

## **Swimming in the City: Urban-River-Swimming as Spatial Appropriation in the Spree Canal in Central Berlin**

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### **Abstract**

What effect can urban-river-swimming, in particular along the Spree Canal in central Berlin, have? Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between ‘voyeurs’, viewing the city at a distance from above, disconnecting the body from the city, and ‘walkers’, walking in the city and immersing their body into the urban ‘text’. Certeau describes “walking as a space of enunciation” (98), a form of expression, and as an art of appropriation. Inspired by this, the paper transfers and expands Certeau’s thoughts on spatial appropriation by analyzing ‘swimming in the city’ and introducing the figure of the ‘city swimmer’. The paper explores what insights architecture and urban design along the (not yet swimmable) Spree Canal in central Berlin give into the urban history and river-city-relationship. Also, the paper discusses how urban-river-swimming (in Berlin: *Flussbad Berlin* Project) can work as a practice of spatial appropriation, reclaiming urban nature and public liquid space, as well as enabling a post-industrial ‘re-writing’ of the urban experience. Creating, transforming and appropriating space by ‘swimming in the city’ raises awareness of and creates visibility for urban nature, its ecological condition and accessibility to humans and non-human life in the city, which is especially important in the light of the climate situation and corona virus crisis.

Keywords:

Spatial appropriation, public space, urban nature, environmental justice, urban-river-swimming, Berlin, Spree River, *Flussbad Berlin* Project, Certeau, Barthes

## The City Swimmer

The built and arranged environment shapes the bodies within and influences their movement and actions. As Michel de Certeau writes, “a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (...) and interdictions” (98). Yet, human bodies are not necessarily subject to their surroundings. They can appropriate and (re-)write the city. As do walkers, Certeau’s *Wandersmänner* “whose bodies flow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (93).

In his chapter “Walking in the City” Michel de Certeau distinguishes between ‘voyeurs’, viewing the city at a distance from above, disconnecting the body from the city, and ‘walkers’, walking in the city and immersing their body into the urban ‘text’. Certeau criticizes the panoptic construction and totalizing view on the city, which he considers to be not much more than a theoretical visual ‘representation’ of the city and a ‘misunderstanding of practices’ (93), which links to Lefebvre’s category of ‘representations of space’ as ‘conceptualized space’ and as the “dominant space in any society” (38-39).

The “ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’” (Certeau 93), in the “representational space”, “the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre 39). The walkers (or pedestrians) appropriate the topographical system, act out space and imply relations between differentiated positions through movements. Thus, Certeau describes “(t)he walk – (as) an elementary form of the experience of the city” (93) and “walking as a space of enunciation” (98), a form of expression, and an art of appropriation. With this practice of spatial appropriation, the walker challenges the ‘spatial order’ and updates the possibilities within the ensemble. The walker makes a spatial selection in choosing an individual path, for example, by taking detours and shortcuts and thus making spaces emerge.

Spaces of urban water bodies, however, are excluded from the walker’s path. While walking along a river ‘walkers’, to some extent become ‘voyeurs’. They view the river from afar and mostly from above, and are not fully immersed into this particular urban (water) ‘text’. Certeau refers to Greek mythology when explaining that it is this elevation that “transfigures him (Icarus) into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance” (92). “An Icarus flying above these waters” (92) – these waters down below being the fluid, “mobile and endless labyrinth” (92) of the urban landscape.

Barchetta calls for “ways of walking politically, and not voyeuristically” (176) – how about ‘swimming politically’?

To actually experience (safe) urban water space, such as a river, one has to dive in – literally. The ‘walker’ has to break with the voyeuristic perspective on the river. The ‘walker’ has to become a ‘swimmer’ to enable an active figure in relation to urban water bodies, jumping the barrier between solid ground and liquid space, connecting them and challenging the voyeuristic perspective. So why not expand Certeau’s thoughts on spatial appropriation and introduce the ‘swimmer’ as an urban figure? What effect can ‘swimming in the city’ have? Can urban-river-swimming function as a ‘space of enunciation’?

Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinaesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. (Certeau 97)

Following up on this, Certeau’s ‘chorus of idle footsteps’ could turn into one of aquatic splash. ‘Their story begins’ not on ground level but in water, with dipping, splashing, jumping, diving into the canal – and swimming, not walking. Together with the ‘urban kinesthetic sensation’ (Barthes “Stadtzentrum” 47) the “kinesthetic appropriation” (Certeau 97) would take its toll – stroke by stroke the swimmers liquid paths would give their shape to water and “their shape to spaces” (97). As Lefebvre notes those “paths are more important than the traffic they bear (...)” (118). Those paths are, when reading the city as a text, the inscription of humans into space (Barthes “Semiologie” 202). They are the poetics of space that unfold the significant, the urban (Barthes 208). For as Barthes writes: “*La ville est un idéogramme: le texte continue*” (Barthes “Stadtzentrum” 48) – the city is an ideogram: the text continues.

