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**A Social and Architectural History of the Swimming Pool at**  
**Château Laurier**

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## THE TIDES OF CHANGE A Social and Architectural History of the Swimming Pool at Château Laurier

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In 1929, the Château Laurier in Ottawa was enlarged, adding more than two hundred rooms to what was already the finest hotel in the city. The addition included lobbies, guest rooms, restaurants, a music room, and a new ballroom, nearly doubling the number of people that the “Grand Dame of Rideau Street” could accommodate.<sup>1</sup> Complementing these spaces was the new Therapeutic and Swimming Pool Department, “modelled on famous European spas,”<sup>2</sup> that offered state-of-the-art treatment facilities and a modern, Art Deco style swimming pool. This new department represented a turning point, not only in the history of the hotel itself, but also in the long running narratives of public health, tourism, and swimming culture in North America. The space was also remarkable in that it functioned in a series of dual capacities: it was a place of exercise and relaxation, of wholesome and salacious entertainment, and it occupied an unusual position on the line between public and private space. The multiplicitous nature of the pool and its treatment rooms, and the meanings embedded in its design, make it an important social benchmark both in Ottawa and Canadian history.

While swimming pools have seen more scholarly attention in recent years, the role and influence of swimming culture in luxury hotels has not.<sup>3</sup> Hotel pools in particular, being non-essential leisure amenities, are understudied, yet their ubiquity, popularity, and stylistic and functional diversity make them worthy of our attention. They have much to tell us about changing historical perspectives on health, leisure, popular culture,



FIG. 1. CHÂTEAU LAURIER, OPENING DAY, JUNE 1, 1912. | WILLIAM JAMES TOPLEY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-009252.

sexuality, and social equality, and the pool at Château Laurier is a remarkable example of this. Château Laurier itself has received considerable attention from architectural historians, particularly for its châteauesque design, its representation of Canadian national identity, and its role and influence on the architecture of Ottawa.<sup>4</sup> The individual cultural impacts of its highly popular lounges, ballrooms, and other amenities, however, have been largely overlooked.<sup>5</sup> This paper hopes to reemphasize the hotel as an important site of public cultural development, particularly in its capacity to perform as a series of heterogeneous cultural arenas. Each of these arenas had their own special effect—the swimming pool no less than any other. It both reflected and influenced broader cultural practices, and had a significant place in the lives of local Ottawans. This research explores the history of Château Laurier and its Therapeutic and Swimming Pool Department, situating it among the swimming pools of other Grand Canadian Railway Hotels. It will also explore the history of swimming pools in general, in order to demonstrate the importance of these spaces, and the role that this and other swimming pools have played in the Canadian and North American sociocultural narrative.

### EARLY CHÂTEAU LAURIER 1907-1912

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In October of 1907, plans were laid for a luxurious new hotel in the heart of Ottawa. It was to be named Château Laurier, after the regnant prime minister of Canada, and would serve as a showpiece of the Canadian Grand Truck Railroad.<sup>6</sup> Erected in conjunction with a new railway terminal, the hotel would become a symbol of Canada's burgeoning economy and social refinement. Charles Melville Hays, General Manager

of the railroad, wanted “the finest hotel yet to be built in Canada,”<sup>7</sup> and commissioned American architect Bradford Lee Gilbert to realize this ambition. Gilbert's plans, however, would ultimately be executed by the Montreal firm of Ross and MacFarlane, who transformed Gilbert's medieval French Gothic façade into a classically detailed, Loire Valley châteauesque (fig. 1).<sup>8</sup>

The châteauesque architectural style, referred to by the Hon. John C. Elliott, Minister of Public Works, as “the type of architecture most suited to our northern climate,”<sup>9</sup> brought with it connotations of elegance, formality, and nobility. These qualities were clearly articulated in the opulence of the new building. It was composed of Caen stone, Indiana limestone, Italian, Belgian, and travertine marbles, and crowned with a copper roof bursting with turrets, tourelles, and elaborately carved dormers. The interiors were equally impressive, furnished with fine antiques, and boasting polished brass fixtures and Tiffany windows.<sup>10</sup> Ross and MacFarlane had made several other alterations to Gilbert's designs however, one of which was a peculiar change in the arrangement of the hotel's bathrooms. *The Architectural Record* of 1908 remarked that these had once been outward facing, but were now “[turned] inward upon a dark corridor instead of giving them outside light and air.”<sup>11</sup> A similar concern, this time regarding the tunnel laid between the hotel and Union Station (fig. 2), was raised in a recollection in the *Ottawa Citizen* by Madge Macbeth some years later: “The tunnel could be cold, hot, damp, or dry. It would be airless. A germ mislaid along its length could not possibly find its way to freedom. It would lurk in some dark corner and leap upon an unsuspecting victim. The tunnel would, indeed, be a menace.”<sup>12</sup>

Comments like these were part of a long running narrative—an international conversation about public health and cleanliness—that had been developing in North America since the second half of the nineteenth century. The potential for “mislaid germs” was of growing concern, and the incorporation of sanitation facilities was increasingly demanded of the architects of public spaces. As we shall see, the culture of health and bathing, which during that period put an emphasis on the swimming pool, would have a significant impact on the fabric of Château Laurier only fifteen years after its opening in June of 1912.

