

Swimming Is Winning - The Case of an Urban Bathing Revival in Vienna's Danube Canal

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Abstract

How do we want to shape and innovate lived urbanity in a more and more commodified city centre? From an urban anthropology and social design perspective, this article explores the creative use and enhancement of urban liquid structures as open access blue spaces, using the example of Schwimmverein Donaukanal, a social design initiative promoting swimming in Vienna's Danube Canal. Mapped out as an ethnography of historical and contemporary urban bathing in Vienna, this article identifies both enabling and consolidating factors that together can turn urban swimming into a lasting aspect of everyday Viennese culture. Through empirical qualitative research - conducted with and about the swimmers' community of Schwimmverein Donaukanal - three interconnected dimensions of urban swimming emerged: swimming as a cultural technique deeply connected to human and non-human nature; the (re-)appropriation of public space as a form of political activism and civic participation; the value of urban bathing as a community practice, fostering a sense of belonging, inclusion and responsibility. This article's findings suggest that the practice of communal urban bathing can be a vital contributing factor for strengthening the social and cultural fabric of a city and holds the potential to contribute to a more environmentally sustainable urban development in general. As cities worldwide confront the challenges posed by climate change, this case study offers valuable insights for researchers, decision-makers, and grassroots organisations on how to promote urban swimming and rethink urban waterways in the 21st-century city.

Keywords

urban swimming; urban bathing culture; social design; blue spaces; civic participation; swimmable cities.

1. Introduction

Urban swimming has experienced a renaissance in a growing number of cities in Europe in recent years (Globevnik et al., 2022), including Vienna, where urban bathing culture is historically rooted in accessibility, democratic use, and personal responsibility. This revival is increasingly relevant for addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change, urban heat island effects, and the need for inclusive recreational strategies in a growing city.

This article offers insights into the emergence of urban swimming in Vienna's Danube Canal at the turn of the

20th century. Back then urban swimming may have historically emerged as a by-product of large-scale urban infrastructural transformation processes as a response to the public health crisis, but which factors have contributed to its consolidation as an integral part of Viennese everyday lifestyle? This article examines the emergence, gradual decline and subsequent resurgence of urban swimming in the Danube Canal, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of the social design initiative Schwimmverein Donaukanal (SVDK) in facilitating this revival. Which historical aspects that have been reintroduced today ensure that swimming in the Danube Canal is becoming a permanent feature of

Viennese city life again? Through an in-depth analysis of the case of urban swimming in the Danube Canal then and now and a series of interviews with practitioners, this article identifies numerous factors that contribute to the occurrence of a long-lasting urban swimming practice in the Viennese city centre.

The implications of urban swimming at both individual and societal levels are explored by focusing on its role in enhancing well-being, fostering social cohesion, and promoting civic participation. The re-appropriation and creative use of urban spaces can be understood as a form of activism, civic participation, responsibility, and care (Lefebvre 1996; Barak 2017, 2019). Like SVDK, many other self-organised urban swimming initiatives across the globe seem to strike a balance between independent guerilla swimming and involvement of official municipal structures, following an “intrinsic logic” (Löw 2012, p. 310) of their respective cities. Additionally, the current article identifies the potential of urban swimming to address systemic challenges such as public health crises and climate change, while contributing to sustainable urban development and community resilience.

Ultimately, this article seeks to examine how disruptive, yet inclusive interventions in urban fabrics can lead to beneficial outcomes for multi-species ecosystems and thus a more livable coexistence in the 21st-century city.

2. Urban Bathing in the Danube Canal - Historical Context

The emergence of Vienna’s tradition of urban swimming dates back to the turn of the 20th century – a period of rapid industrialization and significant economic and population growth. With the introduction of labour protection laws, the working-class population gained more leisure time (Klose, 1962). These developments coincided with the completion of the extensive Danube regulation process in 1875, implemented to mitigate flooding in Vienna (Hahn et al., 2004).

The Danube Canal underwent substantial infrastructural modifications, which enhanced transportation flows and improved water quality through a comprehensive

transformation of the canalisation system. This process was guided by the aesthetic and functional vision of Otto Wagner, a renowned Viennese architect and urban planner (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011). Consequently, the Old Danube and the Danube Canal, formerly two of the many arms of the Danube - evolved into cherished bathing areas and essential public spaces for relaxation and recreation for Vienna’s working class (Freyer, 2020; Bauer & Bauer, 2022).