Liquid paths, however, quickly disappear. The visible traces slip away and turn into sleek surfaces or are carried away by the flows. However, the act itself is visible and the infrastructure around making a river accessible inscribes the practice of urban-river-swimming into the urban landscape, making it readable as a post-industrial cityscape.

Swimmers movements as well as pedestrian movements chime into the ‘city discourse’, the urban language and engaging into a dialogue between the city and its bodies (Barthes

“Semiologie” 202). Furthermore, they “form one of these real systems whose existence in fact make up the city” and “[t]hey [their intertwined paths] weave places together” (Certeau 97) – the swimmer connects liquid space with the surrounding space.

The architectural segregation of liquid spaces and solid ground in many contemporary cities separate the ‘walker’ from urban water bodies, such as rivers. This urban situation is deeply rooted in history, in particular in the industrial past where urban design instrumentalized rivers as transport and supply routes and, furthermore, as sites for waste disposal. In many cases rivers made urbanization and industrialization possible in the first place, in providing water, energy and food resources, transport corridors, and in enabling communication. Rivers shape towns, cities, their hinterlands and their inhabitants as well as international relations.

As Lübken notes, “(r)ivers have been critical for the foundation and development of many cities, while urban development has had a profound impact on rivers” (155). In this way Lübken highlights the coevolving relationship between cities and rivers. Watson takes a step further and writes, “(w)ater is emblematic of the powerful interconnections between human/non-human, and nature and culture, where these entanglements are in a constant process of transforming cityscapes and landscapes” (3).

The engineering and mastering of rivers, and for that matter nature, is often conceived as a very urban phenomenon of humans dominating, exploiting and ultimately polluting natural resources, instead of engaging in a city-river relationship that fosters the natural, social and cultural urban life alike. As a result of this relationship and especially due to the pollution through industrial and human waste turning “flowing fresh water into grimy, often infested and unappealing places to immerse one’s body” (Watson 140), so “many cities abandoned their rivers during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” (Lübken 161).

Despite urban deindustrialization processes across the last century urban rivers in many contemporary post-industrial cities are still neglected, unattended, often unused and sometimes ‘forgotten’ public spaces, even in dense urban areas such as central Berlin, where space is scarce and contested. However, things are changing. As Knoll et al. note, “(s)ince the 1990s, these different attempts to clean up and to re-appropriate rivers have dovetailed into a significant movement in many parts of the world” (19).

“The interplay of proximity and distance between urban society and the river” and the sensual “perceptions and practices shape urban knowledge and urban identities”, Knoll et al. write (16). The interaction between urban society and the river as well as the architecture

framing the urban river-scape give insight into the city-river relationship and to the walkers and swimmers spatial situation in the city – may it be one of distance or proximity.

Ever more post-industrial cities are aware of this missing bodily connection to their urban water and are reassessing their approach to them. For as Barthes notes, cities without a connection to water, without accessible water bodies such as lakes, rivers and canals – all these cities are difficult to inhabit, to live in, and to read (“Semiologie” 208).

Globally post-industrial cities, including Basel, Berlin, Boston, Copenhagen, London, Paris, and Seoul (just to name a few, notably prevalent in the northern hemisphere), are turning towards their urban waters. As Way notes, “designers, planners, and scientists, along with city leaders and citizens, want to clean their rivers from pollution and to construct healthier and environmentally sustainable developments along the riverbanks” (2).

Cities are letting rivers and harbors re-emerge as public liquid spaces by making them accessible to the urban society as a whole as well as integrating more-than-human life into urban design. The many projects in various parts of the world might have differing agendas, however, as Knoll et al. highlight “what all these endeavors have in common is a remarkable shift in the hegemonic understanding of the role the river is supposed to play for urbanites as contrasted to before the 1970s” (17).

### **Berlin: Spree River**

This is the case in central Berlin, where the project *Flussbad Berlin* has a vision for the future of the Spree along the Museum Island providing a new idea for the city-river relationship in central Berlin. Initiated in the late 1990’s by two architect brothers Jan and Tim Edler as a citizens’ initiative, the *Flussbad Berlin* project aims to improve water quality in the Spree, in particular in the Spree Canal, making it swimmable again and more accessible to the urban society as well as enhancing more-than-human life and ecological balance within the city.