### CLEANLINESS AND CLASS, MOVING INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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During the early industrial era in the United States and Canada, public health had become a significant problem. Rapidly growing industries and swelling urban populations had led to squalid and overcrowded living conditions for much of the working classes. This situation was only worsened by the moral attitudes and medical theories of the time, but would, perhaps unexpectedly, lead to the introduction of what would become the modern swimming pool.<sup>13</sup> As Jeff Wiltse notes in his book *Contested Waters*: “Public baths [became] necessary because the urban poor lacked bathing facilities in their homes, and middle-class northerners had come to see dirtiness as a sign of disease, immorality, and disorder.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1866, a cholera-scare in Boston led to the creation of some of the first successful baths in North America.<sup>15</sup> These early baths were little more than wooden enclosures, usually either set directly into, or fed by, natural bodies of water (fig. 3). They proliferated around the mid-to-late



FIG. 2. THE TUNNEL ENTRANCE FROM GRAND TRUNK CENTRAL STATION TO CHÂTEAU LAURIER, 1916. | TOPELY STUDIO, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-011245.



FIG. 3. THE VELOCIPED RINK AND BATHS IN OLD TORONTO (BATHS SEEN ON THE LEFT). ONE OF CANADA'S EARLY SWIMMING BATHS (C. 1860), IT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN FED BY NEARBY LAKE ONTARIO. | WILLIAM JAMES THOMSON, CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, PICTURES-R-5356.

nineteenth century, and were sometimes accompanied by a structure containing changing rooms or other facilities. The new swimming baths—sometimes called “plunge baths” or “river baths” depending on their depth or location—were quickly perceived more as places of entertainment than hygiene however. Splashing and roughhousing quickly became commonplace, especially among young men and boys.<sup>16</sup> The popularity of the new facilities was demonstrated at one pool in Philadelphia in 1884, when, in their enthusiasm, eager young bathers “tore the door from its hinges and knocked down the fence that surrounded the pool.”<sup>17</sup> As this popularity increased and caused swimming baths to become more widespread, in-ground facilities gradually became the norm, and standards of appropriate behaviour at public baths became a much-debated matter of public concern.<sup>18</sup>

For the wealthy, swimming was initially disdained for its association with the working classes. As, however, the public bath came to be seen more broadly as an amenity, pools were gradually accepted, and upper-class swimming culture emerged in the more exclusive context

of private clubs and Turkish baths. In these architecturally coded facilities, pools were sometimes grandiloquently labelled “natatoriums,” a name better suited to the columns, chandeliers, and marble-tiled basins enjoyed by the elite. Status differentiation also manifested in ways beyond mere lavish accommodation; strict codes of behaviour were often enforced, and many class-conscious patrons deliberately regarded swimming as a serious sport rather than a form of entertainment.<sup>19</sup>

One reason for this intense attention to class separation was nudity, and the particular social problems rooted in comparative states of undress. Nudity and swimming clothes acted as a great equalizer, whereby those stripped of their finery became suddenly indistinguishable from members of the working classes. During the opening of one pool in 1889, the city fathers of Milwaukee refused to take part in a ceremonial first swim because “without their business suits and hats, they did not feel nearly so comfortable with the public gaze upon them.”<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, class would continue to be closely associated with swimming pools for many years to come.

In the late nineteenth century, the introduction of germ theory changed the western world’s views of health and cleanliness. With this, pools were made obsolete as a form of “bathing” in a hygienic sense—though the term would continue to be used. Instead, pools were reconceived (in keeping with the strict, athletic notions of the elite) as fitness facilities, where swimming sports were promoted as being healthy, morally virtuous, and masculine.<sup>21</sup> Not coincidentally, this period would also see a rise in the commercial use of fitness ideals—largely in specialist magazines—in which idealized bodies were exhibited in advertising in ways we recognize today.<sup>22</sup>

A democratization of swimming pools began with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) around 1885, which began making pools affordable to middle-class men in both the United States and Canada. As swimming pools became available to all classes, they also began to take on new social connotations, so that by the turn of the twentieth century broader pool culture had subdivided into two distinct subcultures. The first revolved around the “baths” which were available to the lower classes, in which



FIG. 4. WOMEN'S SWIMMING LESSONS, POSSIBLY AT THE MCGILL STREET YWCA IN TORONTO, C. 1907. | CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, FONDS 1244, ITEM 3139.