2.1. A History of Democratisation of Leisure

By 1904 two public bathing facilities - called “river baths” (German: “Strombad”) - were in regular use, welcoming 40.000 guests in the first summer season (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011, p. 22) at the Danube Canal, with three more planned to be realised in a few years’ time (Freyer, 2020). The river baths - all fed with the Canal’s water and stationed along the canal’s banks offered controlled, safer spaces to swim or to learn how to swim. These river baths later expanded into “air and sun baths” - facilities offering changing cabins and recreational areas. One of the baths was open well into the winter months, to cater to the needs of the growing ice-swimming community called “Verkühle dich täglich” (“catch a cold daily”) (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011, p. 33). In post-WWI Vienna, the Old Danube beaches - such as the Gänsehäufel island - attracted 20.000 daily visitors in summer months (Bauer & Bauer, 2020). Urban swimming was proving to be a real break-through in the democratisation of leisure and recreation, juxtaposed to the tradition of Sommerfrische (see figure 1) - the yearly mass exodus of the Austrian aristocracy and later of the Viennese bourgeoisie, enjoying the clear waters of the many Austrian lakes and fresh air of alpine resorts in the hottest months of summer (Payer, 2018).

Facing poor housing conditions and a subsequent surge of air and waterborne diseases (Globevnik et al., 2022), the Viennese working class population and the city municipality seemed to have found the perfect preventative solution to the unfolding public health crisis: universal access to sunbathing and swimming at one’s doorstep. In 1919, the enthusiastic swimmer and Social Democratic sports functionary Theo Bernatz stated: “modern bathing, which combines hours of exposure of the naked body to

fresh air and sunshine with swimming and bathing, offers the best prophylactic and curative remedy against the proletarian disease - tuberculosis" (Bauer & Bauer, 2020). The emphasis on accessible hygiene facilities contributed to the democratisation of urban swimming, making it a viable option for all citizens, regardless of their economic status (Globevnik et al., 2022).



Figure 1. Vacationers enjoying "Sommerfrische" in the Austrian Alps. Source: Peter Grill, year unknown.



Figure 2. Swimmers at the Gänsehäufel Island. Source: Wien Museum, 1926.

Perhaps the secret behind the long-lasting existence of the Viennese urban bathing culture was the right mixture between community-led, 'wild' urban swimming practices and the emergence of municipal bathing facilities and

state-funded swim infrastructure. For many residents of the historically Jewish district of Vienna that borders the Danube Canal - Leopoldstadt - the Canal was the place for learning how to swim from their elders and spending most of the hot summer days, swimming and sunbathing (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011). To name another instance of a communal use of urban bathing areas: it was so common for the unemployed population, suffering due to the economic crisis of the 1930's, to spend leisure time at the Danube Canal that Viennese journalists were inspired to coin the term *Riviera of the Unemployed*, referring to the Canal (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011), pictured in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Riviera of the Unemployed, Vienna. Source: Mario Wiberal, 1933.

While the existence of municipal bathing facilities relied heavily on state funding and political will, the bottom-up appropriation of the Danube Canal and other water bodies of Vienna was fuelled by the individual responsibility of urban swimmers and the communal spirit of practising "wild urban swimming" - sometimes even illegally - at the peripheral areas of the Danube Canal's "Riviera" (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011, p. 30-31), at the Gänsehäufel's nudist commune (Bauer & Bauer, 2020) or with the working youth fleeing Vienna's heat, bathing in Lobau during their statutory

vacation weeks (Gruber, 1991). Swimming at one's own risk is still one of the essential factors to the success of urban swimming movements in Vienna and in other European cities with longstanding urban swimming traditions (Globevnik et al., 2022).



Figure 4. River, sun and air bath at the Danube Canal.
Source: Lothar Rübelt, 1930's.

It is worth noting that in this time-period the Danube Canal was already a busy waterway, bustling with promenade ship traffic, as well as cruise ships connecting Vienna and Bratislava (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011). Despite the intense ship traffic, the Canal was successfully maintained as an inner-city recreational area, serving as a prime example of the multifaceted use of waterways in a growing city (see Fig.4).

As can be seen in Fig. 5 and 6, the popularity of swimming in the Danube Canal crystallised around the annual swimming competition - "Quer Durch Wien" ("Across Vienna") - attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators each year (Eiblmayr & Payer, 2011, p. 35). The competition for swimmers, jumpers and rowers featured a 10 km swimming race and attracted internationally acclaimed athletes - both male and female. Many female swimmers were autodidacts, Viennese Jewish citizens and members of the sports club SC Hakoah Wien, such as Hedy Bienenfeld, Fritzi Löwy and Judith Deutsch (Schwaiger, 2008).