The river Spree and its multiple canals meander slowly – very slowly – through Berlin and enrich the city as a whole – ecologically, economically, socially, aesthetically and culturally. After passing the iconic *Oberbaumbrücke* in the East of the city, the river flows parallel to the Berlin Wall Memorial, the East Side Gallery, and past Berlin’s club scene along the banks of the Spree, before making its way through the historic center, where the city was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A few hundred meters further, the Spree winds through today’s government district. The river passes the central station and touches the *Tiergarten* green parkland area before heading

further westwards through the industrial and residential urban fabric towards its confluence with the Havel river and the Berlin lakes in the West of Berlin.

Back up-stream, in the historical center of Berlin, the Spree Canal branches off the main Spree at *Inselbrücke* and rejoins it again at *Monbijou Brücke* to form the Spree Island, better known as the Museum Island with its UNESCO World Heritage ensemble, its famous museums, the *Berlin Cathedral* and the *Humboldt Forum*. The present functionality of this historic part of Berlin with its protected architectural monuments and museums is one strongly oriented towards the past with a focus on cultural and educational enrichment of Berliners and visitors alike.

### **A Public River-Bath in Berlin's City Center**

Here in the center of Berlin the *Flussbad Berlin* project plans to add “new perspectives and additional opportunities to get close to these cultural institutions and protected monuments” (Edler 78) along the Spree Canal, by facilitating the opportunity of swimming through this unique historical ensemble and expanding the spectrum of uses on site. In the words of Certeau, “actualizing some of these possibilities” making them “exist as well as emerge” (98) and enabling the experience of “both Berlin's different historical layers first-hand and the potential of a sustainable city” (Edler 77).

‘Sustainable city’ meaning a city respecting and caring for local urban nature and natural resources (water, soil, plants, and animals) and recognizing their importance for the local and global ecosystem, for public health and the urban society as well as for the urban micro-climate, and at long last climate adaptability in the city. Urban water bodies and green spaces, such as rivers, lakes, parks, street trees, and even “balcony biotopes” (Brantz “Vertical ecologies” 100), provide urban living spaces for cohabiting multispecies ecosystems and reduce inner city temperatures and with this the urban heat-island problem, thus helping adaptation to climate change (Tonne et al. 7).

The *Flussbad Berlin* project brings together citizens, experts and politicians to discuss the use of public space in the city and seeks to communicate the “link between environment-related and the modernization of wastewater infrastructure and the resulting increase in the quality of life and the environment in the city” (Edler 78). The citizens' initiative engages in negotiation processes concerning monument protection interests, gentrification and touristification concerns as well as in debates on urban environmental justice and the promotion of environmental education.

Direct encounters with urban nature such as rivers and green spaces foster awareness, appreciation and sustainable action. As Fischer's research suggests, "urban green spaces enable a wide variety of people to experience nature on a regular basis, and in a variety of ways" (302) and that "direct contact with nature makes them value urban biodiversity even more" (302). Due to densification processes in cities, however, the "number of residents of urban areas with limited access to natural environments" is increasing (Tonne et al. 7).

Berlin has the image of being a green city and, as Kowarik notes, almost half (41 percent) of Berlins urban area is made up of forest, water bodies, parks and other green spaces (Kowarik 217). However, looking at the average supply of and access to green space (and blue space) in Berlin it quickly becomes clear that these blue-green infrastructures are not evenly distributed across the city (Kowarik 217). Especially dense inner-city areas, such as Berlin-Mitte, including the historical district, are affected by the lack of free space and green space to the extent that the need for it is far from being met (*Umweltatlas Berlin*). This leads to urban environmental injustice (an ecological and social problem) because not everybody can equally profit from urban nature. Furthermore, the access to public space and urban nature has gained even more importance in the light of the climate emergency and the lockdowns during the corona virus crisis.

All the more reason to find ways of making urban nature in the form of public liquid space accessible where it is needed most – in the center of Berlin. As Barthes writes, being in the city center means to participate in the 'abundance of reality' (Barthes "Stadtzentrum" 47). He elaborates on the city center being the 'meeting point of the whole city' and the 'place of encounter with the other' (Barthes "Semiologie" 207). Interpreting the other as the other-than-human, in this case water and urban nature in a broad sense, the *Flussbad Berlin* project fosters this encounter with the 'other', breaking with the dichotomy of urban and nature and interconnecting humans and urban life with the more-than-human world in the city center of Berlin.

Linking to Lefebvre and engaging with the 'right to the city', the right to public space, or as rephrased (amongst others) by Brantz the "right to green space" ("Grüne Fragen" 226), and recognizing that a "presumed exclusive human 'right to the city' and the biosphere is increasingly untenable" (Houston et al. 191) will help to refigure these "rights to the city and finding ethical, just and inclusive forms of urban planning", as Houston et al. (197) call for.