FIG. 5. CHÂTEAU LAKE LOUISE'S SWIMMING POOL, THE SECOND LARGEST POOL IN CANADA AT TIME OF CONSTRUCTION. INSTALLED IN 1926, PHOTO C. 1930. | CANADA DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, C-029447.

public cleanliness and rowdy conduct remained primary concerns. The second was associated with “swimming” facilities and health clubs, which were made available to the middle classes in the form of paid-admission pools like those at the YMCA. The latter sought to emulate the attitudes of the upper classes, who were, in turn, beginning to adopt the idea of pools as leisure spaces, with private pools being installed in the homes of the wealthy as early as 1895.<sup>23</sup>

By the early twentieth century, swimming pools as places of exercise and leisure had become the norm in both Canada and abroad. Photographic evidence shows that Canadian YMCAs and YWCAs were providing swimming services for both men and women as early as the first decade of the 1900s, and private pools were being built by wealthy Canadians like Sir Henry Pellatt, who installed a pool in Casa Loma in Toronto in 1913 (fig. 4).<sup>24</sup> Swimming pools were also beginning to play a role in travel and tourism. The White Star Line installed the first “swimming pond” on their luxury

ocean liner, the R.M.S. Adriatic, in 1907, and a few ambitious hotels had begun to follow suit.<sup>25</sup>

Some of Canada’s Grand Hotels, principally those owned and operated by the Canadian Pacific Railway, had specifically begun to take advantage of this trend. The Banff Springs Hotel in Alberta built what may have been Canada’s first hotel swimming pool in 1911, and another Grand Hotel in Banff, the Chateau Lake Louise, added the second largest swimming pool in Canada in 1926 (fig. 5).<sup>26</sup> As with technology, fashion, and many other aspects of life during the early twentieth century, major social changes were occurring, and a new popular swimming culture was on the rise.

### A POOL IN CHÂTEAU LAURIER

By the mid-1920s, planning had begun for the addition to Chateau Laurier. It was collaboratively designed by Montreal-based architects John S. Archibald and John Schofield, the latter of whom was the Canadian National Railway’s chief

architect on staff. By now, the chateausque hotels erected by the Canadian railways—including the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec, the Fort Garry Hotel in Manitoba, and the Empress Hotel in British Columbia—had led the president of the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada to comment that “in the Canadian language ‘Chateau’ now means Railway Hotel.”<sup>27</sup> It was a matter of course then, that the new addition to Chateau Laurier should follow suit. The L-shaped addition would be attached to the original L-shaped plan, forming a large U-shape, and was “so skillfully merged as to seem built as one”<sup>28</sup> (fig. 6).

The addition, however, was not merely a reaction to the needs of the hotel and the tides of economy, it was also a response to the social changes taking place in North America and the West. No longer was Chateau Laurier only playing host to Victorian aristocrats like Lord and Lady Astor and the Prince of Wales, or political dignitaries like the prime ministers of Canada and Great Britain, now came an age of Hollywood film stars, glamour,



FIG. 6. THE 1929 ADDITION TO CHÂTEAU LAURIER, PHOTO TAKEN 1937. | CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY COMPANY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, R231-2009-6-E, BOX NUMBER: INT 014, RV4 52-1.



FIG. 7. CHÂTEAU LAURIER'S SWIMMING POOL, 1931. | CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY COMPANY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-175313.

and modern design.<sup>29</sup> Under the traditional châteauesque exterior of Archibald and Schofield's new wing could be found an eclectic array of historic and modern architectural styles. As well as a formal Adam style dining room, the hotel opened the Jasper Tea Room—a restaurant decorated in stylized Canadian and aboriginal themes which “quickly became the favourite meeting place for Ottawa's young people.”<sup>30</sup> Château Laurier was shifting from the era of formal Louis XVI drawing rooms to the young and fashionable roaring twenties. Indeed, with the opening of the new addition, the hotel would see the signatures of film stars like Marlene Dietrich, Nelson Eddy, and Bette Davis added to its register.<sup>31</sup>

The new addition also addressed concerns from the hotel's first phase. Bathroom locations were adjusted, opening some of them up to “light and air,” and a great deal of attention was paid to the trends of health and physical therapy that had emerged out of the smoke of the industrial and progressive eras.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the new wing was the Therapeutic and

Swimming Pool Department. Arguably the most technologically advanced space in the hotel, it was a veritable showcase of the latest trends in physical health and fitness. The department occupied part of the lower floors of the new east wing, and included not only a magnificent swimming pool, but an astonishing array of other services. Modelled on luxury European health spas, it was advertised as “the most complete and up-to-date in North America.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than the opulent, classically designed pools favoured by New York clubs and movie-star-hosting moguls like William Randolph Hearst, however, Archibald and Schofield chose to fashion Château Laurier's pool in the ultra-modern Art Deco style (fig. 7).<sup>34</sup>

The world's first major Art Deco exhibit had been planned as early as 1911—the year the construction of the original Château was completed. The exhibit, however, meant for the Paris Exhibition of 1916, was postponed until 1925 by the outbreak of World War I.<sup>35</sup> By this time Château Laurier's new wing was being designed, and Art Deco had become

established as a popular and glamorous style of modern architecture. As Michael Windover points out, “Glamour is a term often used in descriptions of Art Deco objects and spaces—not to mention the Golden Age of Hollywood film, which only furthered the visual impact of the style in the 1920s and 1930s . . . sumptuous [Art Deco] interiors provided stages for the performance of modern(e) lifestyle.”<sup>36</sup> Glamour has had a long and complex relationship with hotel culture, and, as we shall see, qualities of glamour, Hollywood, and social performance would all have a significant impact on the design and use of the pool at Château Laurier.<sup>37</sup>

