

words cathryn drake

pictures arabella schwarzkopf

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTIMACY

Entering the tranquil eighteenth-century Cagaloglu baths from the hot streets of Istanbul I feel the anxiety of the novice: I am ignorant of the procedures and etiquette of the *hammam* as well as the language, and I am not accustomed to being naked in front of strangers. The mustachioed man at the ticket counter gives me a *pestamal*, a colorful checked cloth, and directs me toward a dark wood cubicle, one of many that line the walls surrounding the entrance hall's marble fountain. Wrapped in the towel, I am then led to a door through which a womblike chamber materializes like a dream. The cavernous cruciform sanctuary of the bathhouse is warm, damp, and dark. Light shafts stream down from the perforated dome, intersecting with the steam and illuminating the surface of the central





polygonal marble platform, which resembles a sacrificial altar, encircled by columns, arched doorways, and smaller domes. From the gestures of the woman who has left me there I gather that I am to wash at one of the basins with brass faucets that punctuate the curved marble walls at regular intervals. Completely alone and overwhelmed by the empty magnificence of the space, I project operatic tones from the back of my throat that reverberate louder and louder off the dome above. After what seems like an eternity, a plump woman clothed only in panties walks in the door with a look of amusement on her face. Directing me to lie face down on the heated *gobek tasi* ("navel stone"), she then kneads my body with soapy water and pulls every limb. Both time and my form seem to expand and dissolve into the smooth marble. Finally she pulls my face smack between her pendulous breasts to rub down my back. I give myself up entirely to this matronly stranger as she leads me to the spigot at the wall, scours my skin with a rough mitt, scrubs my scalp vigorously, and then wakes me out of my stupor with buckets of cold water. In the dressing room when I find it impossible to run a comb through my hair, a couple of Turkish women detangle it with some moisturizing cream. I am touched by this sisterly attention and walk out in a state of utter limpness coupled with euphoria.

Now that we no longer need a public place to cleanse ourselves, the role of the public bath has been greatly diminished, much to the detriment of modern society. Nevertheless, my visits to baths in the Middle East and Central Europe evoked the communal intimacy, sensuousness, timelessness, and relaxation that have always been characteristic to the public bathing experience. The places I visited represent a range of functions and architectural styles rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition.

In ancient Greece the public bath was located near the *palestra* (courtyard for sports activity) and *exedra* (place for philosophical discourse), and had the lofty objective of keeping the mind and body in harmony. As at the Roman baths, everyone from plebian to emperor mingled, and class distinctions disappeared along with garments. The height of bathhouse culture came to fruition in ancient Rome. There a visit to the bath was a central element of daily urban life, as illustrated in the following tomb epitaph: "The baths, the wines and Venus corrupt our bodies; but the baths, the wines and Venus are life." According to Agrippa's census, in 33 BC there were 170 public baths in Rome; by the fourth century there were about 1,000. Often elaborately decorated with sculptures, mosaics, and frescoes, they served the same functions as our gymnasium, bathroom, barbershop, massage parlor, and social club. The grander complexes, sometimes the size of small cities, included promenades and gardens, libraries and reading rooms. There were food sellers, depilators to pluck armpit hair, masseurs to oil and pummel, and thieves (the wealthy brought slaves to watch their possessions). For a minimal admission fee even the poor could spend their leisure time away from the squalor of daily routine. It became a way of life for the Romans, who generally led a very social existence. People not only washed and exercised there but also were exposed to art and culture, made business and political contacts, and



conducted their social affairs. Even the emperors Augustus and Vespasian spent their afternoons there playing ball. The horns blew at about noon to signal the opening of the baths, and a racket of myriad noises emanated from them until dusk.

The Arabs adopted the structure and rituals of the Roman *thermae* after discovering them in the seventh-century conquests of Byzantium. Unlike the Roman baths, the Islamic *hammam* (*hamma* means "to heat") is a place of retreat for spiritual as much as physical purification, as Muslims must cleanse themselves before attending prayers. Muhammad also believed that followers of the faith should multiply and that the heat enhanced fertility. Because of its religious significance the *hammam* is often annexed to the mosque. The object here is meditation and repose rather than physical and intellectual development. Thus it retained the *tepidarium* (warm area) and *caldarium* (hot area) but dispensed with the bracing *frigidarium*. But it also serves an important social function; for example, it is the only place outside the home where women may take off their veils and catch up on gossip.