Furthermore, expanding the range of activities by adding urban-river-swimming in the Spree to the mix, opens up the center of Berlin for the everyday life also of people that otherwise would not join activities in the city center. Providing the opportunity of getting close to historical sites, deepening historical knowledge of Berlin and the Spree and laying the foundation for further engagement. This, following Barthes, would promote an actual ‘meeting point of the whole city’ (Barthes “Semiologie” 207) – may they be voyeurs, walkers or swimmers (just to name a few).

Backed by plans for a public river-bath the Spree River has been put on to the urban agenda in Berlin as a political issue and the project has received funding “from the German federal government and the Berlin state government as part of their National Urban Development Project” (Edler 74) making further project development possible and so transforming their vision into reality. The *Flussbad Berlin* project is on track to open up and welcome swimmers to a first swimming section of the river-bath as of 2025 – and in this way connecting to Berlin’s historical origins of river swimming.

### **The Spree Canal in Central Berlin**

Now, along the Spree Canal, architecture, urban design, and the structure of the canal itself, keeps a distance between the walker and the river. The local infrastructure and the uncertain water quality discourage the swimmer. Unlike the urban design not far away in parts of the government district, where flat steps lead directly down to the water’s edge, the Spree Canal’s architecture with its steep almost vertical side-walls prohibits any closer interaction with the urban water body down below. The walker thus walks voyeuristically along the canal.

The Spree Canal has long lost its original function and the reason for it being a highly engineered waterway. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Spree Canal had heavy cargo ship traffic until the “water traffic was transferred to the main Spree in 1894” (Edler 76) and, along with the railway networks increasing importance, the canal’s history as a busy transport and supply route ended. The Spree Canal “lost all further meaning as a traffic waterway in the mid 1930s” (76).

For the past 100 years, the Spree Canal has been trickling along almost unused. Now “the canal serves almost exclusively as a repository for flood water and wastewater” (Edler 76), which means that periods of heavy rainfall result in untreated overflows from the sewerage system into the otherwise clean river water of both the main Spree and the Spree Canal. These then become “periodically polluted” – and this “15 to 25 times per year” (76) even to the extent



of endangering the river's ecological balance as well as posing health risks upon contact with humans and animals.

### **Historical Use and River Pollution**

This highlights an unbalanced city-river relationship harming urban nature and emphasizes the importance and urgency of modernizing the sewerage and waterway infrastructure in Berlin. Needless to say, the problem of a contaminated Spree River is an old one. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Berlin became the capital city of the German Empire and a period of rapid urban and industrial growth began. Increasing interest was shown in the problem of river pollution in the light of the growing city and with it the resulting rise in the quantities of wastewater from industry and private households (Winkelhöfer et al. 117-118).

Back then the Spree was used as a waterway for the transport of coal, as a water supply for water-intensive industries and for sewage and wastewater disposal (Winkelhöfer et al. 119). Furthermore, the newly introduced water closet (WC) found its way into ever more Berlin households as of 1860 and added to the increasing amount of wastewater reaching the river (Tepasse 230).

The relevant industrial settlements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Berlin were mainly located upstream before the city center, which meant that any negative effects of river water use and resulting pollution would have consequences for Berlin's center further downstream (Winkelhöfer et al. 119). An investigation was initiated in the 1880s due to reoccurring deaths of large numbers of fish in the river after storms with heavy rainfall (132). Fishing license holders saw the root cause of the problem in rainwater overflows of the sewerage system spilling untreated sewage into the river (132).

This problem is still present today almost 150 years later – including its aftermath of fish die-back in the Spree river as a consequence of overflows (Edler 76). In 1889 an investigation commissioned and carried out by James Hobrecht shows that the Spree's outflow volume had already become very small by that time. This was due to hydraulic engineering measures taken with the aim of making the river navigable and, due to little rainfall in the relatively small catchment area of the Spree upstream from Berlin, a high evaporation rate and a lack of gradient in the lower Spree (Winkelhöfer et al. 131). Thus, the Spree river (to this day) flows very slowly, which is not a good precondition for getting rid of the pollution load in the river as a consequence of it receiving so much wastewater.

Today one knows that the lowering of groundwater in connection with urban constructions also contributed to this. Another investigation from 1924 on deaths of river fish in the Spree additionally names, next to outlets of sewage, also shipping and untreated industrial wastewater as causes of river pollution and death of fish (Winkelhöfer et al. 132).

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, river-baths along the Spree and the Spree Canal had to be closed, one of the most pressing reasons being pollution of the river water (Bräuer and Lehne 29). Until then, Berlin had numerous *Flussbadeanstalten* (river-bathing institutions) along and in the Spree. This was a phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where river-baths were a quick and cheap way of providing bathing facilities and promoting body hygiene for as many as possible in order to prevent illnesses especially in dense urban areas.