The pool room was designed to occupy two levels, with the rest of the department oriented around it. Its sixty by twenty-five-foot basin was, as advertisements put it, filled with the “greenish-blue opalescent waters of a tropical sea.”<sup>38</sup> Set into a mosaic floor, the pool was surrounded by walls of pale pink Tennessee marble, contrasted against fluted Corinthian pilasters of dark green marble imported from Arizona. At one



FIG. 8. THE GYMNASIUM IN CHÂTEAU LAURIER'S THERAPEUTIC DEPARTMENT, WITH PATIENTS USING THE ELECTRIC HORSE AND THE VIBRATIONS MACHINE, 1931. | CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY COMPANY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-175312.



FIG. 9. CHÂTEAU LAURIER THERAPEUTIC DEPARTMENT'S SCHNEE BATH TREATMENT, 1931. | CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY COMPANY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-175314.

end of the pool, a two-storey alcove held a decorative fountain, its lintel carved with waves. The fountain and alcove were executed in the same dark green marble as the pilasters, and were flanked on either side by ornate brass grates depicting stylized fish and shells. The second storey of the room featured a long, nearly wrap-around gallery decorated with an intricate, hand-wrought brass railing, and the tiled ceiling above was surrounded by a fluted white frieze adorned with carved marble panels. Other luxurious fittings included the original, brass, Art Deco lanterns, and the so-called "Angel's Stairway," a golden spiral staircase that connected the ladies changing rooms to the pool area.<sup>39</sup>

Elsewhere in the department were a gymnasium—finished with polished wood floors and brass fixtures—and a series of pristinely tiled treatment rooms (figs. 8, 9). The treatment rooms housed state-of-the-art machines like the "Hanoria super-alpine-model ultra-violet ray lamp" which was used in the treatment of rickets, polio, kidney and

bladder troubles. There were hydrotherapies for rheumatism, electric therapy for nervous treatments, and the "Scotch Douche"—a combination of the two, in which a patient stood at one end of a long, aluminum clad room to receive high-pressured jets of alternately hot and cold "electrified water" sprayed up and down their spines. Another room contained the "Neuheim carbonic acid bath" for treating enlarged heart conditions. There were also tiled steam rooms and scrub rooms, an electrified "couch" for the treatment of high blood pressure, and a room for "Colonic and Plombières Therapy" managed by a specialist trained in France. The facility even provided nose and throat sprays with hot and cold condensed air, and offered help with the removal of warts and growths.<sup>40</sup> The entire department was overseen by its director, Dr. Ball, who had "over twenty-five years of experience working in Europe."<sup>41</sup>

The new addition was opened in 1929 with much celebration, heralded in *The Ottawa Evening Citizen* with a

thirteen-page article that proclaimed the enlarged hotel "THE NEW WONDER HOSTELRY." It included photographs of the hotel, its staff, and exposés on every amenity the Château now had to offer. Under the headline "SWIMMING POOL IS AN ADDED ATTRACTION," a comparatively modest article extolled the virtues of the Pool and Therapeutic Department:

Features of various characters are being daily added to the attractions of modern hotels but the Château Laurier is rather a step ahead of the Canadian hostelries through the introduction of a natatorium so that guests who long for a plunge may have their wish gratified . . . The water to be used in this pool will pass through special filters and receive such treatment as to rend it limpid and of crystal clearness . . . A therapeutic department has been established in the Château for the convenience of patrons and the swimming pool will be operated in conjunction with this department.<sup>42</sup>

The age of the new and improved Château Laurier, and of its cutting-edge Art Deco pool, had arrived.



FIG. 10. THE BATHING PAVILION AT BANFF SPRINGS, BUILT 1914, PHOTO TAKEN 1941, FEATURING A THREE-TIERED SPECTATORS' BALCONY. | WILLIAM JOHN OLIVER, CANADA NATIONAL PARKS BRANCH, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-804026.



FIG. 11. BEAUTY CONTEST WINNER, 1926, WEARING A CONTEMPORARY SWIMMING SUIT. | CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, GLOBE AND MAIL FONDS, FONDS 1266, ITEM 9224.

## MODERN SWIMMING CULTURE AND THE CHÂTEAU LAURIER

It is evident that, despite the changing times, swimming pools remained inextricably linked with their early origins as a public health service. Indeed, as late as 1924, Ottawa was still erecting public baths in response to the deadly Spanish flu epidemic of 1918.<sup>43</sup> At Chateau Laurier, it may be argued, this link was radically emphasized, and remains (to some degree) even today, in the form of gym, massage, and swimming services. Archibald and Schofield's designs combined the latest styles and technologies to create a glamorous modern experience, but they also echoed previous models. Influences from earlier pool plans included the use of marble, ornamental fountains, columnar decoration, and the incorporation of a second floor viewing

gallery. Of these, the latter is especially interesting, because it played a role in the evolution of modern swimming culture that helped change how pools were being seen and used in the twentieth century.

