



# In the Swim of Things

*Launched amid a public health crisis, Montreal's pool system remains deeply embedded in the lives and hearts of residents, Eve Cable finds.*

Illustrations by Agathe Bray-Bourret

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When I swim at Piscine Schubert, a public indoor pool in Montreal's Plateau neighbourhood, I often think about the microscopic bits of everyone flying around in the water. I think about the mingling of sweat, spit and snot, diluted in a big blue wash of chlorine. I like to look at the week's haul of hair ties collected on the pool floor, and squint at the dark red smear of (hopefully) rust down there, about two strokes before I need to turn in the shallow end. I like to listen to the noise of legs and arms slapping against the water, and think about the generations of people who might have heard those same sounds at this pool. I wonder who the first person was to step foot in the building when it was built as a public bathhouse back in 1931, who the first swimmer was

to haul themselves out of the water using the same rough metal handrails that I use today.

Though the water changes, and the chlorine blitzes the remnants of the swimmers of the past, pools like Schubert carry a weighty history in their basins. Schubert is one of many public pools that opened in Montreal in the first half of the twentieth century as part of a plan to address an out-of-control public health crisis, one that saw poor hygiene and overcrowding result in Montreal becoming “the most unhealthy city in North America,” according to a 2007 retrospective in the journal *Urban History Review*.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Montreal had death rates significantly higher than many other major cities in North America, including New York and Toronto. Disease ravaged the city, with the spread of illnesses like typhoid, diphtheria and tuberculosis vastly exacerbated by terrible public hygiene and cramped living conditions. A report from the spring of 1902 by the United States consul-general describes how some summer months in Montreal would see weeks where 125 infants died. Infant mortality was “abysmal,” with more than a quarter of the city’s children born between 1899 and 1901 dying before their first birthday. “The public health situation was horrible,” says Denyse Baillargeon, a historian who specializes in the history of women, children and health in Quebec. “Hygiene was not a high priority, I would say.”

Multiple families were often living together in one dwelling, and, with the vast majority of units having no access to running water, disease ran rampant. In the absence of baths and showers, families would wash themselves with shared water that was heated on the stove, and would sometimes bathe in the heavily polluted Lachine Canal or Saint-Laur River, spreading disease even more. Homes were rarely fitted with toilets in the early twentieth century, and Montrealers instead used community “privy pits”—holes dug in yards for locals to do their business in. Donovan King, a Montreal tour guide who founded Haunted Montreal and Hidden Montreal, says the privy pits caused huge problems in the city when contaminated water spilled out with the spring thaw. “Those areas would often flood in the spring, and so here you’ve got thousands of literal shitholes, and then the water floods over and it all comes up,” he says. The perfect storm of privy pits, poor hygiene, overcrowding and a lack of access to bathing facilities resulted in death rates spiralling out of control. “It was a real disaster, sociologically and also medically,” says King.

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The city needed to do something. In the 1910s, local authorities decided that they would open public bathhouses across Montreal, a way to bring cleanliness to the “great unwashed.” This followed cities like Boston and New York, which had seen success with their own public bathhouses that opened in the mid-to-late 1800s. Boston was particularly innovative, installing “floating baths,” wooden structures extended over a river, an idea that was then adopted by New York City as it attempted to address its own public health problems.

“The [bathhouses] that were opened allowed some of those people to have a real bath once a week,” says Baillargeon. During this time, municipal, provincial and federal authorities attempted to educate the public on the importance of personal and domestic hygiene. The weekly trip to the bathhouse for a good scrub soon became a part of daily life. Much like at today’s pools, it would have been common to run into familiar faces when going for a dip. “The purpose was not only hygiene, but also recreation, socialization,” says King.