The wooden buildings of *Flussbadeanstalten* were often only seasonal structures that were dismantled in winter (Bräuer and Lehne 47). The seasonal nature of the infrastructure and the natural decay of wood are the main reasons why there are no traces left in Berlin of this river-bathing culture from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction of permanent structures, or *Volksbäder* (bathhouses) at the end of the 19th century with clean water and all year round use also contributed to river-baths becoming obsolete at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the last Berlin river-baths, closed in 1925, was on the Spree Canal and is planned to reopen on the exact site as the *Flussbad Berlin* in 2025 – after 100 years of closure.

### **Making the Spree Canal Swimmable again: *Flussbad Berlin* Project**

Tracing the current situation along the Spree Canal in central Berlin starting at the *Monbijou Brücke*, which connects the Museum Island to the urban land on either side of the river joint by the neo-baroque *Bodemuseum* from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, one is confronted with architectural and topographical conditions deeply rooted in a city-river-relation from the industrial past (Figure: 1).



Figure 1: *Monbijou Brücke*. Photo: Caitlin Kraemer, 2020

The river flows unreachable deep down below between two steep canal walls. The riverbanks have been heavily modified – the living river waters in a straight-jacket and disconnected from the life on land around in a most unnatural way.

To date there are, as yet, no official entry opportunities for swimmers along the Spree Canal. Besides being prohibited, not everybody can jump the rail or other architectural barriers to access the water and the water is not always deep enough to jump into from a height. The steep, almost vertical sidewalls prevent an easy entry to or exit out of the canal. Possibilities to rest or to hold on to while in the water are not provided.

The swimmer, like the walker, is in the position to “insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement” (Certeau 105). They challenge the ‘ensemble of possibilities’ organized by a ‘spatial order’ by overcoming, if possible, barriers within the ensemble, meaning interdictions such as rail bars, river banks and canal walls and ultimately transform space. The swimmer ‘actualizes’ and ‘multiplies the possibilities’ of the walker by making former industrial liquid space part of the urban experience again.

As the walker, the swimmer too “constitutes in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a *here* and a *there*” (Certeau 99) – and more strikingly – an *in* and an *out* (of water). The swimmer is *in*, the walker and the voyeur are *out*. However, one should not completely separate the figure of the city swimmer from the walker and vice versa. The practice of swimming is, of course, limited to (swimmable) water. Swimming is a spatially limited practice, yet a powerful

one – one that walkers are excluded from, unless they break free from the walker-voyeur perception, jump *in* and temporarily become swimmers themselves. When returning to being *out* of the water and to being a walker, this walker is nevertheless one with wet skin and hair and presumably in swimming gear, giving a hint to ‘other’ spatial practices within the city. So the city swimmer can be understood as an expansion of the walker.

Along the Spree Canal, until now, the swimmer is prohibited and is forced to be a walker. In addition to this, it is only possible to walk along the railed path on one side of the canal. Walking up-stream underneath the *S-Bahn* light railway bridge connecting *Friedrichstraße* and *Hackescher Markt*, one passes the *Pergamon Museum*, a monumental neoclassical three-wing complex erected in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Directly opposite is Chancellor Angela Merkel’s private city residence, an apartment building on the other side of the street. Next to the *Pergamon Museum* and in front of the *Neue Museum* is the newly built *James-Simon-Gallery*, a visitors center completed in 2018, with sleek white walls replacing yet not breaking with the old vertical canal side-walls.