Many early natatoriums featured two-storey designs with a spectator's balcony, including the Greenbush Natatorium built in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, around 1895, and the Brookline Pool in Massachusetts in 1897.<sup>44</sup> In 1914, no less than three tiers of balconies were built overlooking the swimming pool at the Banff Springs Hotel (fig. 10). Even the aforementioned Ottawa baths of 1924—known as the "Plant" and "Champagne" baths—followed this model.<sup>45</sup> These spectator platforms were initially intended for non-swimming viewers to socialize and watch sporting events, but it quickly became apparent that an element of voyeurism

was emerging in swim culture, particularly with the phasing out of gender-segregated swimming beginning around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup>

Drastic changes in swimwear contributed especially to the eroticizing of swimming pools in the early twentieth century. During its first decade, male bathers still wore loose-fitting, knee-length trunks with a high-necked shirt over them, and female bathers were expected to wear nearly full-body coverings that included a swimming cap, leg stockings, and a knee-length skirt.<sup>47</sup> Change was instigated around 1905 however when Olympic swimmer Annette Kellerman debuted a highly controversial, one-piece bathing suit in a publicity photo. The event helped lead to a fashionable decline in the body coverage of swimwear, in which menswear would eventually be reduced





FIG. 12. CHÂTEAU LAURIER SWIMMING POOL, SHOWING THE PALM BEACH WITH SUNLAMPS, 1931. | CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY COMPANY, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-180766.



FIG. 13. CHÂTEAU LAURIER SWIMMING POOL, C. 1940. NOTE THE LOUNGE WINDOWS OVERLOOKING THE DIVING BOARD. | INGENIUM DIGITAL ARCHIVES, CN IMAGES OF CANADA COLLECTION, X-45414.

to a pair of swimming trunks, and the “Kellerman style” was gradually abbreviated to a skirtless, one- or two-piece outfit (fig. 11).<sup>48</sup> These revealing fashions inevitably heightened the sexual climate at swimming pools.<sup>49</sup> As bodies became publicly visible, the importance of physical appearance increased accordingly, and so a day at the pool became an exciting experience for voyeurs and exhibitionists alike.

Class distinction was also made possible by the advent of designer swimwear. Rapidly changing and expensive poolside fashions soon became popular with the fashion-oriented and class-conscious, whose concerns echoed those of the Milwaukee city fathers nearly half a century earlier.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1920s, pool culture in Canada and America had grown enough to spawn its own brand of specialist magazines, beginning with *Swimming Pool Age* in 1927.<sup>51</sup> Leisure activities other than swimming had also become associated with the pool, the most popular of which was

sunbathing, an undeniably exhibitionist activity. As Wiltse points out, “The increasing popularity of outdoor recreation, as well as the reality that most laborers now worked indoors rather than in the fields, led many . . . to reassociate tanned skin with youth, health, and beauty.”<sup>52</sup> To that end, the lack of windows at Château Laurier’s pool were compensated for in the form of the “Palm Beach,” a poolside arrangement of waiter-attended chaise lounges and potted palms where one could bask in the light of powerful brass U.V. lamps (fig. 12).<sup>53</sup>

Pools and swimming were also starting to feature prominently in films and media, and were becoming as glamorous as the Art Deco in which Archibald and Schofield had clad their pool. Hollywood used the sex-appeal of pools and swimwear to their advantage in films like *Bird of Paradise* (1932, directed by King Vidor), in which actress Dolores Del Rio was scandalously shown displaying her bare midriff.<sup>54</sup> By the late twenties and early thirties, Hollywood influence, combined with the continued marketing of

physical fitness that had begun in the late nineteenth century, had contributed significantly to the sexual glamour of modern swimming culture.<sup>55</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that sexuality was rampant wherever a pool was installed. Many hotels instituted dress codes for swimwear that sometimes chafed at the modern sensibilities of younger generations. This was not always the case however, and photographic evidence suggests that no strict dress codes were in place at Château Laurier. It is also interesting to note that while swimming championships and other spectator events were held at the Château’s pool which supported the need for a second-storey gallery, it is likely that luxury swimming culture, voyeurism, and the visiting famous, all played a role in the architects’ decision to include a windowed spectator’s lounge directly overlooking the gallery and the pool (fig. 13).<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, the glamorous modernism of the pool was doing more than simply modernizing the hotel, it was giving its guests

a cultural arena in which to play out a sexy, fantasy Hollywood lifestyle. These associations were valuable in both social and economic terms, and were certainly something that a hotel like Château Laurier would want to be associated with.<sup>57</sup> This, then, was a pool of many functions. It was a place of entertainment and relaxation, a participant in changing social and cultural values, and—perhaps most importantly to its users—it was a place to see and be seen. This last function, as an arena of social display, was a complicated one however. While the pool was accessible to the public, and spectatorship even encouraged, cost of admission was not as democratic as the pools present-day accessibility might lead us to assume. This was reflective of two key issues, the social cost of maintaining class distinction, and the economic cost of maintaining an extravagant amenity like the Château's pool.