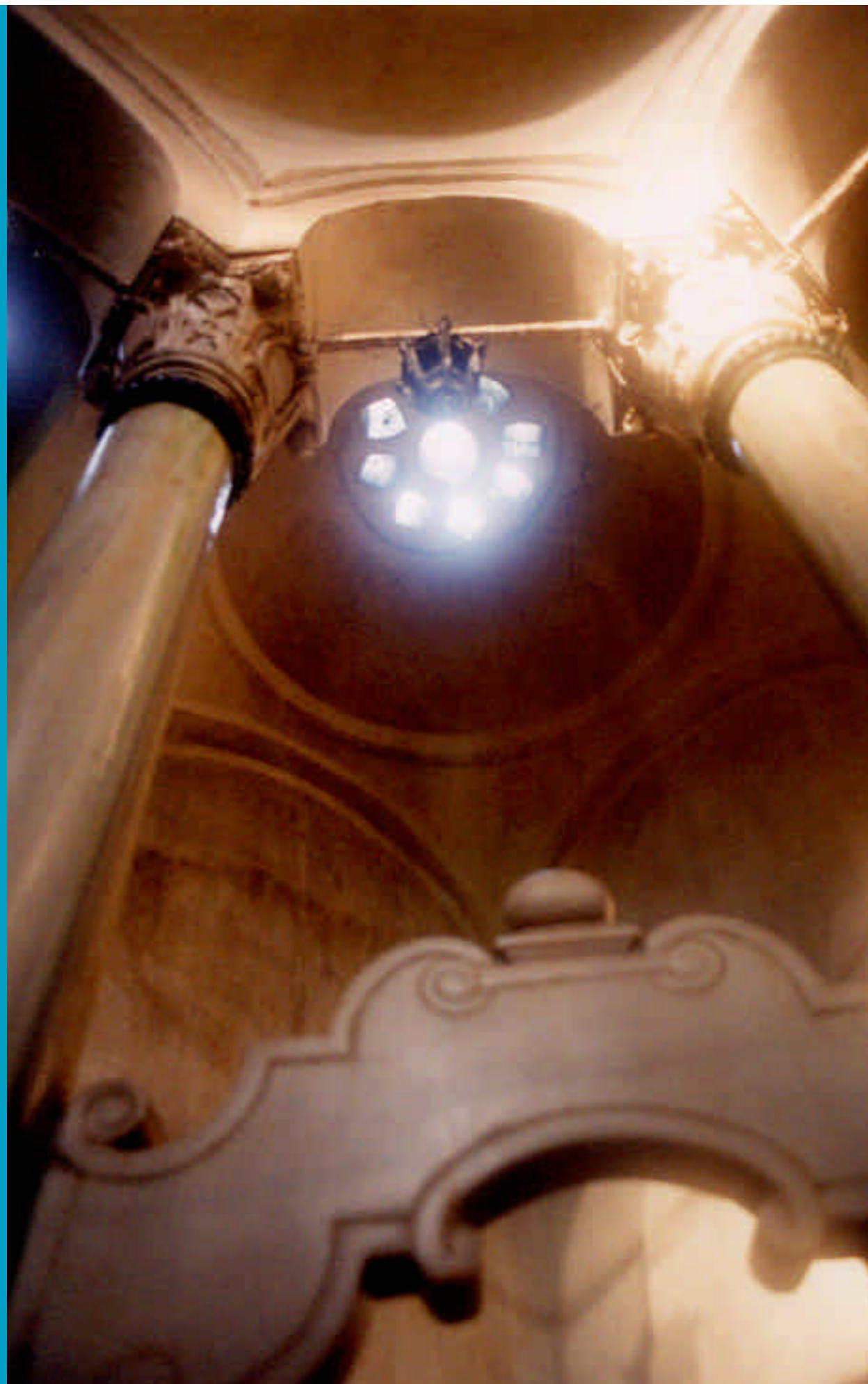
While visiting the Moroccan spa town Mouley Yacoub, I meet four of twelve siblings of the Rahmatallah family, who have come for a weeklong holiday. Driss Rahmatallah describes the people who frequent his family's bathhouse in the town of Sidi Slimane, near Rabat: "All sorts of people come to the *hammam*; the most noticeable category is aged about 40 to 50. They are the most talkative people. When they finish their bath, they sit in the dressing room with their towels on their backs. The things they discuss range from personal to political to metaphysical. For example, we lacked rain last agricultural season. Everyone discussed this curse, as they call it. They say the lack of rain is due to decadence in our society and remoteness from religion. The women spend even more time rubbing their skin and talking – and even fighting when the *hammam* is crowded (e.g., they are impatient when getting water out of the *barma*). Some of them spend three to four hours in the *hammam*."