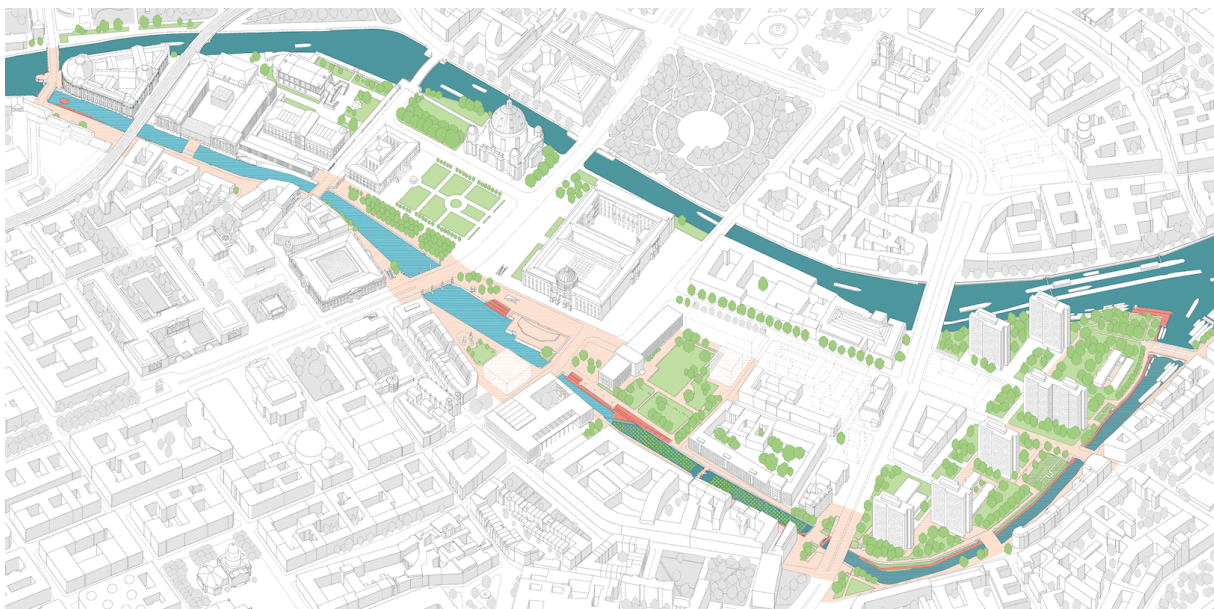


Figure 2: Map of the *Flussbad Berlin* project area, © Flussbad-Berlin e.V., realities:united, 2019

Going further one reaches the *Eiserne Brücke* and the canal widens a little (Figure: 2). At weekends one can either stroll along the many stalls of the *Berliner Kunstmarkt*, an art and design market next to the *German Historical Museum*, or cross over to the other side. Here the *Lustgarten*, first built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century as the garden of the *Berlin Castle* (now in parts



being reconstructed as the *Humboldt Forum*), opens up and provides a spacious area with trees and benches. Behind the trees is the *Alte Museum*, a classicistic building erected in 1830 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, an architect who had a huge influence on Berlin's architectural appearance. Not possible to overlook is of course the neo-renaissance and neo-baroque *Berlin Cathedral* with the modern *TV-Tower* behind it rising up from *Alexanderplatz*, former East Berlin's central square.

In order to continue walking along the canal, one has to cross a busy street with six lanes of traffic on the *Schlossbrücke* (most of the time with the added complication of construction works). On the other side of the street the *Humboldt Forum* is being built, as a partial reconstruction of the *Berlin Castle* first built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century and torn down in 1950 by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to be replaced with the *Palast der Republik* 'parliament' building in the 1970s, which was torn down in turn 40 years later. Today, the *Humboldt Forum* opening in late 2020 aims to be an expansion of the museum-landscape on the *Museum Island*.

After re-crossing to the other side of the canal again one passes *Schinkelplatz*, named after Karl Friedrich Schinkel with the reconstructed former (*Schinkelsche*) *Bauakademie* next to it. Crossing the *Schleusenbrücke* the canal narrows again. The following buildings, part of the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, mirror in the river water and take up the slight bend of the canal. Opposite on the other side of the canal there is the former GDR *Staatsratgebäude* with a fenced in public garden that fails to look public (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Spree Canal. Photo: Caitlin Kraemer, 2020

Here, so close to tourist attractions the river bank suddenly becomes quiet. The historic and representative buildings change to offices and residential buildings. One passes the *Jungfernbrücke*, the oldest bridge in Berlin, and the *Gertraudenbrücke*, before a dark and damp underpass, home to people in need of shelter, leads one underneath another large street crossing. Here the Spree Canal bends its way round the tip of the island. A park-like pathway goes along the canal, which now has boats floating on either side along the canal sidewalls. In reaching the *Inselbrücke* one arrives at the tip of the island, where the Spree Canal branches off the main Spree.

This more residential canal section between *Inselbrücke* and *Getraudenbrücke*, after the canal bends round the island in the South, is under planning to be “transformed into an ecological regeneration zone for flora and fauna” (Edler 89), where the river water flowing through the canal is filtered through a natural filter mainly consisting of plants, roots and gravel, simultaneously promoting biodiversity (Figure 4). Parts of the canal walls will be removed in order to enable shallow embankments and to reveal foundations of Berlin's medieval city wall currently hidden under ground. A wooden pathway at water level along the canal will enable walks close to the water along this section. (*Flussbad Berlin* 11).