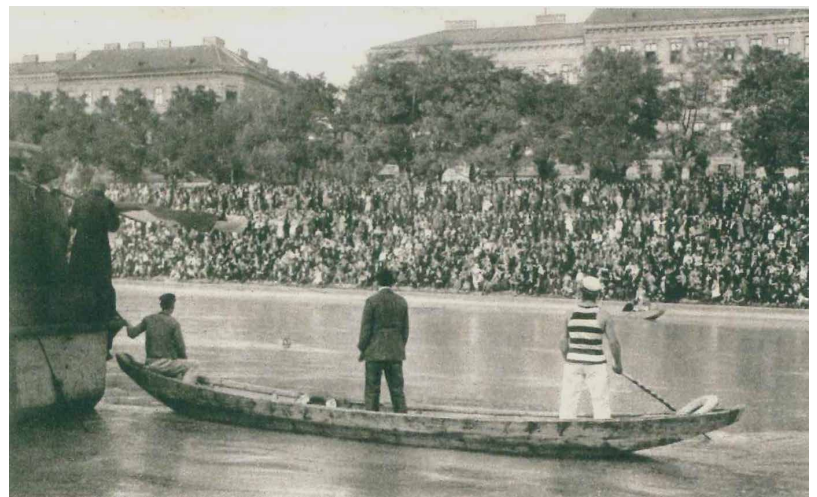
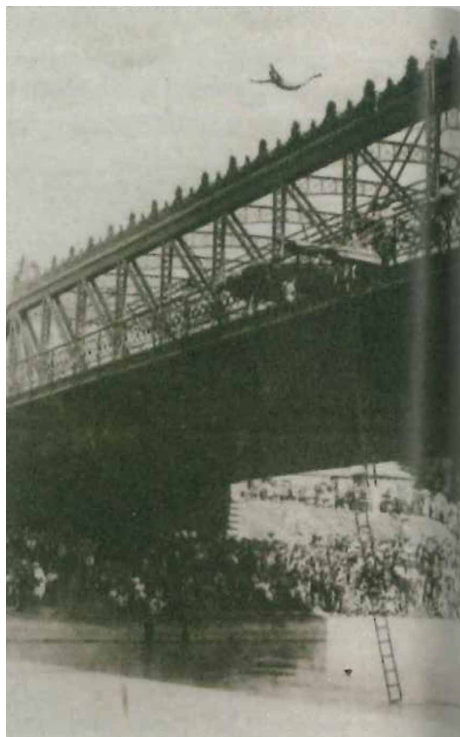


Figure 5. Diver jumping into the Danube Canal during a swim competition.
Source: Wiener Bilder, Nr. 31, 1919.

Figure 6. "Quer durch Wien" Source: Wiener Bilder, Nr. 30, 1920.

while taking a clear standpoint against excessive commercial development to maintain public, consumption-free zones. However, while the plan was comprehensive regarding the canal's banks, it did not consider the water body itself as a public blue space, leaving swimming out of its scope.

The Danube Canal's status as an international waterway complicates its potential for urban swimming. Cruise boats and the *Twin City Liner*, which connects the two capitals Vienna and Bratislava since 2006, regularly navigate the canal. From the city's perspective, there has been little interest in promoting swimming here, given Vienna's seventeen off-centre, EU-certified bathing sites, all offering excellent water quality and public infrastructure (Stadt Wien, 2024). However, these official sites are relatively far from the city centre, limiting convenient access for spontaneous urban swimming.

According to Austria's Water Rights Act 1959 (Wasserrechtsgesetz 1959 idF BGBl. I Nr. 73/2018), it is allowed to swim in the Danube Canal, unless specified otherwise, as it is a public, natural body of water. Due to the canal's waterway status, the City of Vienna advises against swimming there. In reality, according to the Austrian waterway traffic regulations swimming is only restricted within a 100 metre radius of any ship docking stations situated along the Danube Canal (Wasserstraßenverkehrsordnung 2024).

The canal is not an EU-certified bathing site, so there is no publicly available data on water quality. However, following the renewal of Austria's Water Rights Act in 2003 (Wasserrechtsgesetz-Novelle 2003) - as per the 2000 EU Directive (EU Water Framework Directive, 2000) - significant improvements have been made. Wastewater - both industrial and household - along with rainwater, is collected and treated at Vienna's centralised wastewater facility before entering the Danube Canal. The planned extension of the Wiental canal by 2027 will further enhance flood protection and water quality in the Vienna River, which feeds into the canal, reducing pollution and managing runoff

(Stadt Wien, 2024). While the canal lacks a formal bathing certification, the City of Vienna's robust water infrastructure suggests that the water is likely safe for swimming.

