22: Hammam al Andalus Baths in Granada, Spain, Image by al Andalus, 2020

A similar aesthetic to the AIRE ancient baths can be found at any one of the Hammam al Andalus baths across Spain which recreate the old Moorish style of an Arabic public bath, with mosaics, columns, arches and vaults, marble décor, windows featuring mashrabiya patterns, dim lights and candles. This is a chain that is striving to celebrate and promote an almost lost magical world and conservation is at the heart of it with their first hammam being the Granada (1998) which is on the site of an ancient hammam that had closed 5 centuries previously. (fig 21) (Hammam al Andalus, 2015) All of these projects are front-runners of what will hopefully be a new wave of Spas and public baths that endeavour to celebrate longstanding wellness cultures and to slow us down in the process.



Fig 23: Artefacts from bathing cultures in *Soak, Steam, Dream: Reinventing Bathing Culture*, Photo by J. Withers, 2020

An alternative approach to the conservation of bathing cultures is through art and exhibitions. Artist Jane Withers' 2016-2017 exhibition, *Soak, Steam, Dream: Reinventing Bathing Culture*, in the Roca London Gallery (fig 23) charted a history of global bathing cultures as well as a series of contemporary projects in the format of a collection of objects and media which expressed the relationship between the physical and social aspects of bathing. (Withers, 2017) In a way, I think that contemporary architecture and interior design built with the purpose of preserving a certain culture are living breathing exhibitions promoting said culture. They are subconsciously educating the inhabitant or visitor about that culture by immersing them in relevant and thematic design.

Sadly the wellness industry will have lost billions in 2020 as a result of months of business closures and the idea of returning to spas or public bathing spaces is likely to be approached with real caution and hesitation by most users. (Morris, 2020) Therefore, the effect of the pandemic on this industry will be seen for a while to come. However, Beth McGroarty, the vice president of research for the Global Wellness Institute says that "at the big-picture, long-term level, the case for the wellness concept and wellness markets post-pandemic looks very bullish." (Morris, 2020) This assumption is made on the prediction that societies will come out the other end of this pandemic with a determination to focus more attention on our own health and wellbeing. Pre COVID-19, the social bath house was showing great promise and growth around the world and it is up to operators to keep up that momentum by finding ways to deliver those experiences while ensuring the health and safety of customers. (Morris, 2020)

Conclusion

Ancient traditions of wellness have stood the test of time and have the power to transport us back into the past. It is impossible to think about any day to day worries whilst being repeatedly thrashed with branches in a finish sauna or scrubbed to within an inch of your life in a Turkish hammam. I have learnt during my research, their intrinsic value to the cultures that formed them and the people that practice them and I have discovered their vulnerability in the modern age. Life has sped up dramatically over time and people don't take as much time to do things like bathing in a traditional way which has lead to these practices evolving to meet our pace of life as opposed to the other way around. Bathing rituals are an effective and immersive way to educate ourselves about a culture or society and need to be nourished and rejuvenated which can be done through design and architecture.

The field of interior design and architecture could be the saviour that vulnerable global bathing cultures need to ensure a long and prosperous future. Conservation and preservation are inherent to the architectural and design industries and they have long embraced the importance of conserving cultural heritage and the work of their predecessors in order to gain knowledge and inspiration from the past for the current and future generations. (Nicolae, 2020) This is why I have great hope that as long as spas and bath houses are being built and designed, bathing cultures will be celebrated and promoted in all their glory. Norwegian architect and academic Birgit Cold insists we must trust that the designers and architects know what is best for us in the long run. (Cold, 2001) As a result of these spaces becoming more common, rituals may well regain their places at the centre of communities as an essential part of modern life. It all comes down to the fact that you can't beat the therapeutic act of refreshing and cleansing the body and why shouldn't the experience be elevated to an almost ceremonial and spiritual level?

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