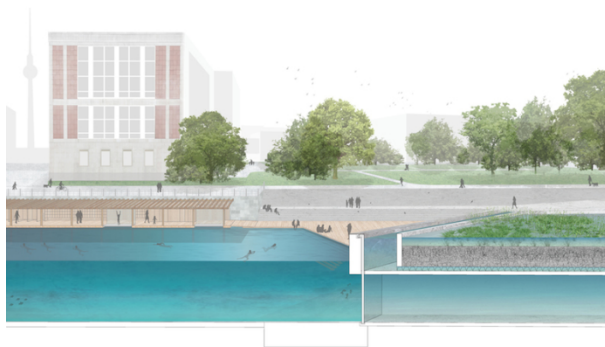


Figure 4: Plant filter and swimming area, © Flussbad Berlin e.V., realities:united, 2019



Figure 5: Plant filter and beginning of swimming area, © Flussbad Berlin e.V., realities:united, 2019

Further plans include a swimming area to be created, open to everybody and free of charge. This is foreseen in the straightened long section of the canal starting from *Gertraudenbrücke* and ending at *Monbijou Brücke* where the canal joins back into the Spree (Figure 5). Free access is one of the key aspects of the *Flussbad Berlin* project, which is to be a non-commercial space.

Matthew Gandy in an interview with Rosengren (2018) emphasizes free access as a “critical aspect in relation to leisure and water” keeping in mind the “speculative dynamics of waterside developments in post-industrial spaces” (Rosengren 68) as well as capitalist urbanization processes. The river-bath will not be a swimming pool, no entry fee will be charged, no supervision will be provided, the water body will just be made accessible to the public. This will be done by making sure the water is clean (should this not be the case then warning against swimming), and by facilitating a river-bath architecture that enables safe entry into and exit out of the water.

This planned infrastructure for realizing a swimmable Spree Canal is not very complex or expensive, nevertheless, it is a semi-large intervention that to some extent changes the historical site and is discussed controversially, as most things tend to be in the symbolically charged center of Berlin (e.g. *Humboldt Forum*). Compromises have been made so that the historical site is not modified too much, yet accessibility is made possible as well.

A handful of decentralized entry and exit points are planned along the canal. The river access point opposite the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, right behind the proposed water filter section, changing rooms, lockers, and toilets will be provided. At the *Humboldt Forum*, steps will lead down to the water. Additionally, a seasonally erected access point at *Monbijou Brücke* will enable more flexibility in summer, the swimming season in Berlin. (*Flussbad Berlin* 10).

First priority in enabling urban-river-swimming, next to the river-bath infrastructure, is to secure clean, environmentally friendly and swimmable water in the canal. Next to other safety issues, hygiene is the main reason that swimming in the Spree in Berlin's city center is strictly prohibited. Seeking to additionally prevent overflows from the wastewater system in the first place, the *Berliner Wasserwerke* (Berlin municipal water company) plans to install new retention basins in the near future to reduce the risk of overflow from sewage into the river. Urban-river-swimming and the *Flussbad Berlin* project thus functions as a link between investing in environmental protection, and supporting the natural environment as well as pursuing the modernization of the wastewater infrastructure, along with creating usable democratic, public space for the urban society.

Rachel Carson addresses in *Silent Spring* the problem of water pollution with the added difficulty of it mostly being invisible to the human eye: “For the most part this pollution is unseen and invisible, making its presence known when hundreds or thousands of fish die, but more often never detected at all” (41). Enabling swimming in the Spree means focusing on the

water quality of the Spree River and creates an at first sight human-centered utility needed for immediate and long-term action that at the same time fosters the river's ecological balance, the more-than-human urban life, and the "chains of life it [water] supports" (46).

Linking these two urban spaces and promoting encounter between them creates visibility and awareness for ecological conditions – the invisible, described by Carson, becomes visible and a reason for action. As Carson notes on our attitude towards plants: "If we see any immediate utility in a plant we foster it. If for any reason we find its presence undesirable or merely a matter of indifference, we may condemn it to destruction forthwith" (63). Thus, fostering encounter and through this creating visibility and utility are necessary means for the purpose of changing attitudes towards urban nature such as urban rivers.

Houston et al. equally highlight the (in)visibility of the non-human other: "Much of our focus on animals and plants in the city relies on bodily encounters (the visibility of wanted or unwanted nonhuman others)" (197). Multispecies relationships, as Houston et al. emphasize, also concern what one cannot see and even the non-human life one might not know of. Entanglements Houston et al. define as "a mode of ethical urban encounter" (197), which "extends ethics beyond the body and out into the shared multispecies world" (197, citing Smith and Wright). These 'spaces of encounter' enable the "coming together of human and nonhuman bodies and things" (Houston et al. 197) and the re-figuration of urban multispecies life, and for that matter, the right to the city.