3. Reviving the Liquid Interface - A Brief Chronicle of Schwimmverein Donaukanal

While urban swimming in the Danube Canal was a celebrated activity in the early 20th century, in the early 2020's Vienna only a few remembered its glory days. Instead, an urban legend persisted – that the Danube Canal is little more than a dirty wastewater channel, unsuitable for bathing. Despite this misconception, the canal's banks remained a popular spot for cafés, clubs, and recreational activities. Against this backdrop, in spring 2020, a social design initiative to revive the Danube Canal swimming culture was born: Schwimmverein Donaukanal (SVDK).

3.1. Social Design Strategies for Urban Swimming Revival

The department of Social Design - Arts as Urban Innovation at the University of Applied Arts Vienna produces multidisciplinary knowledge about the mechanisms of social innovation, develops artistic and design strategies, and enables social designers as mitigators of bottom-up and top-down processes in the urban fabric to drive or often replicate social innovation.

Guided by these Social Design principles, the co-founding team of SVDK - Ana Mumladze Detering (sociologist), Fabian Ritzi (industrial designer), Amelie Schlemmer (fashion designer) and Amanda Sperger (architect) - undertook multidisciplinary research, using artistic strategies, such as dry swimming, emotional mapping, immersive bathing, and wet strollology. They studied the multifaceted history of urban swimming in the Danube Canal, including infrastructure and policy developments, as well as the attributed communities and rituals, supplemented by interviews with key stakeholders and urban swimming enthusiasts from Vienna and Europe.

The Schwimmverein Donaukanal project produced several key outputs. One was a playful, low-threshold FAQ¹ - a tool

1 - <https://schwimmvereindonaukanal.org/FAQ-en-1>



Figure 8. Media Coverage of the Opening Event.
Source: Kurier, Amanda Sperger, 2020.



Figure 9. Installation in the KunstHausWien courtyard. Source: Maria Kanzler, 2020.

designed to address common concerns about water quality and legal issues, aiming to debunk public misconceptions about swimming in the Danube Canal. The team also created an interactive installation in the courtyard of the Kunst Haus Wien, featuring free-to-use lockers and changing cabins for swimmers, as well as information panels, pictured in figure 9. At the vernissage, an open panel discussed the future of urban bathing, accompanied by performative swims before a large audience.

The event garnered widespread media coverage, with scenes of canal swimmers featured in local newspapers (fig. 8), national TV, and online platforms, sparking heated public debate. Coinciding with the COVID-19 lockdowns, the program naturally encouraged locals to explore the Danube Canal as a nearby recreational area (German: "Naherholungsgebiet") through various activities.

3.2. SVDK as a Creative Community - Identity, Activities & Infrastructures

Following its initial success, SVDK was officially registered as a non-profit cultural association in October 2020. The organisation quickly evolved into a dynamic platform for cultural exchange, connecting with citizen collectives, cultural institutions, and local political entities. From its inception, SVDK has focused on building a robust local community. By its fourth year, the association comprised approximately 300 members ranging in age from 13 to 79.

To cultivate a sense of community and promote safe and self-responsible swimming practices, SVDK introduced several ritual formats - such as weekly swim-buddy meet-ups (StammFISCH) and the revival of the historic swimming competition *Quer Durch Wien - Schwimm Parade* - with its inaugural edition in September 2024 (see fig. 10).



Figure 10. Schwimm Parade water entry point at Urania. Canal water at the "WasserSpielPlatz", near Friedensbrücke. Source: Sophie Bösker 2024.



Figure 11. Children and adults playing with Danube Source: Christopher Mavric 2024.

Informed by the needs of its growing community, SVDK (co-) created various permanent and temporary functional, site-specific installations along the banks of the Danube Canal. The permanent designs feature changing cabins, showers and lockers in urban community gardens. Others were designed in collaboration with the architecture department of the Technical University of Vienna to foster social exchange and recreation as everyday pleasure (STAYCATION // KanalWal, 2021, fig. 13) or to familiarise non-swimmers and children with the waters of the Danube Canal through play and low-threshold interaction (WasserSpielPlatz, 2024, fig. 11).

To encourage safe exploration of the entirety of the Danube Canal and mobility through swimming, SVDK collaborated with a Swiss swim-gear manufacturer to design bright-coloured swimbags. The concerns of safety, visibility and the practical needs of urban swimmers also inspired the creation and aesthetics of Hybrid Dessous, a social design label specializing in multifunctional bathing wear, both visible in Fig. 12.

3.3. From the Swimmable Danube Canal to Global Swimmable Cities

Although each city faces its own unique challenges on the path to becoming swimmable, there is already a rich body of knowledge on the sustainable transformation of urban waterways and the role of grassroots organisations in fostering urban swimming cultures. With an increasing number of cities redefining their water systems—such as Paris, which is investing €1.4 billion in a revitalisation project for a swimmable Seine (Walt, 2023), and New York City's plans to establish its first 'river bath' with \$60 million in public funding (Walker, 2024)—city-to-city collaboration and knowledge exchange become crucial. In response to this, SVDK convened a digital Community of Practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) for leaders in the urban swimming movement in 2023.