Though the primary purpose of Montreal’s bathhouses has changed since they were first built, many of their architectural elements haven’t. The facade of Bain Morgan, located in the Hochelaga–Maisonneuve neighbourhood, looks straight out of Ancient Rome, with imposing stone columns topped with sloping statues of horses and reclining figures. Swimmers entering through the giant archways at the front of the building are still welcomed by sculptor Alfred Laliberté’s “Les petits baigneurs” fountain, featuring two frolicking bathers in bronze: the same sight swimmers would have seen when the baths were built in the early 1900s. Piscine Quintal, located in Ville-Marie, retains its blocky Depression-era brick edifice, the inside tiling intersecting the square window panes in an almost Art Deco style that transports swimmers back decades. Even the Plateau’s Piscine Lévesque, which has a modern, boxy exterior, makes you feel like you’re stepping into a time machine once you pad out of the changing rooms. The inside of the pool retains its vintage charm, with tiles in octagons,

squares and rectangles lining the water in nostalgic shades of cream and royal blue.

Nicky Cayer, a spokesperson for the City of Montreal, says that public pools have a special place in Montreal, both past and present. “Montreal’s pools are more than just infrastructure: they’re living spaces, offering a variety of services to the entire population,” she explains. According to Cayer, the city now boasts thirty-nine indoor aquatic facilities and sixty-two outdoor pools, as well as eighty wading pools and 203 water playgrounds that operate during the summer months. For many cities, aging infrastructure is a sign of a crumbling history that’s better forgotten, demolished and swept away. In Montreal, our pools are beautifully archaic reminders of our past, spaces that connect those that formerly made up the city with the current occupants. Though some facilities have faced threats to their existence through the years, locals have continued to fight for the bathhouses: not just so they have a place to exercise or cool off, but because our pools are part of the very fabric of our city.



Mandeep Basi, a research consultant, grew up in the suburbs of Montreal. The child of immigrants from India, she didn't have much exposure to swimming when she was younger. "My parents moved to Canada from India in the 1970s, and where they're from, water is considered dangerous," Basi says. "You just don't go into the water. Animals go into the water, not humans, and people do not learn to swim."

Basi's husband is from Maine, and he grew up jumping into lakes and spending time by the water. After years of being unable to fully partake in the fun with him and his family, Basi had enough, and decided she wanted to learn to swim. She took the plunge, literally, and signed up for some private lessons, then started heading out to practice during open swim times at Piscine Schubert and other public pools in her area. "Now, I can go toward the deep end. I'm not that comfortable being out there, but I can go there and rest against the wall, and then make my way back," she says. "It feels really liberating that the whole pool is open to me now."

As a new swimmer, Montreal's public pools feel like a safe place for Basi. Cayer says that the city has been focusing on making swimming open to everyone, with low-cost swimming classes—\$99 for a course of eleven classes at Piscine Lévesque, for example—and aquatic exercise programming geared

toward locals at any stage of life. The city has been aiming to align its infrastructure with standards set by Société Logique, a nonprofit focused on accessibility. These requirements include installing mechanical chairs that can lift people in and out of the pools, access ramps inside and outside of the buildings, and fully accessible changing rooms. Accessibility goes beyond physical accommodations: accessible changing rooms, for example, might also mean ones that are non-gendered, which Cayer notes helps increase access by "abolishing the barrier of sex and gender identity."

This is all part of the concept of universal design: the idea that an environment should meet the needs of all who wish to use it, regardless of age, size, ability or disability. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, a leading research and advocacy group, notes that universality doesn't just benefit a minority of people, but is instead a "fundamental condition of good design" that serves everyone. The organization lays out seven principles of universal design, developed in the late 1990s by a working group of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers. These principles include equitable use, meaning that the environment can be used in either identical or equivalent ways by all, and flexibility in use, meaning that the environment encourages choice in how users engage with it.

Montreal is updating its pool system to align with these principles. In fall 2023, Piscine Schubert concluded just over a year of renovations to make it universally accessible; at both Schubert and Lévesque, chairlifts for users who are disabled or who have reduced mobility now enable access to the pool. In a pool system where many of the buildings were built decades ago, retroactively meeting these accessibility requirements has been slow going—some of Montreal's pools still lack adequate features, which means that swimming isn't a truly accessible activity for all residents. Similarly, there are areas of the city that have limited access to public pools. The Outremont neighbourhood, for example, only has one public outdoor pool and no indoor pools. Users have to travel further to other facilities, something that isn't always possible for all swimmers.