### MAINTAINING THE CHÂTEAU'S POOL

As Wiltse reports of pools in the early twentieth century, "Swimming pools, for the most part, resisted commercialization. Entrepreneurs opened some for-profit pools during the interwar years, but they struggled to compete against the ubiquitous publicly owned pool, and many went out of business."<sup>58</sup> This struggle may be reflected in the decision of the Canadian railway companies to add pools to only three more of their dozens of hotels. These were the Digby Pines Hotel in Nova Scotia, Château Montebello in Quebec, and the Château Laurier, all added in the years 1929 and 1930.<sup>59</sup> Prior to this, only the two great Banff hotels (Banff Springs and Château Lake Louise) had undertaken such an improvement, and, perhaps tellingly, no other pool would be installed in any of the Canadian Grand Hotels until 1972. Indeed, most of the world's



FIG. 14. SWIMMING POOL AT THE REMOTE BANFF SPRINGS HOTEL, C. 1930S. BUILT AMONG THE SPECTACULAR ROCKY MOUNTAINS, THIS WAS POSSIBLY THE FIRST GRAND HOTEL POOL IN CANADA. | CANADA DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PA-046133.

Grand Hotels avoided the cost of a pool. Even the famed Waldorf Astoria in New York, described by Henry James as "one of my few glimpses of perfect human felicity,"<sup>60</sup> is only now, at the time of writing, constructing its first swimming pool.

It is also important to note that with the sole exception of Château Laurier, all the Canadian railroad hotels that built pools up to and around that time were situated in remote, idyllic locations, where the pool was a symbol of luxury and civilization in the boundless Canadian wilderness (fig. 14). Château Laurier however was the hotel of the nation's capital, and given not only a pool, but a therapeutic department as well, suggesting that it possessed added connotations of health and big city glamour more akin to those of its early ancestors. In light of these facts, it seems that the Château Laurier stands as a rare,

possibly even unique example of a successful, Canadian, prewar, intracity, Grand Hotel pool.

Nevertheless, the pool and its facilities would become a burden for the hotel shortly after their opening in 1929. Part of the problem was the onset of the Great Depression, which unfortunately began in that same year. Another was the overwhelming cost of running a large pool and therapeutic facility, including the upkeep of the elaborate plumbing and electrical systems, the constant need for cleaning and maintenance, and staffing. The Château managed to offset this cost somewhat by opening the pool to the public for paid visits. Before 1946, the cost of a visit stood at around forty cents per head, per hour—a small amount at first glance, but not a paltry sum when considering that the average labourer's wage

in Canada was around forty cents an hour in the early 1930s.<sup>61</sup> This meant that for an average, lower-class Canadian family, an hour's visit to the Château's pool—which was also tightly regulated, and might turn away undesirable persons at the door—could cost nearly half a day's wages. This was an outrageous sum when compared with Ottawa's Champagne Bath, which cost approximately two cents a swim.<sup>62</sup>

The financial cost of the Château's need to maintain exclusivity was offset by the hotel's celebrity success, however. Over the years, Château Laurier hosted many celebrities whose presence glamorized the hotel. By lending to its reputation (and of course, paying hotel fees), a reciprocal relationship was created between the hotel and its famous guests.<sup>63</sup> They could be accommodated at the hotel with a greater degree of exclusivity, while also attracting the middle and upper classes who could afford to lounge at the hotel's poolside. In short, while the hotel's pool was opened to the public, maintaining exclusivity ensured a sufficient revenue to sustain it.

This relationship sustained the pool through both the Great Depression and World War II, until 1946 when the cost of an hour's swim was raised to fifty cents.<sup>64</sup> By that time however, the average wage had raised to around sixty cents, and postwar healthcare changes had made electric therapies and other such treatments the purview of hospitals and care facilities.<sup>65</sup> With the closing of many of the Therapeutic and Swimming Pool Department's early services—and their costs of operation removed—more democratic admission fees were introduced in the early 1950s. By the latter part of the twentieth century, the pool at Château Laurier would become a space that could be recognized and enjoyed by all classes of Ottawans.<sup>66</sup>

## MEMORIES OF THE CHÂTEAU

The Grand Dame and its pool would play host to countless patrons throughout the twentieth century, withstanding wars, politics, cultural movements, and, of course, the comings and goings of its visitors. Many retained happy memories of the Château and its pool, some of whom even shared their stories with authors of books about the Château. These accounts are valuable personal and cultural artefacts, illustrating the meanings that spaces like these can hold as arenas of diverse life experiences.