Moreover, to enhance stakeholder management and advocacy efforts that grassroots initiatives require in their local contexts, the need for cross-sectoral alliances and a cohesive set of principles for the movement emerges. As

a result, SVDK co-founded the international Swimmable Cities Alliance in 2024 - a decentralised global network, as per Baran's typology of networks definition (Innovation Network for Communities, 2016) - drafting a common charter with signatories from 31 cities worldwide. This Charter² recognises the urgent need for sustainable transformation of urban waterways and champions the right to swim as a universal human right (Swimmable Cities, 2023).

In light of the global climate crisis and the need for urban climate adaptation, urban swimming can be a vital contributor to fostering socially and environmentally sustainable urban environments. By bringing people closer to nature, it cultivates a sense of stewardship for natural spaces. This movement inspires innovative thinking about urban waters and encourages decision-makers to incorporate swimmability as a key factor when transforming local waterways.

4. Urban Bathing as a Social Modality - A Case of Community Research

The story of Schwimmverein Donaukanal (SVDK) highlights urban swimming as a catalyst for civic engagement and cultural exchange. By reclaiming the Danube Canal for swimmers, SVDK has fostered a strong community, promoted sustainable interactions with public spaces, and initiated important discussions on urban design and well-being. These insights prompted further research into how such initiatives affect civic participation and well-being. In the following chapter, we present a qualitative analysis based on interviews and ethnographic data to explore the social, cultural, and psychological benefits of urban swimming in Vienna and beyond.

Using a participatory research approach, an open invitation was communicated via SVDK newsletters and a members-only group on Signal. From April to July 2024, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews and focus groups with SVDK experts and members in German language. More data was collected through participatory observation and field conversations during weekly swim meet-ups and other community events. All interviews were recorded,

2 - <https://www.swimmablecities.org/>



Figure 12. SVDK Members Wearing Tarzan Swim Bags and Hybrid Dessous Bathing-Wear.
Source: Christopher Mavric 2024.



Figure 13. STAYCATION // KanalWaL built installation for everyday pleasures at Danube Canal.
Source: Wolfgang Thaler 2021.



Figure 14. Urban Swimming, Water Quality. Source: SVDK 2020.

transcribed, and analysed according to the principles of Thematic Analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). As a result, three main dimensions of SVDK communal impact in Vienna could be identified: The dimension of leisure and wellbeing for urban citizens, urban swimming as a community practice, and the role of SVDK as a platform for civic participation and co-creation.

4.1. Urban Swimming as a Cultural Technique for Leisure, Health, and Wellbeing

Humans have valued the beneficial effects of bathing on health and wellbeing since ancient times, and water bodies invite unwinding, contemplation, and enjoyment (Globevnik et al., 2022). Accordingly, the obvious primary motivation for urban swimming in the Danube Canal revolves around sports, leisure, and wellbeing. SVDK community voices expressed an appreciation for the large number of spots for public swimming provided by the City of Vienna, acknowledging Vienna's qualities as a Swimmable City. Most swimmers, however, highlighted the fact that swimming in the canal in a particularly central area of the city (Fig.15) - often close to their homes or workplaces, accessible at no cost and without long or any commute - was highly

attractive and improved their quality of life: "...cooling off after a long workday (...) at first, I thought I can directly float to where I live from here" (IP3, trsl.).

Around half of the interlocutors stated they had thought about bathing in the Danube Canal before joining SVDK, but they had wondered if the water quality was safe and if swimming was permitted. One person even recounted that he learned to swim in the canal as a child in the 1950ies. Several interlocutors were attracted to SVDK when they spotted swimmers in the Danube Canal well visible due to their neon-coloured swim gear. Another reason to join the SVDK was to find out about legal permissions, safety, water quality, and practical aspects like best places to enter and exit the Danube Canal.

As mentioned in chapter 3, SVDK follows the principle of self-organised and self-responsible swimming. To share information about safety and responsible behaviour, a group of experienced swimmers among SVDK members facilitate jour-fixe meet-ups twice a week during summer months. For inexperienced Danube Canal swimmers several open jour-fixes per year give a glimpse into SVDK activities.

