

# The architecture of pleasure

*The bath house at Williamstrip, Gloucestershire*

Can you resist the urge to strip off and jump in? Gavin Stamp delights in a Classical bath house that transcends the distinction between tradition and Modernism

Photographs by Will Pryce

IN 1775, Charles Cameron published his illustrated study of *The Baths of the Romans*, noble structures in ruins which he, and his contemporaries, thought very important, 'when we consider what various uses of pleasure, as well as convenience, the luxury of the times had appropriated the Baths under the Roman Emperors. Their buildings are deservedly reckoned amongst the most remarkable of their works'. Thanks to this book, Cameron was invited to Russia by Catherine the Great to be the Empress's architect and, at her palace at Tsarskoye Selo, he built a bath house in the manner of the Romans that is one of his finest creations.

Baths, as a building type, have not flourished in all civilisations; medieval Britain, for instance, does not seem to have been very keen on swimming or washing (although there was a royal bathroom in the Palace of Westminster from the late 13th century). But, inspired by the Romans, Georgian England discovered the pleasures of the spa in Bath and elsewhere, and the 19th century saw the construction of public baths and washhouses as well as swimming pools in some of the grander country

houses and London clubs. And then there were the Turkish baths.

Today, according to Dr Ian Gordon and Simon Inglis, the authors of *Great Lengths: The historic indoor swimming pools of Britain*, there are, in addition to the many municipal facilities, more than 1,600 private swimming pools in Britain—in hotels, health clubs, corporate headquarters and government buildings. But none, they think, can compare with the pool in the basement of the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) in Pall Mall, that Francophile palace that opened in 1911. With marble on the walls and colourful mosaic-clad columns surrounding the water, it was clearly the intention of the architects, Mewès & Davis, to evoke ancient Rome—swimming in it has been described as 'like stepping into a painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema'.

That celebrated pool has, however, been trumped by a private bath house of astonishing luxurious splendour, recently completed at a country house in Gloucestershire. A free-standing covered swimming pool has been built at Williamstrip, a house by Soane, which the architect, Craig Hamilton, has also adapted and enlarged with a clever and



Fig 2: The interior of the bath house, looking towards the apse

sympathetic extension. The new bath house, superbly built in Bath and Portland stone, has also been designed in a style that might loosely be described as neo-Classical. It is entered at one end, through an Ionic portico *in antis* (Fig 1).

And here is the first of the engaging subtleties that raise this building above the dull pedantry that distinguishes so many modern Classical buildings. The two columns are of the unusual Ionic order that C. R. Cockerell discovered at Bassae, and the architect has enlarged their unusual volutes to make them seem comical, almost owl-like. As he explains: 'The building is temple-like, but the columns help communicate that it is ultimately devoted to pleasure rather than religion.'

And behind the columns, also to communicate the building's function, is a tripartite bas-relief frieze by Hamilton's regular collaborator, the Scottish neo-Classical sculptor Alexander Stoddart. This shows the transformation of the Greek gods from the Old Dynasty to the New with, in the centre, Aphrodite, who arose from the sea.

From here, the central doorway leads to a toplit vestibule (Fig 3) with a rich decorative frieze below the coffered ceiling. Below this, the walls are yellow above a deep dado of dark Kilkenny marble. Black columnar lights rise from the black-and-white marble floor. But even the richness of this space does not quite prepare the visitor for the wonderful surprise of the first sight of the sheer sybaritic delight that lies beyond.

The swimming pool (Fig 2) stretches away between walls of Pompeiian red above

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and below black marble—framed in thin bands of white stone—and the vista is terminated by the glitter of a gilded semi-dome.

Ancient Rome and Pompeii are evoked, but as seen by later, romantic generations—Alma Tadema again, perhaps, or another (actually rather bad) painter, Franz von Stuck, who built a studio home in Munich, the Villa Stuck, in a sort of Antique-Jugendstil style. John Betjeman wrote that a well-designed church should make you drop to your knees. This pool makes you long to strip off and jump in.

The design of the pool is, in fact, very functional. At the RAC, the columns rather get in the way. Here, there is a generous poolside area and the side walls largely consist of rectangular piers. Between these are French doors so that, in the summer months, when they may all be open, the swimmer can move to the outside paved area, which runs behind a long Doric colonnade (Fig 4)—of the Delian order, with fluting only at the base and below the capital—and thence into the garden.

Everywhere, there is an exquisite and impressive attention to detail. Elegant bronze lamps in the Antique manner are fixed to the piers; further light comes from bowls on top of more freestanding columns, but this time of a white, veined marble. And the pool itself, instead of being lined with the usual swimming-bath turquoise, has pattern given by smaller tiles of darker hue. ➤



Fig 1: The entrance, with Alexander Stoddart's frieze running behind Ionic columns



Fig 3: The vestibule between the entrance and the pool, with its decorative frieze and magnificent mahogany doors with marble panels

Beyond, there is the 'spa', with its apsidal end of a lighter-coloured marble, articulated with niches, covered by that gilded semi-dome glimpsed from the entrance. Here, a semi-circular Jacuzzi is surrounded by a Doric order in black marble, which is half buried in the wall in the manner of Michelangelo. And either side, tucked away behind vestibules with large Classical marble basins, are a sauna and a steam room.

