

Outdoor bathing: How the outdoor hot tub became the most frequented gathering place in Iceland

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to clarify why the abundance of renewable resources is becoming one of the most important characteristics of Icelandic society as nearly 80% of energy used could be categorized as clean. Making use of geothermal water is of vital importance here. Harnessing hot water from the earth is a far from straightforward task; furthermore, it is unique in that it has become the dominant form of energy use in a whole society. Here, implausible as it might seem in view of the Iceland's 'topographical' location, an island in the middle of the North Atlantic, the widespread availability of naturally hot water along with the overall technological capabilities means that its use is varied and has become increasingly important over the years. The principal focus of this paper will be on a partial aspect of geothermal use, i.e. the culture of the rhythm of daily life and public outdoor bathing that has turned out to be one of the most significant features of the Icelandic way of living. The hot tubs of the swimming pools in Iceland have by far become the most frequented places for social gatherings. The analysis is focused on the social aspects of the utilization of geothermal water in Iceland in the context of the nation's modernization process.

Key words: Public places, public pools, Iceland, code of conduct, symbolic interactionism.

The hot tub as a public place

Geothermal energy has become one of the most valuable assets of Icelandic society; it is a curious blend of the desperate need of a poverty stricken people to survive the harsh conditions, coupled with a stubborn determination to search for a viable solution which has enhanced their quality of life.

One of the unexpected aspects of the widespread use of geothermal water is that an everyday visit to the neighbourhood's swimming pool has become an integrated part of everyday living for a considerable part of the population. In 2008 one hundred and sixty three public swimming pools were operated in the country, of which one hundred and thirty were geothermal and mostly outdoors. In addition numerous private or semi-private pools can be found, some of which have become tourist attractions in their own right. A community without a proper public bathing facility, including a hot tub, is considered incomplete.

Despite the widespread discourse about the ambivalent relationship between the public and the private in modern society it is remarkable how swiftly an outdoor hot tub became such an important institution. In just a few decades the tub turned into the most popular place for social gatherings in the country.

Giddens' concept of 'structuration' might be helpful here; or the assumption that all human action is performed within the context of pre-existing social structures, that are governed by a set of norms, distinct from those of other social structures (Giddens 1984). The hot-tub-culture described along these lines is simultaneously a recent phenomenon that has acquired rules, which have been 'normalized' and generally accepted all over the country. In a sense the pools have taken on the functional role of community centres and this partly compensates for the lack of dynamic aspects of street life in the otherwise sprawl-dominated structure of Reykjavík (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, 2000).

According to a spokesman of the Youth Movement, around 1900 less than 1% of the population knew how to swim (Ívarsson, 2007) With the increasing importance of fisheries it was estimated that the overall drowning of people amounted to two hundred, while according to the same source, three hundred and fifty people mastered the skills of swimming. Learning to swim became a priority. Cleanliness took on a metaphorical meaning as well as a practical one. The plan was to create a good and clean disciplined world, which coincided with the libertarian value of a balanced egalitarian society. Upbringing, aimed at enhancing the capabilities of all, became the core of the Icelanders' fight for independence; freedom *to*, rather than freedom *from*; paternalistic guidance, instead of reliance on the 'invisible hand'.

In the late thirties the plan was to build a thoroughly planned 'suburb' in harmony with the overall visions of the modernizing process of natural urbanization, a logical move for the burgeoning town which had become the nation's capital. The period in-between the wars had been a prolonged period of deficiency due to different and complex reasons such the collapse of the market of salted cod due to the Spanish Civil War.

The seemingly controlled urbanization of Reykjavík in a slow but premeditated and balanced development of the urban and the rural manner took a u-turn in 1940 with the arrival of the British army. The British, and later US, occupation made the previously conceived city planning almost meaningless, increasing the number of inhabitants by 25,000 in a city of 40,000. After the British were gone, the barracks left behind became permanent accommodation for Icelanders due to the housing shortage in the Reykjavík area. These barracks formed whole neighborhoods, of which the biggest camp was in Vesturbær, the area that was intended to be the model for future development. The writer Einar Kárason accurately described the surroundings as tin cans, fallen over and half buried in the ground, deteriorating into leaky and rusty huts unfit for decent living in the cold winter nights.

Every neighborhood has an identity of its own and the residents maintain loyalty to their local traditions. This was partly true of the poverty-ridden community in the Vesturbær area. It had a football team, a cinema and an amusement park. The cinema, inherited from the British and located in one of the barracks, was named after the Lebanese town of Tripoli and the amusement park, which included the dance hall 'Winter Garden', was given the name of Copenhagen's famous amusement park, Tivoli. Neither Tripoli nor Tivoli had much resemblance to the places they were named after. In short, the barracks scattered over the new Vesturbær and other Reykjavík areas were not exactly residential areas of which a nation seeking independence could pride itself. They were a manifestation of the fact that a large part of the population lived in dire poverty.