Public-bath functions, culture, and mores changed as they moved from West to East and back again, as well as over time from antiquity to modernity. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the Ottomans introduced the *hammam* to the Balkans and Hungary, along with coffee and crescent-shaped pastries. In this crossroads of East and West the various baths, pools, and spas reflect a coming together of traditions and cultures.

In Budapest, where there are natural thermal springs, central hot pools replace the platforms and the cold plunge pool has been revived. The exterior of the city's oldest bathhouse, the sixteenth-century Király, embodies an East-West hybrid: a brick structure with mosquelike cupolas abuts a green neoclassical building with columns embedded on the facade. My teenage Hungarian translator, Natasha Stork, is excited because she has never been to a real bathhouse. After we buy tickets at the window inside the door, we hand them to a pimply young man at a small wooden table inside and then walk up some winding stairs. In the changing area an attendant secures our lockers and marks our entry times







on them in chalk. Downstairs we emerge in a blue-and-white tiled area with archways and a small 90°F pool; to the left there is a sauna and to the right a shower room. A woman climbing up from the pool and seeing the puzzled look on our faces instructs us as to the routine. From there we enter the central rotunda, where a sign tells us the large pool is 97°F and recommends an immersion of 20 minutes. Lumbent light shafts illuminate a middle-aged woman's fleshy underwater body, transforming it into an old master painting. A young Japanese woman sits serenely in the water reading a book. Our voices bounce softly off the dome. The muted sounds of water and dimness subdue us as the warmth relaxes our bodies. The star-shaped holes in the domed ceiling have black tail-like streaks, like shooting stars. Natasha and I try the small 104°F pool to one side; although five minutes is recommended, we jump out feeling like stewed meat after less than one. I then enter a tiny domed chamber dense with suffocating steam, where my skin and the inside of my nostrils burn painfully. After I burst out of the room gasping, I stick a toe in the ice-cold pool just outside, only to retract it quickly and return to the central pool for relief.

I approach my "wet" massage with trepidation: in a small room a stocky matron in an apron beckons me to a metal table as she holds a hose ominously in her other hand. I give her a tip right away, hoping that she'll go easy on me. As she kneads my shoulders she makes a face. I say, "Bad?" and she nods. Natasha then has the first massage experience of her life. Afterward in the shower, my well-developed young companion tells me the masseuse admired her body and asked if she could see her again. Today the Turkish baths in Budapest have a largely gay clientele. A friend had warned me that the water at nearby Râc, a neoclassical villa surrounding a domed bath, would probably be filthy with semen because it is a notorious gay trysting place. We are then given large sheets to dry with and walk upstairs to the resting room, which has cots with plaid blankets lined up against a peeling wall and women partaking in "dry" massages.

As the social and economic structures of society have transformed, the morals and functions of the bathhouse have mutated. In ancient Rome there were changes in bathhouse morality between regimes; mixed bathing was allowed by some emperors and not by others. However, staring was always prohibited, and one was expected to act as if fully clothed or was expelled. As Rome declined, the baths degenerated likewise into places of debauchery. The recently uncovered two-story Terme Suburbane in Pompeii has unisex changing rooms decorated with erotic frescoes including orgies and the only known depiction of a lesbian

encounter from Roman antiquity. The permissiveness of nudity and mixed bathing, as well as the occurrence of misbehavior, also fluctuated over the centuries according to the rise and fall of religious fervor. In the third century Emperor Caracalla decided to leave the bathhouses open all night and introduced mixed bathing, which led to widespread sexual misconduct that successive laws failed to control. The early Christians called them "cathedrals of flesh," and at the end of the fourth century St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, issued a condemnation of public baths. Gradually, by the end of the fifth century, their use was abandoned.