4.2. Urban Swimming as a Practice of Care

While urban bathing itself can be a very intimate personal experience and positively contribute to mental as well as physical health, the framework of the activity is oftentimes directly linked to a community. A significant number of members cited the community aspect as a reason for joining SVDK. Especially for people who are new to the city, this is an opportunity to connect with like-minded citizens: “I joined for socialising, as well as social engagement” (IP1, trsl.). For seasoned Vienna city dwellers, the association offers the possibility to widen their existing social circles. For some members, the weekly meet-ups of SVDK became a regular item in their calendar and contributed to building a sense of community. As for canal swimming per se, several swimmers pointed out that they felt safer and more visible

to ships when going into the water as a group. “Alone, I wouldn’t dare to jump in (...) and community is always good” (IP3, trsl.).

This aspect of community and care also extends beyond the human community. In his work on ecological citizenship, Barak (2019) points out that urban spaces are an increasingly important arena for the promotion of ecologically conscious practices. Swimming is a cultural technique deeply connected to nature. Our findings suggest that the communal aspect of the practice of urban swimming has much potential to evolve into a practice of care for the common space. Many urban swimmers highlighted that floating through their home districts on the Danube Canal implied seeing and feeling the city from a completely new perspective. The act

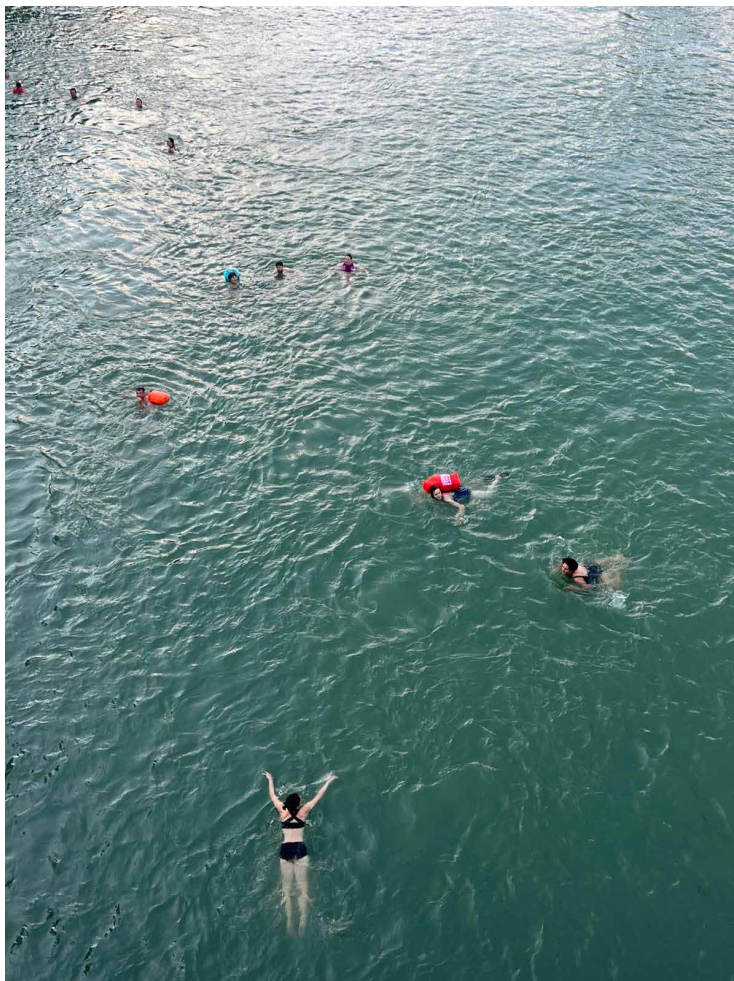


Figure 15. Urban Swimming in the Danube Canal close to Rotundenbrücke. Source: Amanda Sperger, 2023.

of immersing oneself in urban waterways enhances both a sense of belonging and responsibility to the material and social city fabric. Bathing and swimming in urban public waters, citizens tend to start taking care of blue spaces and their multispecies members, thus developing a sense of responsibility for the human and non-human (urban) environment. This sense of stewardship of the urban fabric is a prerequisite for civic participation that cultivates sustainable urban development.

4.3. Urban Swimming as Political Activism and Civic Participation

Originally put forth by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la ville*, the notion of the right to the city has been revived more recently by scholars, activists, grassroots movements, and progressive local authorities as a call to action to reclaim the city as a space that is co-created, and at the same time liberated, from the growing effects of commodification on social interaction. It also refers to the rise of spatial inequality in cities across the globe (Lefebvre, 1996). In this spirit, notions of urban citizenship often emphasise “the collective rights of inhabitants to shape their public spaces” as an essential component of civic participation (UN Habitat 2017, p. 28).

