



MELBOURNE CITY BATHS

On a cool Spring day, I'm standing at the side of the pool scanning the water and I get a feeling of contentment that I can't remember having in any of my many former jobs.

I watch the lap swimmers powering down the lanes, the beginners wallowing and splashing and the children squealing with happiness as the sun, pouring through the skylights high above, catches the droplets and makes the air sparkle. If the cream tiled walls were sentient and could recall the 115 years since this building first opened to the public, I think they would have wonderful stories to tell.

The grand old Edwardian, Melbourne City Baths, on the corner of Swanston and Victoria Streets houses two swimming pools, a gym and a number of training studios as well as a warren of now disused small rooms that used to provide baths for residents and visitors to the city. There is also a Mikvah bath which is still used for Jewish ritual purification ceremonies. I have been told it is the oldest Mikvah in Australia and keep meaning to verify this.

Patronage at the baths is as various as the population of Melbourne itself. It ranges from the lunchtime rush of city office workers coming for a workout or swim, to tourists from local hotels having a relaxing spa or sauna, to folk registered as homeless supported by city charities to take a shower.

The solid old walls would be long familiar with disadvantaged people needing a wash. The original baths were built in 1860 so men who were flocking to Melbourne to try their luck on the goldfields, didn't need to bathe in the polluted Yarra and risk death from typhoid fever. When the new red and cream brick building was opened in 1904 swimming was becoming more fashionable but private baths were still the most important service offered.

So here I am now, watching the excited children of city workers, academics and students, (mostly from India, China or South East Asia), learn how to swim. I look up to the high windows on the next floor beside the pool letting in more sun from the outdoor training deck and see the bobbing heads of ponytailed gym girls panting with strain as they follow the insistent rhythm of a fitness class.

There are just as many women working out and swimming here as men. The old building would remember when that wasn't so. Originally, the big pool was for men only. The gender divide was literal: there was a wall between the women's and men's sides. The divided front stairs took women up to the left archway and men to the right. These arches are still labelled WOMEN and MEN although the entrance is now central and unisex. Men swam naked in the early days, but women had to wear thick woollen dresses and bloomers in their smaller shallow pool.

Then there is the way people swim. Staying on the left side of the lanes shouldn't be that difficult and who would have thought aquatic lane rage was a thing. (It really is!) Some people swim in such a weird way I watch in fascination and try not to laugh. Others create aquatic poetry in motion; just a few long slow strokes per lap and a whirl of ripple to mark their passing. Some splash so much it turns the old tiles round the edges into a slippery river. It is as if they are punishing the water - challenging it to take them under.

The Baths has a rich history of attendance by different sub-groups of our community. Many school children have learned to swim here. I have had older men fondly reminisce to me about school



excursions to the Baths many years ago. Not as often spoken are the years when gay men found non judgmental company within the aquatic areas. For many years the members' (male and female), change rooms had private spa baths and saunas attached. These were removed about a decade ago leaving just one spa and a large sauna open to both genders in the public area.

So, I stand watching the swimmers for my allotted time, then walk around the brick red, glazed tiled edges beside 100 feet of clear, tepid water and I think how strange it is that my attempted retirement has brought me here as a lifeguard. I wonder if it is just my life coming around full circle. I loved swimming when I was a child in the Western Wimmera. I would tow my little sister around in a dam being careful not to touch the bottom and stir up the fine clay mud. I haven't had to test my rescue training by jumping in and doing a water tow so far and the only thing I've had to pull out is detached Band-aids, but I keep as fit as I can and hope I can walk the red tiles and watch the swimmers for a few more years yet.