Nude communal bathing resurfaced in the eleventh century, when the importance of hygiene was stressed and a growing awareness of selfhood promoted an interest in the body, which was no longer considered a Christian taboo. But in Europe the atmosphere rapidly became one of bawdiness and promiscuity, and by the mid-sixteenth century modesty required men to wear drawers and women a long tunic; unclothed bathers were fined or had their clothes confiscated. Finally the onset of the plague and spread of syphilis as well as increasingly licentious behavior caused the suspension of public bathing for two centuries. People started washing in private and not very thoroughly, compensating with makeup and perfumes. The bathhouse was mostly for amatory encounters, as espoused by Casanova. In the seventeenth century open-air bathing became popular, and people started swimming in rivers. With the Enlightenment came a stronger interest in the natural and hygiene. Then in 1785 the first swimming pool was built in Paris. A modern version of the Roman *frigidarium*, the pool became a fixture of bourgeois social life. Health and exercise were valued, and cold water was favored for its invigorating qualities.



In modern-day Budapest there remain examples of the hydrotherapy spas that

were fashionable in nineteenth-century Europe. After eating pastries at Bathányi Square, Natasha and I take the tram farther up the bank of the Danube to the Gellert Hotel. At the back is what Natasha calls "the only Hungarian sea," a gigantic outdoor wave pool. Inside the dressing room a jovial man gives us blue shower caps and modesty aprons. From there we get lost in an underground tunnel; we look up and see a porthole through which a stomach and then a leg float by. We finally arrive in the indoor pool, an exquisite Art Nouveau vision: decoratively carved columns, an amber glass roof, water-spouting lion heads, iron-work balconies, and a bronze sprite preparing to dive in at one end. It is crowded with blue-capped swimmers, so we head to the thermal baths, where we can take off our suits. The thermal area has a pool on each side, 97°F and 100°F. Blue-and-green mosaics on the ceiling reflect those at bottom of the