Accordingly, a political-activist motivation to swim the Danube Canal was an aspect strongly voiced in the community: “...it was clear to me from the beginning, this is not just a fun project, but very much a project of city politics and social activism” (IP7, trsl.). Key notions mentioned in other conversations were free access to public waters, reclaiming ‘natural’ surroundings, and the inclusive use of urban space outside the logic of forced consumption, especially in the context of a city area that has been heavily commodified in the last ten years. Here, urban swimming was understood as an act of (re-)appropriating public space. Around half of the interviewed members, however, would welcome greater supportive involvement by the City of Vienna, including infrastructural investments or dedicated ‘ship-free days’ for canal swimmers. One interviewee stated that she joined SVDK as an official member decidedly “to give the movement more political weight” (IP3, trsl.). Several members compared swimming in the Danube Canal in coexistence with tourist ships to riding a bike in streets that were formerly dedicated to motorised vehicles only.

Immersing oneself into the waterway then symbolises becoming part of the city’s traffic flow, representing both an act of disruption and inclusion.

In this regard, the practice of urban bathing represents a performative act of civic participation in the city fabric, shaping one’s immediate environment by ascribing an alternative meaning to the city’s “intrinsic logic” (Löw 2012, p. 310f).

5. Conclusion - A New Wave in Urban Living

In closing, this article has aimed to illuminate the historical and contemporary significance of urban swimming in Vienna, particularly in the Danube Canal. By examining the intricate factors that facilitated the emergence and revival of this practice, we have identified key enabling factors - such as robust water infrastructure and liberal swim policy - as well as important consolidating factors - such as the existence of public bathing facilities and vibrant swimming communities. Together, these elements ensure that urban swimming can evolve into a lasting cultural practice.

Our analysis revealed that the resurgence of urban swimming is not merely a nostalgic return to past practices, but rather a dynamic response to present day challenges such as climate change and the quest for inclusive recreational spaces. The case of Schwimmverein Donaukanal stands as a testament to how grassroots and social design initiatives can catalyse social innovation and urban transformation, fostering a culture of civic participation and social cohesion, while facilitating stakeholder engagement and even city-to-city collaborations e.g. the Swimmable Cities network.

The implications of our findings extend beyond the immediate context of Vienna. As cities worldwide grapple with similar challenges, the lessons drawn from the Viennese experience can offer valuable insights into the potential of urban swimming to enhance public health and promote community resilience. Our case study illustrates the power of community-driven solutions in transforming urban landscapes into more liveable, inclusive spaces and in connecting people with nature through swimming.

Looking ahead, further research will be essential to explore the long-term impacts of urban swimming on social dynamics

and public health outcomes, as well as to document the experiences with similar initiatives in diverse urban settings. This could pave the way for a broader understanding of how such practices contribute to sustainable urban development and urban resilience.

In conclusion, the revitalisation of urban swimming in Vienna not only redefines the use of public spaces but also sets a precedent for other cities to follow. As we navigate the complexities of lived urbanity in the 21st century, embracing inclusive, sustainable social innovation practices will be crucial for fostering a healthier, more interconnected urban ecosystem: Urban river bathing is a win for every city and its social fabric.

Conflict of Interests and Ethics

The authors declare no conflict of interests. The authors also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects, anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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Reviving Public Spaces Through Socially Sustainable Urban Furniture

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative potential of urban furniture for enhancing public spaces through a Social Design approach implemented in the Viennese pilot project Re-Sourcing Commons, which integrates principles of community involvement and circular economy in the design of public spaces. Focused on the redesign of Fritzi-Massary-Park in Vienna's second district, the project, led by Social Design Studio – a department located at the University of Applied Arts Vienna –, engaged local residents to enhance social infrastructure, recreational quality, and accessibility across diverse age groups, with a particular focus on youths and the elderly. Central to its approach is the systematic reduction and the repurposing of materials sourced from municipal stocks and landfills, such as discarded standard park benches, to minimise urban waste and promote sustainable public space design. The project exemplifies a shift from linear to circular material flows, integrating modular and adaptable urban furniture design to meet different user needs. By identifying and utilising (previously) unnoticed resources in the city – material as well as immaterial – the pilot project demonstrates a scalable and transferable model towards circular cities, which not only promotes circularity but also integrates the social dimension, ensuring a holistic approach to sustainable urban development. The approach revitalises public spaces and strengthens community bonds, contributing valuable insights to the challenges of implementation and future potentials of circular urban design strategies. Re-Sourcing Commons builds on two previous research studies. One of them (“Stadt aufmöbeln – a platform exploring untapped potentials of urban furniture”) spawned the initiation of an online platform exploring alternative approaches to urban furniture and sustainable design of public spaces, drawing from international case studies and participatory action research. This article brings together lessons learnt in the project and underscores the transformative impact of community-driven and circular design processes in creating vibrant, resilient urban environments.