While the pool system is far from perfect, Cayer says that the city's project teams now consult with diverse groups of locals, including disabled people, to gauge their needs during the design phase—making sure the principles of universality are built-in from the beginning. Local author Leila Marshy says she's been impressed with the city's development of existing

aquatic facilities. "I'm super proud of Montreal's civic-mindedness, honestly," she says, noting how positive it's been to see accessibility aids like mechanical chairs installed at local pools. "Universality means that you can enjoy something knowing everybody can also enjoy it, and that's really important to me." For Marshy, universality doesn't just mean physical accessibility measures; keeping public pools free is also a big part. While not a direct measure within universal design, affordability is certainly a barrier to use, and, frankly, an under-examined facet of accessibility. Wheelchair-accessible changing rooms and retrofitted ramps wouldn't be as much of a cause for celebration if only a financially privileged few could use them.

Marshy often swims in Parc-Extension's Piscine Saint-Roch, one of the few pools in the city that still offers open swim times specifically for women and girls, where she's seen other local women enjoying the water in hijabs and other cultural coverings. At Piscine du Parc Jarry, an outdoor pool also in Parc-Extension, Marshy sees families set up for the day by the pool, kids jumping in and out of the water and groups eating at picnic tables while enjoying one another's company on summer days. She says it's crucial these kinds of communal spaces continue existing, and continue to be offered for free or with low-barrier entry. "Our services being free and available means that we're recognizing that we're a society, we're sociable and we need each other," she says. "Swimming is delightful. And to nurture this sort of access to delight is really nice."

Marshy learned to swim as a kid in Montreal in the 1970s, and came full circle two decades later, when she taught her children to swim in the same pool system she had grown up using. Her local pools mean a lot to her and her family, and she's built a community through them—a bunch of swimming friends and acquaintances took her by surprise when they showed up at her recent book launch, a reminder of the connections she's forged in the pool. In 2011, she and a group of fellow Plateau residents came together to protest the shuttering of Piscine Schubert, which the borough council had declared it would close due to budget constraints. Ultimately, the council reversed its decision, retaining an iconic local landmark and proving the power of the people. For Marshy, that community spirit is what keeps Montreal's pools alive and thriving.

Community certainly blooms inside the pool, but there's connection happening at the water's edge,

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too. Loreen Pindera, a journalist and triathlete, and Claire Roberge, a researcher, met in the narrow pool-side viewing area of Piscine Schubert more than twenty years ago, where they would find themselves once or twice a week watching their sons' water polo practices. The physical space of the viewing area made it almost impossible to avoid chatting and developing a friendship. "It was so narrow, so we couldn't spread around, it was easier for us to look at each other and start talking," says Roberge.

The water polo club became a social occasion for Roberge and Pindera—as well as for their young sons, who were around nine years old at the time. Though the boys were born only two weeks apart and lived mere minutes from one another, they had never met. Pindera credits those days at the pool with bringing their sons—one anglophone, one francophone—together. "They became fast friends, which was lovely, kind of across the linguistic line, and Claire and I became fast friends, and we've been friends ever since," she recounts.

Like Marshy, who used the pool as a young person and then as a mother, Montreal's pools have seen Pindera and Roberge through different stages of their lives. Before pool sessions were an after-school activity, they provided relief for both women during their pregnancies. Roberge remembers the coolness

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of Piscine Schubert comforting her during the sweltering heat near the end of her pregnancy. "My son was born on July 7, and it was very hot that summer, so being able to swim was also a nice community service that was available for free," she says. "It was a way to get this fresh renewal of your own body when you're pregnant and almost about to give birth." That same summer, Pindera was floating in Parc Laurier's outdoor pool, a vast basin of water that's often the same colour as the cloudless summer skies above. "That saved me in the final weeks of pregnancy. It was just so, so hot," Pindera says. "I remember how awesome it was to arrive at [the] Laurier pool at noon and be able to float with my big belly. You feel like a whale until you get in the water, and then you feel as light as a feather."