The fear of the political consequences of the frightful slums in relation to rapid urbanization was genuine, as stated directly by Le Corbusier: "Architecture or revolution" (Le Corbusier, 1989, 267). Now it is generally accepted that the Le Corbusier variant of spacious planning in modern architecture was taken to extremes in the twentieth century. Order took over the social aspects or the needs of the citizens came second, while his advocating for better sanitary conditions is undisputed. The emphasis on street life, found in the work of Jane Jacobs, has more to do with the sense of reciprocal responsibility, which is characteristic of older parts of large cities, but is often lost in the clean cut suburbs (Jacobs 1961). Jacobs has been accused of 'romanticizing' the inner city (Berman, 1983). Jacobs' understanding has been in accordance with the resurgence of the metropolitan city centres such as Greenwich Village, where she lived at the time of writing her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

The Tripoli theatre was replaced by the University cinema, the stately home of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, and, as a symbol of the forward-looking gesture, supposedly the largest

movie screen in Europe. The Farmers' Union contributed a large building which housed their Reykjavik headquarters but also a hotel, The Hotel of the Sagas/The Farmers Palace. The hotel had a restaurant and a dance hall that made the older 'Winter Garden' redundant and catered for the residents' secular amusement on Saturdays, while a visit on Sunday to the newly erected Le Corbusier-inspired church satisfied the more virtuous needs.

The new square, like so many modernistic projects of the era, lacked the homeliness of the street culture with its vividness that transformed a neighbourhood into a tightly knit community. Even the most downtrodden slums have a place for playfulness and belonging, which was lacking in the strict and formal organizational plan of the new Vesturbær.

The pool as community centre

As strange as it may sound, the pool became a centre for everyday gathering or took on the role of the village's social centres to some extent, added the element that had been missing in the grand modernistic architectural scheme for the *Hagatorg* square and its surroundings. Locals of various backgrounds used the pool's hot tubs as their daily meeting place. The hot tub concept was imitated all over the country to become one of the most frequented locations for social get-togethers in the country in less than two decades, comparable to the Parisian café, the English pub, the Mediterranean church plaza, the ancient Turkish Hammam, the Japanese Sento, or, closer to home, the Finnish sauna.

Learning to swim plays a fundamental function as well. Children take swimming lesson early on. The training has a wider purpose than learning survival skills and rescue methods. According to the standard curriculum the training is to be adapted to the children's needs and capabilities, from the age of six, when

they start, to thirteen when they graduate. Learning to swim is only a part of the game and could better be described as disciplined fun. Emphasis is on developing and synchronizing the child's senses and motor skills but probably the most important factor is the general social aspect of their cognitive development – learning to respect each other and behave in a responsible playful manner avoiding stigmatization.

In 1953 a fund raising committee, which included some of the most prominent citizens of Reykjavik, was founded in the Vesturbær area. The municipal council donated 75,000 kr. and the nearby Reykjavik Girls' School raised 150,000 kr. The girls' contribution was intended to finance an installation in the entrance of the local swimming pool by one of Iceland's most well known artists at the time, Barbara Árnason. The entrance, with large brightly coloured and playful murals along a sizeable aquarium of Caribbean goldfish, gave the pool an exotic flavour and a Mediterranean feel – a welcome oasis in contrast to the downtrodden barracks. This was an indication that the pool's role was to contribute to the envisioned post war plenitude although the predominant motive for the pool's construction was to provide facilities in the fast growing neighbourhood for teaching local school children to swim.

During the ten-year period it took to construct the pool, the emphasis shifted somewhat from the clear-cut functional intentions to a more varied and pleasurable purpose. The pool was to be a place that satisfied expectations and to some extent the singular longings of an increasingly affluent population, a fact that was literally cemented in the pool's architecture and manifested both in modern fashion and the popular song. One of the first public events in the pool was a fashion show where the year's beauty contest winners exhibited the latest trends in swimwear.

To a certain degree all the above-mentioned functions became integrated into the 'softer' ideology of the Nordic welfare state. The shift was from the pressing necessity of an overall

improvement and the more 'vitalistic' understanding of health as reflected in body sculpting and strengthening the soul in a stringent manner, as was the case in earlier times, to a concept of a common responsibility to improve the quality of life in a more relaxed manner; as such, joint effort and cooperation is required. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), wellness is understood as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In a way, the effort towards a holistic public health policy is also a direct continuation of the ideology of 'positive freedom', so central throughout the twentieth century in Iceland, but now the focus is on health issues directly related to the overall quality of life rather than a Spartan healthiness.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the emergence of the hot tub culture in the country is how fast it has grown into a major institution. Community bathing spaces have been on the wane the world over due to increased affluence and more sophisticated infrastructure in the urban landscape. The tendency to elevate specific cultural attributes is one aspect of the commoditization related to mass tourism. Lee A. Butler has drawn attention to common phrases such as: „In the West, a bath is a place where one goes to cleanse the body; in Japan, it is where one goes to cleanse the soul.” (Butler, 2005, 2). Such a generalization is typical for the 'exoticizing' of cultures. More generally, it must be an overstatement that “spiritual bathing is one of the fundamentals of religion and draws men, women, children and whole communities closer to the Divine”, although this can be the case in various cultures (Arvigo and Epstein, 2003, 1). Roman and Turkish baths had a similar aura of the exotic, as Hackworth has stated: “Early on the Turks perfected the old Roman institution of the steam bath, encouraged by the Islamic belief that physical cleanliness is close to godliness” (Hackworth, 2007, 183).