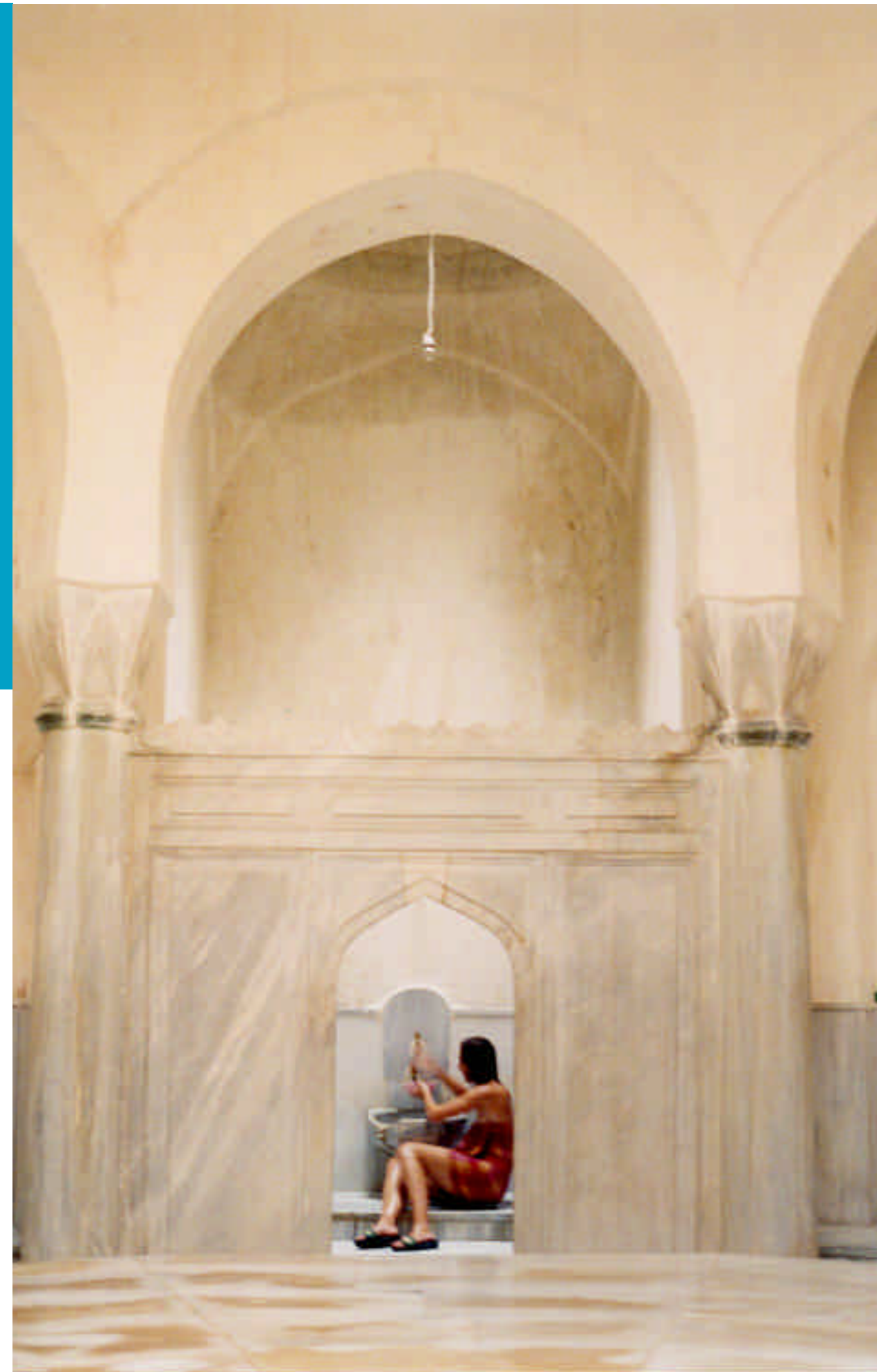


pools; the walls are covered in panels of white and terracotta marble. An enormous woman with huge rolls of fat stands under the shower endlessly; some young Japanese women sit in a dry sauna to one side. The clientele at Gellert is made up largely of tourists, expats, and hustlers. A steel-pipe bidet reminiscent of an instrument of torture looks like an upside-down shower; we turn it on and then run away shrieking as it spurts out uncontrollably. Full-bodied pensioners move languidly about the pools: some paddle slowly around; others sit with their backs to waterspouts for a massage. I observe the flawed features of their aged bodies with a detached intimacy; Natasha's firm, youthful body looks strangely obscene. My own seems a mere vessel here. After soaking in the pools we are briskly and perfunctorily pounded side by side on metal tables while our uniformed tormentors chat nonchalantly with one another.

The Beaux Arts lobby of the Széchenyi Fürdő, one of the largest health spas in Europe, has crystal chandeliers and murals of water nymphs. In the long ticket line, an elderly woman shows me the card that prescribes her arthritis treatments. In Budapest's Városliget Park, the complex provides treatments for rheumatism, polio, gout and various stomach, intestinal, nervous, gynecological, and respiratory diseases with medicinal water supplied from a 158°F Artesian well. Its giant outdoor pool courtyard is like a summer resort: well-fed men in baseball caps and umbrella

hats play chess on floating boards, children splash about and lovers make out, swimmers in plastic bathing caps do leisurely laps in the large center pool. In a pool at the far end I am propelled around a tiled spiral by timed water jets with human flotsam helplessly knocking against me as they squeal past. A carnival atmosphere pervades the scene among the ornate ochre buildings and white spurting statues of Neptune and Venus, a kitsch version of the sumptuous Roman bath. Afterward I retreat to the indoor thermal baths, which have a crusty charm, with walls spotted in mildew and green-tinged pool water. White institutional tiles and metal hanging lights, a large clock suspended by wires, and red cabana doors lining the wall contrast the earth-colored urns and columns topped by Ionic capitals surrounding the pool. I can't relax. A child paddles about the warm pool in an inflatable ring, and the humidity makes my bathing suit cling uncomfortably to my skin. Corpulent men in skimpy suits and gold jewelry perform calisthenics in profile against the white walls. As I approach the sauna I see through the steam that it is packed with flushed, sweaty men, the foremost being a large stern ginger-bearded fellow resting his arms atop his big belly as if on guard.