The summers have gotten even hotter than they were back then, with the city seeing the hottest

month on record just a few years ago, in August 2021. Pools have been a welcome respite for many during those blistering months. Cayer, the city spokesperson, says that some of Montreal's outdoor public pools have been designated as emergency cooling points. As annual temperatures climb, there's more reason to worry about at-risk populations, like those with chronic illnesses, infants and seniors, all of whom are considered more vulnerable to extreme heat. Public pools can help locals like these by providing places of respite during dangerous heatwaves.

Montreal is considering ways to upgrade its pool system in order to meet the demands imposed by climate change, like installing outdoor lights that would allow pools to be open later into the evening during heatwaves. With oppressively hot summers becoming the norm, the city is also re-evaluating when outdoor pools open for the season, potentially

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opening them earlier in the spring and closing them later in the autumn. But this would also be rife with challenges due to the extra resources required.

Montreal's pools began as an answer to a public health crisis, over time morphing into spaces for leisure and recreation. More than a hundred years after their creation, they're once more playing a role in protecting Montrealers from a different kind of public health threat. When city officials a century ago began to envision spaces for residents to clean themselves, could they have imagined that generations later, Montreal's pools would be providing refuge from climate change's oppressive heat? As tattooed bodies relax poolside and children splash around in today's former bathhouses, it's sometimes easier to feel pride in how the pools continue to be loved by generations of Montrealers than it is to focus on how alarmingly hot it is outside of the water.

While it's not hard to find a pool with free swimming hours in the city, there has been a decline in the number of such facilities. Back in 2011, the city counted seventy-nine public indoor aquatic facilities—that's around double what it has now. The forty that are no longer owned by the city are either under private or school jurisdiction, or in some cases belong to non-profit organizations.

That's a large number of pools to lose over fourteen years, and for locals like Pindera, this decrease has meant less choice. Finding the hours of Montreal's public pools difficult to work around—some pools that do offer free swim hours schedule them in the afternoon, which can be difficult for Montrealers who have 9 to 5 jobs—she now pays for a membership at McGill University's private pool, where she trains for triathlons. Most of Montreal's public pools are also

on the smaller side: Piscine Schubert, for example, is about twenty-three metres long. For athletes looking to train for serious competitions, like Pindera, or who want to train in specialized skills like diving, Montreal's public pool system isn't particularly accessible. There are a few bigger facilities, like the two fifty-metre pools at the Parc Olympique, but getting there can be a big commitment.

Diver Nathan Zsombor-Murray has represented Canada twice in the Olympics, winning a bronze medal in the men's synchronized ten-metre platform at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Zsombor-Murray grew up outside Montreal, in Pointe-Claire, a municipality on the west side of the Island of Montreal, but spent around three hours daily from the age of thirteen commuting to the Parc Olympique to train in its pools and gym. He says that it was the best place for young divers who wanted to prepare to go pro. "It was pretty crazy, looking back, I'm not sure how thirteen-year-old me was doing that on my own," he says of the lengthy commute. "But the reason I did it is because the stadium offered a sort of step-up in terms of the equipment."

Zsombor-Murray acknowledges that not all pools can have Olympic-level equipment, but thinks that it would be exciting to see more facilities have equipment like diving boards, to encourage future athletes from all walks of life to try out a sport they might love. "If there were more facilities, then access would be much easier, and I'm sure that would catalyze or at least make it a lot easier for parents to put their kids into diving," he says.

Reducing the barriers to entry for aquatic sports, including by offering facilities for free, could dramatically change the demographics of athletes in the diving and swimming worlds, sports that have been

criticized for a lack of economic and racial diversity. It would take pressure off of young athletes whose families typically have to invest thousands in their potential careers, and encourage more youth to get into exercise.