### **Poetics and Politics of Swimming in the City**

The poetics and politics of swimming in the city are far reaching. On the one hand, the sensual and aesthetical experience of swimming in river water, escaping the "'geometrical' or geographical' space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical construction" and perceiving the city while immersed in urban liquid space and its history – a practice of space referring to a "specific form of operations ('ways of operating'), to 'another spatiality' (an anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space)" (Certeau 93). On the other hand, acting out space, appropriating urban water bodies and public space, articulating a 'right to the city' as well as creating visibility. This has the effect of simultaneously raising awareness for 'forgotten' spaces and urban nature, its ecological condition, and most importantly mobilizing action towards ecologically balanced and accessible public space and spaces of encounter.



For as Barchetta notes “the sensual experience (...) shifts the baselines and determines the extent of the change by suspending one’s anthropocentric judgment; in doing so it occasions rethinking of anthropogenic interventions in urban environments and begins to track our attentiveness and intimacy with places” (174). She encourages “ways of walking politically, and not voyeuristically” (176), in order to prevent and combat “forms of ‘botanical tourism’ (Myers 2015) and Edenic spectacle, which might weaken the possibilities of redefining securitarian and normative politics of nature and public space” (Barchetta 176, quoting Myers 2015). In this context, ‘swimming politically’ also has equal importance.

Beaumont mentions the ‘diagnostic value’ of the pedestrian experience and the walker as an ‘indicator species’ (15-16). What do the practice of urban-river-swimming and the figure of the city swimmer tell us about a city-river and a river-city such as the Spree and Berlin? A city swimmer implies a clean and ecologically balanced river and gives reason for this condition to be achieved and maintained, creating the basis for co-habiting multispecies in urban areas. The emergence of the city swimmer reveals the condition of urban life in a river-city. The figure of the city swimmer can be described as a post-industrial privileged urban figure, living in a city society that engages with its citizens and with the urban natural environment. Having the time and leisure to aesthetically and politically engage with the urban surrounding, the city swimmer can detect its many possibilities including potential for expansion and spatial re-(con)figuration.

The city swimmer goes ‘beyond the limits’ and makes urban blue space ‘exist as well as emerge’ as an accessible public space in the city center (Certeau 98). With the spatializing act of swimming the city swimmer transforms and actualizes the canal, the ‘forgotten’, ‘industrial’ space, into a lived, post-industrial and aesthetical urban nature experience, “observing through a sensing, rather than a mastering” (Barchetta 175) and opening the door to a new form of mobility in urban settings: A mobility in liquid space instead of on solid ground. The body is surrounded by water instead of air and notices the slight resistance of water or moves with the current, feels the liquid texture of space and shapes space with full-bodily action. This blending of multiply sensory impressions enables an extraordinary and memorable bodily experience of, and connection with, oneself, nature, the architectural surroundings, and the world beyond.

The practice of urban-river-swimming and the city swimmer fulfill the ‘triple enunciation function’ in being a “process of appropriation of the topographical system” (Certeau 97), in being “a spatial acting out of the place” (98) in water that only the swimmer can do, and with creating an *in* and an *out*, which “implies relations among differentiated positions, this is, among

pragmatic ‘contracts’ in the form of movements” (98). So urban-river-swimming can be defined “as a space of enunciation” (98). Making the urban river re-emerge and become part of everyday life as a space of bodily experience within the city. Urban-river-swimming articulates the urban, as Barthes notes, while he refers to inhabiting, walking and perceiving space, all these urban practices speak to the city as the city does as well (“Semiologie” 202).

Once a year in the summer, if in the previous days and weeks there has not been any heavy rainfall and the water quality is considered acceptable, the *Flussbad e.V.* organizes the popular *Flussbad Pokal*, a swimming contest in the Spree Canal. This event gives Berliners and other interested people a taste of what appropriating space by ‘swimming in the city’ is like. And, by 2025, 100 years after the last *Flussbadeanstalt* in the Spree Canal was closed, the aim is to be able to swim in the Spree again – every day. Letting urban water, this “element that the urbanistic project excluded” (Certeau 95) from everyday life, re-emerge and become part of the bodily experience in the city.

The project *Flussbad Berlin* “encourages use of public space that focuses heavily on the body, physical movement and nature” (Edler 78). The “sensual perception such as seeing, smelling the water, crossing the frozen river on foot in winter” (Knoll et al. 16) and swimming in the river, touching and feeling the water, being part of the water body, enables the swimmer to ‘spatialize’ it and to dedicate a value to the space – socially, culturally, aesthetically and ecologically. ‘Swimming in the city’ creates, transforms and appropriates space and enables a post-industrial, long overdue ‘re-writing’ of the urban experience – with the potential of shaping accessible, democratic, inclusive, more environmentally and socially just cities which see, know and take care of their urban natures.

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