The Finnish sauna-culture, along with public bathing in Hungary, could probably be seen as closest to the pool attendance

as it has evolved in recent decades in Iceland. The point is that public bathing, always culturally embedded, is and has been a pleasurable social activity, interesting to study and unnecessary to mystify. It is good clean fun. This is a central point in understanding the unrestrained behaviour of the pool attendance in Iceland. A visit to the pool and the hot tubs have in a way simply become a significant meeting point or the public space necessary in the urban landscape where the threat of isolation is always present.

The rules of the game

The city as a place “where strangers are likely to meet” is the well-known definition by Richard Sennet. Public places, in which people feel comfortable conducting routine social interactions with acquaintances as well as unfamiliar persons, are crucial for every community. To maintain such comfort requires a certain level of distance or proximity. Here the metaphor of the ‘bubble’ is appropriate, each and everyone has a personal space which the individual, an acquaintance or a complete stranger, has to respect. Sennet sees this as one of the most important characteristics of urbanization (Sennet, 1977, 16). For Henri Lefebvre, the ‘rhythm of everyday life’ manifests itself in the neighbourhood where ‘locatedness’ or repetition and place converge (Lefebvre, 2004). Edward T. Hall has defined the ‘proxemics’ of intimate space as the closest ‘bubble’ of space surrounding a person and he maintains that the sphere is culturally embedded. Entry into this space is acceptable only for the closest of friends and intimates. He defines social and consultative spaces as the spaces in which people feel comfortable conducting routine social interactions with acquaintances as well as strangers (Hall, 1973).

The rules are subtle and vary from one culture to another. In the case of the Icelandic public pools, visitors quickly become

aware of these rules, sublime or tacit as they may be. Dramaturgical theory maintains that there is a social urgency behind this, insofar as the ‘actors’ are concerned with matters of self-presentation and the emergence of a team impression. The curiously impersonal intimacy of the pool is a clear manifestation of the above traits of modernity. People are constantly shifting roles in a decidedly or in a conditionally restrained manner. Role-playing is a crucial part of the pool-goers’ everyday communal living (Goffman, 1959).

Aquatic customs are a wide-ranging subject and even when narrowed down to bathing, the varieties are almost endless. The Icelandic code of conduct involves minimal touching. You do not greet each other with a handshake; a nod is sufficient; hot pot conversations are general and impersonal, even between regular visitors. Public figures, such as politicians, artists, even internationally known pop stars, can relax undisturbed in a crowded hot tub. Personal questions are not allowed. In some cases pool-goers have frequented the tubs over several years without uttering a single word. Discussions with foreigners rarely surpass the “how-do-you-like-Iceland” barrier.

Doreen B. Massey has defined the politics of co-presence that results from people grouping together in a shared space, without “politics of strong ties and social obligation”. Codes are the ordering mechanisms of conduct and inter-personal behaviour, the ‘throwntogetherness’, in the city’s public spaces (Massey, 2005, 149).

Susie Scott has made a remarkably similar ethnographical study of pool life in England, although there are different nuances such as avoidance of eye contact and, of course, the social life of the hot tub (Scott, 2009). This curiously similar formation of homogenous rules, even immediately detectable by the (unintended) breach of the rules, is central in the theory of Symbolic Interactionism. Breaching the rules makes them visible and encourages conformity (Garfinkel, 1967). The pool culture in

Iceland has a faint resemblance of naturism, despite the fact that public nudity is forbidden at the actual poolside, the relaxed manner characterizing behaviour in a public space is evident. The experience of nakedness and the absence of the gaze of others in the showers is one of the most common comments by foreign visitors to the Icelandic pool facilities.

According to a recent study, 40% of pool-goers attend the centres for reasons other than swimming: they are social gathering places rather than athletic training or body toning. 21% go to spend time with their family and 11% go to meet friends (Birgisson, Jóhannsson 2008).

The culture of public bathing has become an important feature of everyday life in Iceland. Each and every village, and neighbourhood in the bigger towns, has a pool with a character of its own, reflecting the time of construction and the changing architectural trends, functionality as well as meaning, over the years. In a sense it can be argued that the 'pool' has filled in the void that characterized the close knit communities around the country, the fisheries villages as well as the rural ones.

In accordance with Bachtin's concept of the 'carnavalesque' it could be stated that pool going is a way to loosen the restraints of the social order and giving space for the underlying social values of the urbanites (Darren, 2005.). A way to renew the rhythm of daily life as good clean fun.(Bachtin, 1984).

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