But building and maintaining pools is expensive, and the more professional the space, the more expensive the project. Cities are looking at big price tags to create state-of-the-art facilities. The renovations of the Lawson Aquatic Centre in Regina, which is planned to contain two fifty-metre pools and a twenty-five-metre leisure pool, will cost \$245 million to build, about \$160 million more than had been initially expected. Since 2016, the City of Montreal has invested \$120 million in the construction and upgrading of all its aquatic facilities, total.

Costs like that can be hard to justify, but could be worthwhile in the long-run if the facilities encourage more people to stay healthy. Aquatic sports can be a particularly accessible method of exercise, because being in the water takes pressure off of the joints, relieving pain in the spine and limbs, which is helpful for those with osteoarthritis or other conditions that make weight-bearing exercises too difficult. Pressure is also distributed evenly throughout your body when you swim, meaning that the exercise doesn't put too much stress on any one part of the body—especially beneficial for those with joint pain or injuries. Swimming also engages a range of muscle groups, meaning it's a well-rounded activity that helps build strength all over. The stronger someone is, the longer they can stay mobile, and the healthier bodies will be in old age. Investing in places where people can build that strength and find pain relief now could mean that more people can maintain their mental and physical health, reducing the need for other medical interventions.

Adrian Wills, who grew up in Montreal, started regularly swimming twenty-six years ago as part of his efforts to find a replacement for smoking. On his first try, he couldn't swim longer than ten minutes before his lungs began to hurt. But as the weeks went on and he built up his stamina, he found that the pool melted away his stress and anxiety. He began to realize that although he craved the instant anxiety-release of slipping outside for a seven-minute cigarette break, swimming could scratch that same itch. "It actually becomes kind of a meditative space," Wills says. "I find it a really calming and invigorating creative space in my head while I'm swimming... there's that sense of experiencing another world, because you're really immersing yourself in another space in terms of sound, in terms of light, in terms of how your body works

and how you engage with others in the space." Wills says that swimming has also relieved painful back issues, meaning that he's managed to sidestep more trips to medical specialists. He thinks that making aquatic exercise more accessible is potentially a good way of mitigating healthcare costs.

Though Montreal has lost several of its public pools in recent years, there could still be a bright future ahead for local water-lovers. The city got creative last summer with La Piscinette, an outdoor public pool in the Sainte-Marie neighbourhood that was made out of a shipping container and filled with salt water. Despite not being large enough to allow for multiple lanes of serious lap swimmers, the pool was a kitschy breath of fresh air, lined with macramé hammocks and parasols that made the metal box feel more like a beachy resort. Creative initiatives like these are cost-effective ways to increase access to pools—the shipping container was purchased for just \$50,000, a fraction of what it costs to install permanent aquatic facilities (although without as lengthy of a lifespan). There are pricier projects on the horizon as well—a \$27 million renovation of Parc Jeanne-Mance is in the works, with a refurbished wading pool and new splash pad.

I often think about these kinds of projects while imagining the long-gone "great unwashed" as I count my laps at Piscine Schubert. I wonder how the Montrealers of that generation would react to knowing that the city now spends millions of dollars on what they would call public bathhouses; what they'd think of the chairlift for disabled swimmers at the side of the pool; how they'd probably gasp at the unisex changing rooms. I wonder if they would look at the array of colourful sheets of paper tacked up in Piscine Schubert's entryway, featuring drawings by local children, and feel as compelled as I am by the scrawled words of "We love the pool," or as puzzled by one of the latest artworks that reads: "SchuBurt pool is yummy."

I suppose that the young bathhouse visitor of yesterday would feel similarly to me—they certainly weren't put off by the idea of sharing the water with hundreds of other strangers, and I can't imagine they would be particularly disgusted by the idea of accidentally swallowing a mouthful of Montreal history if they were to take a breath too early during their front crawl. At the end of the day, even if we don't know each other's names or faces, and even if we exist a hundred years apart, we're not all that different once we're in the pool. In the water, we're all just Montrealers, sharing one big bath with our neighbours past and present. ♫