As with the original Roman baths, several different functions are combined in a series of spaces, large and small. Splendid as is the evocation of Ancient Rome at Tsarskoye Selo, the Williamstrip bath house, equipped as it is with the best modern plumbing and services (there is a kitchen as well), is a creation that would surely have incited the envy of the Tsarina.

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conventional, dull New Georgian mansions—dare not deviate from Palladian precedents. Mr Hamilton's terms of reference, his sources of inspiration, are much wider: not just Palladio, but Michelangelo, Schinkel, Cockerell, Soane and—one of his exotic heroes—Bindesbøll, the architect of the glorious, colourful Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen.

It is also significant that he was properly trained as a 'traditional' architect, at the University of Natal at Durban, South Africa, where the Orders and all that were still seriously taught. And he can draw, most beautifully.

In this bath house, the Classical language is not just used as a source of rich, allusive decoration. It is fully understood as a governing principle with which to handle the volumes, as well as the visible literate expression of the orders. The external composition is one of rectilinear masses, plus a curved apse, and the level of the entablature of the Ionic entrance portico is also that of the flanking Doric colonnades.

In between, it disappears, its continuation indicated only by string courses, but it nevertheless defines the height of smaller recessed rectangular blocks that are placed at the corners of the building. Inside, similarly, the capital height of the Doric order, expressed only in the apsidal 'chancel' is continued around the walls and piers by the line of white stone while the implied cornice line of white leaps up over the rectangular openings.

Unlike some other modern Classicists, Mr Hamilton's architecture does not depend

on reproducing Classical detail and ornament. He thinks in three dimensions and is also able to abstract, to simplify, to imply the presence of a governing order in austere compositions—something that is to be found in buildings by Schinkel or, another hero, 'Greek' Thomson, or, for that matter, Lutyens.

Mr Hamilton is, in fact, as Raymond Erith said of Soane, a 'progressive Classicist'. For him, the Classical tradition did not end with Palladio, or Kent, or Adam, but continued to develop right into the 20th century, despite the advent of Modernism. And at Williamstrip, the consequences of this intelligent broad-mindedness are particularly evident in the basement of the building.

The brief was for a gymnasium as well as a swimming pool and spa, but as the planning authorities did not want the building, in open parkland close to the main house, to be too big, this was placed underneath, at a lower level. The gym, which is as carefully and lovingly detailed as the spaces above



Fig 4: The garden elevation of the bath house, with its long Delian Doric colonnade

(bronze taps in the shape of swans' heads are a particular delight), is accessed both by an internal staircase and by external staircases.

The latter descend around the walls of an open semicircular sunken court. And, in the centre of the curved wall, facing the windows of the gym, flanked by marble columns *with no capitals*, is a fountain (Fig 5). Water trickles from a lion's head into a fine marble bowl on a pedestal, on which is carved the single word 'Semper'.

This feature is inspired by a similar fountain in Prague Castle, designed by Jozef Plecnik, the greatest and most inventive of all modern Classicists. And it is a private architectural joke, once removed, for 'Semper' could either be the Latin for 'always' or a tribute to the 19th-century German architect and theorist, Gottfried Semper, whose writings about the metamorphosis of architectural forms had a profound influence on the Slovenian.

The Classical language need not be rigid and unchanging, in other words, but it can and must evolve. Mr Hamilton is therefore interested in those unfashionable but heroic architects who maintained the Classical tradition in the last century in response to changed conditions, and who met the challenge of Modernism with intelligence and integrity. There was the great Lutyens, of course, and Edwardians such as J. J. Joass, as well as Charles Holden, who demonstrated a genius for utilitarian abstraction in his London Underground stations.

Other heroes include Hack Kampmann, architect of the vast and superb police headquarters in Copenhagen (which recently starred in the television series *The Killing*), and in Marcello Piacentini (the source of the most unusual balustrade detail around the semicircular sunken court), whose brilliance is still not generally recognised because of his patronage by Mussolini.

There is a further resonance, surely not intended by the architect, which may be significant. The bath house, with its long colonnades, rectilinear massing and horizontality, is reminiscent of the unexecuted design of 1912 by Mies van der Rohe for the Kröller-Müller house in the Netherlands. Nor should this be surprising, for Mies—like other pioneering Modernists—had a Classical training and, before he developed his aesthetic of glass and steel, had worked for Peter Behrens, who was deeply influenced by Schinkel.

The gulf between traditionalism and Modernism is not as wide as is often supposed in the tiresomely polarised debate about style. And the Williamstrip bath house succeeds triumphantly in combining an evocation of Pompeii with modern facilities and, through rich materials and colour, expresses the supreme importance of pleasure in architecture.



Fig 5: The fountain, inspired by one by Plecnik in Prague Castle, in the sunken courtyard opposite the gymnasium