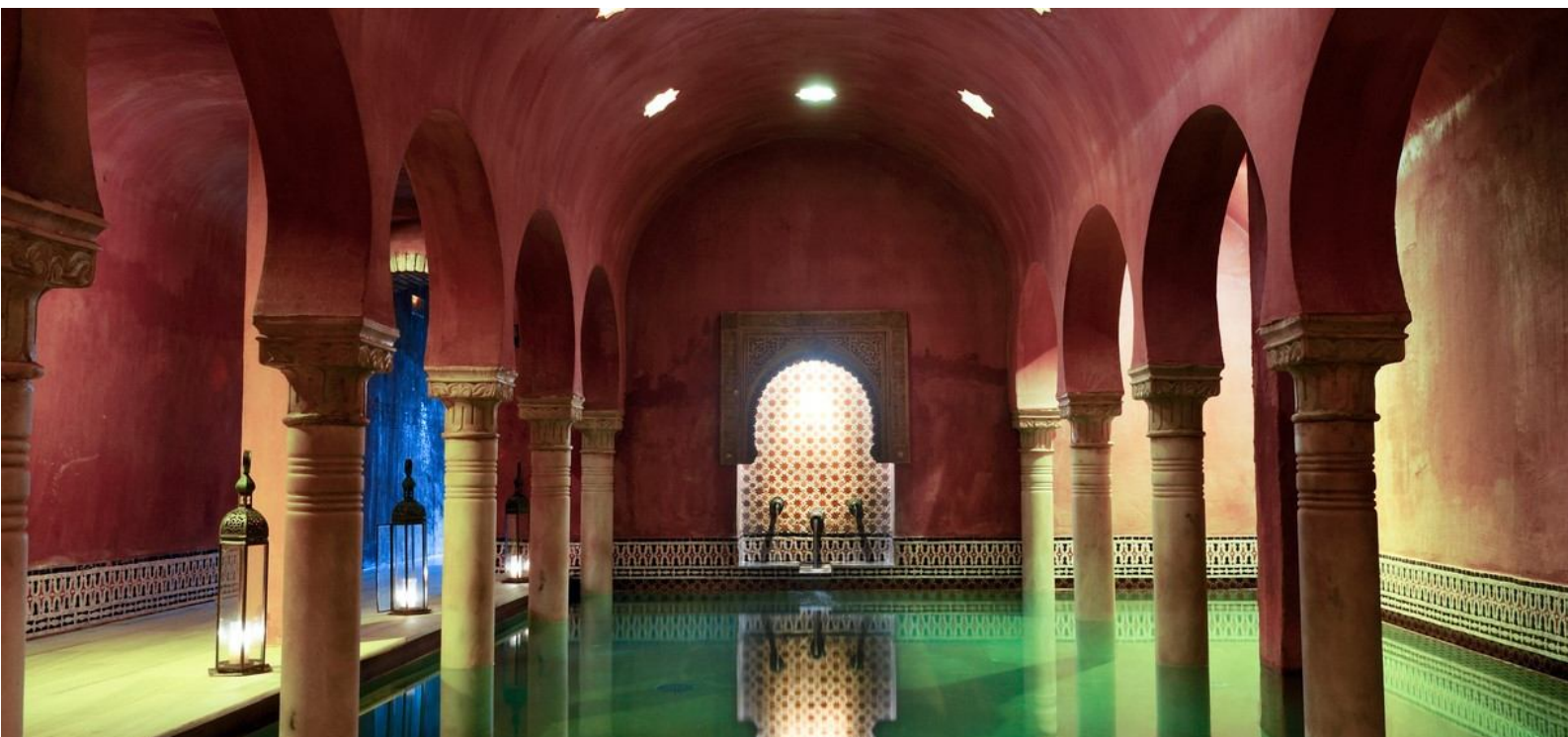




**PUBLIC BATHS IN THE WORLD**  
between tradition and contemporaneity

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## Public baths in the world between tradition and contemporaneity

Antoine Dib, Olimpia Niglio

You can call them *Temazcal* in ancient Mexico, *Banya* in Russian, *Onsen* in Japanese, *Jimjilbang* in Korean, *Hammam* in Arabic, *Pib Naah* in the language of Mayas or *Thermae* in Latin, but the function is the same. They are all various form of public baths, spa or hot springs spread throughout the world. They are considered important places for their therapeutic benefits and as a meeting point for relaxing and socialising independently if the facilities are dedicated for spiritual rituals or for pure hygiene necessities.