Keywords

Social Design; urban furniture; circular economy; resilient neighbourhood; socially-engaged design; public space.

1. Introduction

A bench is there to sit on. That is its purpose. That is what it was built for. But if this bench is placed in public space, it does much more than that. It livens up a place. It offers a place to rest. It leads to random encounters. But it can also displace, erect boundaries, restrict the scope for action. Although the German term “mobiliar” (furniture) derives from the Latin “mobilis” for “mobile”, urban furniture usually embodies the opposite: uniform and immobile elements. These are subject to legal norms and strict regulations in terms of design and use.

Based on our interest in exploring social dimensions of urban furniture, we derived the following questions guiding our research: What forms can and should urban furniture and its design process take? Is it just about sitting down, or can it also contribute to new (social) qualities of public space? How does urban furniture respond to places, environments, and their qualities? Can it promote exchange between people? Does it encourage appropriation? Does it create new meeting places? Can it foster transformation processes in neighbourhoods that go far beyond purely physical redesign?

With the involvement of local residents, Social Design Studio¹ redesigned a public park in Vienna's second district. The park is located in a neighbourhood with a high density of large social housing complexes, which are home to an above-average number of young people as well as people over the age of 65. A previous study conducted by Social Design Studio in 2017 showed that open spaces close to the residential buildings offered too little recreational quality and were hardly used despite the need for social spaces in the area. The creation of a micro-centre, i.e. a public and easily accessible meeting place for the local community, equipped with new urban furniture specifically designed to meet the needs of local residents, was identified as a possible lever to enhance local recreational opportunities (Schraml et al., 2017; Schraml & Plášková, 2018).

In the continuing research project "Stadt aufmöbeln – a platform exploring untapped potentials of urban furniture" (conducted in 2021 and supported by municipal department MA19 – Architecture and Urban Design), the potentials of urban furniture, participation processes and ecologically, socially sustainable urban design were explored – with special consideration of the previously defined target groups (predominantly young and older people). In parallel, the redesign of the park was set up in collaboration with the Viennese municipal department responsible for public parks (MA42 - Wiener Stadtgärten) and the district council of Vienna's second district. The park was redesigned by bringing together principles of citizen participation and the circular economy in 2021-2022. By identifying and utilising (previously) unnoticed resources in the city, the project questions conventional linear routines in the design of public space, where resources are extracted, used, and discarded in a one-directional manner. It demonstrates an alternative, scalable and (internationally) transferable approach to a (socially) circular city – an approach that emphasizes the careful management of existing resources through practices such as waste reduction, continuous reuse, recycling, and regeneration. A socially circular city model extends beyond environmental sustainability to encompass social

dimensions, i.e. integrating circular principles to promote the development of sustainable, inclusive, and resilient communities.

2. A Park with Potential

2.1. The Park and its Neighbourhood before the Redesign

The project Re-Sourcing Commons builds on two artistic-scientific research studies by Social Design Studio, responding to the insights gained from them. The first study, "Eine Urbane Knautschzone mit Potential, research study on the public space in the neighbourhood between Prater and Danube", was carried out on behalf of the municipal department MA19 (Architecture and Urban Design, City of Vienna) in 2017 (Schraml et al., 2017; Schraml & Plášková, 2018). It investigated the use of public and semi-public spaces in an unnamed inner-city residential area in the second district of Vienna, stretching from the Viennese Prater (the largest inner-city public park) to the banks of the Danube and undergoing a critical phase of transformation. The park project Re-Sourcing Commons was later implemented in the geographical centre of this area.

The neighbourhood's housing structures are characterised by densely populated monofunctional use, concentrated in large social housing complexes. Many of these complexes were built in row construction during the late 1950s and early 1970s and are nearing the end of their life cycles. According to the City of Vienna's socio-economic database, which provides insights about the social composition of the local population based on 29 indicators, the neighbourhood is classified as a cluster with higher-than-average rate of unemployment, percentage of individuals with a migration background, and rate of poverty amongst employed persons (Stadt Wien MA18/ZSI, 2013). Additionally, the area has an above-average population of children, young people, and individuals over the age of 65. These demographic groups typically have a comparatively limited mobility radius compared to the overall population, making them more reliant on immediate recreational areas for daily activities.

1 - Social Design Studio is a department at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna founded in 2012. It offers the interdisciplinary master programme "Social Design - Arts as Urban Innovation", which is dealing with artistic research within urban social systems taking Vienna but also rural contexts as well as areas under process of urbanization as fields of research and practice. For further info visit: www.socialdesign.ac.at