Farther west in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna was a center of hydrotherapy in the nineteenth century. From its white exterior the Stadt Amalienbad looks like a hospital, except for the scantily clad statues of bathers above the





entrance. Built in 1926, the recently restored city bath is decorated with geometric-patterned tile work and skylights in blues, greens, yellow, and maroon. The soaring pool hall has two upper levels lined with wooden doors and a magnificent curved glass roof with square panes that opens up. On the weekday afternoon I visit there are few people, and I am not sure whether to wear a bathing costume. As I start to undress in the stark locker room I look up and see a completely nude elderly man walk by in the aisle. Thinking I must be in the wrong place, I find a white-clad attendant near the desk and use sign language to inquire whether men and women are to be naked together here. Giving me a pained look as if to say that she sympathizes, she nods her

hirsute man floating in the middle of it with outstretched arms. Later, during my obligatory massage I try to act casual in spite of the fact that I am lying on a gurney completely nude with a cheerful mustached Austrian named Leopold manipulating my body. He, however, seems completely at ease and tells me that his next client will be attended to in full view of the clientele on the women's sunroof. As I leave the locker room, two of my new male buddies, towels around their waists and beer mugs in hand, lament that I am leaving so soon.

In the West in the early nineteenth century public baths closed as private bathrooms were installed and sea bathing became increasingly popular. As washing evolved into a private function bathhouses were associated only with illicit pleasure or were dedicated to providing facilities for the poor. An example of the former, Vienna's Kaiserbründl has a dignified green door inscribed with its name in gold lettering. But its interior doesn't conceal its current purpose as a temple to sexual hedonism. Built in 1870 in the Moorish style with hand-painted tiles and fed by an arm of the Wien River, it was for a time the city's only central bath. Now its labyrinthine network of elaborately decorated chambers with brightly painted arched doorways is reserved exclusively for gay men. There are posters of beautiful nude men, a bar decorated with tropical-themed murals, and a room with black lacquered booths that have benches and waist-high "glory holes" through which one's neighbor can be accessed. The idea of showers for the masses was started in Germany in the 1870s; by 1900 public showers were a working-class institution. In New York, Simon Baruch led a major crusade for cleanliness, and in 1849 the large-scale People's Bathing and Washing Establishment opened its doors with the following inscribed over its entrance: "Cleanliness Next to Godliness." It comprised a washhouse, swimming pool, and baths for men and women; time in the water was restricted to 20 minutes.

Over the centuries the bath has been reduced from a sanctuary dedicated to sensual and social pleasure to a rudimentary water closet. Even in Muslim countries, where the *hammam* is an essential part of religious practice, it is falling victim to modernization. Historically the public bath was not just a place to cleanse oneself, it was a culture and a state of mind. Its gradual disappearance reflects not only our affluence and the value we place on privacy but modern society's atomization, sexualization of the body, and lack of public communal spirit. Modern architecture emphasizes motion and getting from one place to another efficiently. Public spaces are places to move through, not to rest and meditate in. And the societal architecture of intimacy has changed. As a result, we are missing the spiritual and emotional benefits of communal relaxation. But most of all, we have lost the comfort of strangers.

head in affirmation. As I descend into the sauna area quite aware of being in the buff among the opposite gender, I observe two men chatting at a footbath. Once I settle in to the "biosauna," a tiny room with tiered wooden benches and alternating colored "energy" lights, I begin to sense the conviviality of the assembled group, all senior citizens. One of the women tactfully informs me that I must sit on my towel. Before long I feel entirely comfortable, forgetting that everyone is strange and unclothed, and we are all conversing about the recent tragic demolition of Dianabad, the last historic Turkish bath in Vienna. I start feeling that there is something wonderfully therapeutic about being naked with strangers. I walk by a corner room dominated by an enormous hot tub, and keep walking when I see the large