Regarding that civilisation is identical with development of arts, sciences and human social organisation, the presence of public baths reflects the advanced level of urbanism of such civilisations. These facilities varied from one single room to big complexes offering different chambers with different temperatures and facilities such as massaging areas, gymnasium and places to eat, relax and socialize. They were visited by rich and poor; sometimes for spiritual experience, often on Sundays, as the tradition continues nowadays in Russia; in other cultures, baths were also spaces where major life events from birth to wedding were celebrated. In Turkey and Morocco for example, bathing rituals before wedding is still a common practice between locals. In the upper part of the globe, Finland and *Sauna* are almost inseparable and nearly all Finns “take a sauna” at least once a week.

One of the earliest public baths in history is located in the Indus Valley. The large pool constructed of baked brick in the lost city of Mohenjo Daro, in present-day Pakistan, dated back to some 2500 BC ago. Around 300 BC, Romans adopted the costume of public bathing from the Greeks and they were famous for building big-scale baths within the urban fabric of their cities; Caracalla Bathes and its mosaics is one of the witnesses. In Islamic countries, Hammam or bath was the second important facility after the mosque.



The traveller Ibn Battuta was astonished by the public baths in Baghdad and Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqquadimah* says that it has around 65,000 public baths. In the far east, in countries like China, Japan, Korea rich of natural hot springs, some says that the custom of bathing started from spiritual ritual introduced by Buddhism; however, other archaeologists say that the temptation of soaking in the natural hot springs was known since Neolithic ages.

In western cultures, the first modern public baths were opened in England in 1829 CE after accepting the notion that bathing and hygiene could lead to better health and that water could be used for therapeutic purposes. New York knew the first public bath in 1891 CE; later, between 1901 and 1914 CE, 26 municipal baths were built around the city. This does not mean that the new world did not know public bathing before the bathes of New York. Aztec emperors built a series of aqueducts that channelled fresh water from watercourses for use in *temazcales*. Spanish invaders recorded that the ill Moctezuma II, the last Aztec emperor, 'used to have bathed several times a day and even held court while doing so'. In central America, in the old territory of Mayas, some villagers still go to the sweat house to bath enjoying the companionship of friends in curing ceremonies.

The necessity of having baths within urban centers, encouraged the application of new structural techniques and architectural expressions. For instance, the need for large open spaces in Roman baths lead to offer the first dome structures. The abundant donkey dungs were burnt in Mesopotamia to heat the water and generate the necessary steam; the remaining blue ashes were used to produce high- strength mortar. In other part of the world, Incas build a very advanced and complex system of waterways made with stone blocks. It is possible to see these canals nowadays in the recreational and touristic complex *Baños del Inca*, or *Inti Puquio* as the Incas used to call it.

The public baths did not influence only the world of architecture, but they put their imprint in all arts. Many painting masterpieces were inspired by baths and bathers such as *Le Bain turc* by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingre 1862, *Women at a bath* by Jean-Leon Gerome in 1885, Paul Cesanne did his interpretation of public bathes in *Les Grandes Baigneuses* in 1906... Japanese painters celebrate the Onsen culture by many famous paintings such as the print by Torii Kiyonaga or the 18th-century drawing by Chikanobu Yoshu known as *Ikaho Onsen Hanei no Zu*. In Arabic worlds, the *Hammam* was until recently an important part of the daily life and many songs interpreted by famous artists like Layla Murad have immortalized the costume of public bathing. In TV, *Hammam AL Hana* (1968) was a famous Syrian sub-opera that its plot took place in a public bath. Many cinema movies have included scenes in public baths. Recently, one scene from the Hollywood movie, *Gemini Man* (2019) was filmed in the public baths of Budapest, Hungary.



Nowadays, with the availability of private baths for almost everyone or due to governmental ban or change in people life-style, the public baths are facing big changes. Some of them are abandoned, others are transformed into hotels such in Berlin and other ones were transformed into museums like in Serbia and Iran. In contrary, in country like Spain for example, the traditional Arab baths in Andalusia banned by the Christians by the end of the XV th century, are knowing a new splendour. Many cities such as Granada, Madrid are rediscovering the old tradition and many Arab style baths are opening to the public and the tourists. In parallel, the tradition of public baths in other countries was not affected a lot by the modern life-style, especially in countries like Japan where attractiveness of natural hot-springs is not overshadowed by any social or political factor. The aim of this research is to put light on the past of public bathing, its contribution to the society and to discuss its future within different cultures. The essay, through the contribution of different sciences and disciplines, analyses intersecting topics such as historical facts, urban and architectural heritage, decline and urban revitalization, renovation, memories and collective identities, cultural tourism and many more.

**Languages: The language authorized is: English.**

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The Director

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