During the Second World War, the Château was made an important hub for military and industrial leaders, who were given priority access to the tunnel running from the hotel to Union Station. This meant an influx of Canadian servicemen, many of whom were provided for by the hotel. During their leisure hours, personnel were granted use of the hotel's amenities—including the hotel pool, where many spent a pleasant afternoon.<sup>67</sup>

In 1951, sailors posted to the Naval Radio Station Gloucester some miles south of Ottawa would often make a point of visiting the Château during their leave. One such sailor, W.G. Hillaby, later fondly recalled:

We could rent a bathing suit and swim in the Château pool for a dollar for the whole day . . . meals were out of the question, but friendly waiters turned a blind eye to the fresh cheese, salami and bread purchased at the ByWard Market and taken into the Beverage Room . . . In all, we young sailors managed to have a pretty good time on very little money, with much of the entertainment centered around the venerable Château.<sup>68</sup>

Many other Canadians also had fond memories of the hotel's pool. Louis St. Laurent, prime minister of Canada from 1948 to 1957, was said to have spent many happy hours swimming at Château Laurier, and another prominent Canadian, Marion Dewar, mayor of Ottawa from 1978 to 1985, recalled with affection her time there as a child: "I remember being taken by my parents to the Château Laurier pool. At that time, it was one of the few indoor pools in Ottawa open to the public. It was a special occasion for all concerned when we went to that beautiful institution for a swim."<sup>69</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that Château Laurier and its pool hold a special place in the hearts of many. It has been, as a Château Laurier brochure once put it, "the stage across which the actors of Canada's destiny have moved through succeeding generations to shape the story of a nation."<sup>70</sup> To say that the Grand Dame of Rideau Street is a Canadian landmark is by now a matter of course, but the Château's pool, too, deserves its own little bit of recognition. It presents evidence of the complex changes in leisure activities that took place in luxury hotels during the early twentieth century. It also prefigures the popularization of hotel pools, which would proliferate in more affordable hotel chains across the country, and in middle-class suburban backyards after the Second World War.<sup>71</sup>

This beautiful space resonates with history and meaning in its design, style, and the way in which it has been used over the course of nearly a century. It represents a benchmark in the history of the Château, propelling the hotel from Victorian staidness into the brassy era of the big bands. It represents a turning point in the history of swimming pools, during which they

evolved from the “swimming baths” of the nineteenth century to become symbols of both community and exclusivity, and of glamour and luxury. The pool also represents a milestone in our social history, a time in which fashion, sex, and popular culture began to change dramatically. In short, the swimming pool at Château Laurier represents a small part of the story of Canada. It almost seems, that if we gaze philosophically into the pool’s “greenish-blue opalescent waters,” we can perceive the tides of change.

## NOTES

- Rankin, Joan E., 1990, *Meet Me at the Château: A Legacy of Memory*, Toronto, National Heritage Books, p. 46, 190.
- Id.*, p. 72.
- See Avermaete, Tom and Anne Massey, 2013, *Hotel Lobbies and Lounges: The Architecture of Professional Hospitality*, London and New York, Routledge; Kastner, Victoria, 2000, *Hearst Castle: The Biography of a Country House*, New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc.; Stewart, Meredith, 2015, “The Public Baths of Ottawa: A Heritage Reconsidered,” *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, vol. 40, no. 1, p. 83-96; and Wiltse, Jeff, 2007, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- See Chisholm, Barbara, Russel Floren and Andrea Gutsche, 2001, *Castles of the North: Canada’s Grand Hotels*, Toronto, Transcontinental Printing Inc.; Liscombe, Rhodri Windsor, 1993, “Nationalism or Cultural Imperialism? The Château Style in Canada,” *Architectural History*, vol. 36, p. 127-244; Rose, David, 1993, “The Canadian Railway Hotel Revisited: The Château Style Hotels of Ross & MacFarlane,” *Bulletin (Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada)*; and Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*
- A partial exception to this is Avermaete and Massey’s *Hotel Lobbies and Lounges: The Architecture of Professional Hospitality (op. cit.)*, though its examination of lounges seems somewhat limited. To my knowledge, no such book about swimming pools exists. This work is also exemplary of how spaces like lounges, ballrooms, and pools are generally relegated to brief or collective mentions in the discussion of broader topics (p. 15, 34, 35-36, 69, 74).
- Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- Id.*, p. 5.
- Id.*, p. 12-14; Rose, “The Canadian Railway Hotel Revisited,” *op. cit.*, p. 36. The châteausque was first introduced to North America by architect Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to graduate from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and favourite architect of the Vanderbilt family. His commission of Alva and William K. Vanderbilt’s “Petit Château” at 660 Fifth Avenue in New York increased the style’s popularity in American (and ultimately Canadian) high society. The Vanderbilt fortune was famously derived from their ownership of the New York Central Railroad, so it may be argued that the châteausque was borne into North America on railroad connections.
- Liscombe, “Nationalism or Cultural Imperialism,” *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 19-20.
- LaChapelle, Jacques, 1908, “Architectural Ethics – The Case of the Ottawa Terminals Station and Hotel,” *Architectural Record*, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 297-298.
- Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- The prevailing Christian idea that to be poor reflected literally on a person’s moral character also contributed to the development of the swimming bath. As Wiltse explains, “[some] had come to see sports and exercise as effective means for reforming the working classes. A laborer who regularly swam in a pool . . . would expend surplus energy that might otherwise be directed toward antisocial behavior, such as crime . . . a dedicated swimmer would also come to appreciate the virtues of self-discipline and hard work . . . and might even temper personal excesses, such as alcohol consumption and gambling.” See Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 36-37.
- Wiltse, *id.*, p. 9, 20. North American sources, including the northern United States, were necessarily consulted in the making of this work, with the assumption that the cultures of the two nations are mutually influential, and that common factors and information such as popular opinion, media, and stylistic and economic trends were freely, if not inevitably shared.
- Wiltse, *id.*, p. 20.
- Dawes, John, 1979, *Design and Planning of Swimming Pools*, London, Architectural Press, p. 3; Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *id.*, p. 20-22. Prior to this, public bathing in rivers and open water sources was common among the urban poor. The resultant public nudity (both male and female), and the affront it caused to Victorian sensibilities, certainly contributed to the development of the swimming bath. In 1858, an article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* commented on this problem: “Boys are not always young Apollos or Cupids when their breeches are off, and taste for the fine arts has not yet been sufficiently cultivated—even if the boys were each an Adonis—to permit so much statuary running loose under the eyes of the public.” Quoted in Wiltse, *id.*, p. 12.
- Wiltse, *id.*, p. 8.
- Id.*, p. 9-10, 42-43.
- Id.*, p. 27, 29.
- Id.*, p. 27.
- Middle-class men particularly valued competitive sports during this period. Many feared that sedentary occupations (*i.e.*, lawyers and academics) and comfortable, contemporary lifestyles were causing men to become weak, feminine, and “overcivilized.” See Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- Wiltse, *id.*, p. 34, 36.
- Id.*, p. 29-30, 100. The 1895 pool listed by Wiltse (p. 100) seems to be the swimming pool at Biltmore, the palatial residence of George Vanderbilt in North Carolina. George was the brother of William Kissam Vanderbilt, whose wife Alva oversaw the construction of the Petit Château (1882) and made the châteausque fashionable in American high society.
- Oreskovich, Carlie, 1982, *Sir Henry Pellatt: The King of Casa Loma*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, p. 140, 142. Coincidentally, Pellatt’s pool (though never completed), was of nearly identical dimensions to the one at Château Laurier (Pellatt’s pool is 60 x 24 ft., and Chateau Laurier’s is 60 x 25 ft.).
- Long, Kat, 2017, “The Monster Ships that Changed How We Travel,” *BBC Future*, April 11, “Comfort Class.”
- Chisholm *et al.*, *Castles of the North*, *op. cit.*, p. 35, 49. Some of the information in this paper is the product of the author’s own research, conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes many of the dates and statistics concerning the installation of hotel pools in Canada. Thirty-three of Canada’s historic hotels were telephoned or otherwise consulted in the process, and some points are made through extrapolation from this data.

27. Liscombe, "Nationalism or Cultural Imperialism," *op. cit.*, p. 129.
28. Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
29. *Id.*, p. 30-31.
30. *Id.*, p. 52-53.
31. *Id.*, p. 49, 189.
32. *Id.*, p. 46-49.
33. *Id.*, p. 72.
34. Kastner, *Hearst Castle*, *op. cit.*, p. 170-181; Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
35. Charles, Victoria and Klaus H. Carl, 2012, *Art Deco*, New York, Parkstone International, p. 15.
36. Windover, Michael, 2012, *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, p. 102-103.
37. Avermaete and Massey, *Hotel Lobbies and Lounges*, *op. cit.*, p. 50-51.
38. Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 73, 75.
39. Chisholm *et al.*, *Castles of the North*, *op. cit.*, p. 180-182.
40. *Id.*; and Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
41. Rankin, *id.*, p. 72.
42. Wednesday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1929, *Ottawa Evening Citizen*.
43. Stewart, "The Public Baths of Ottawa," *op. cit.*, p. 86-88.
44. Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 28, 45.
45. Stewart, "The Public Baths of Ottawa," *op. cit.*, p. 87.
46. Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 37-38. Some municipal pools cashed-in on the presence of voyeurs at their pools. At Price Run Pool in Wilmington, Delaware, a five-cent "spectators" fee was implemented, and the city considered building bleachers for voyeurs (see Wiltse, p. 116). The advent of mixed gender swimming also coincided with an increase in racial segregation in pool culture. Wiltse (p. 78) notes: "The simultaneous occurrence of these two social transformations was not coincidental. City officials excluded blacks because most whites did not want black men interacting with white women at such an intimate and crowded public space." While there is no evidence that any such policies were in place at Château Laurier, it is perhaps telling that no early photographs of the pool show a non-Caucasian face.
47. Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 109-110.
48. *Id.*, p. 111.
49. Naturally this was accompanied by a backlash. While some complained to the newspapers about the visibility of the overweight or unattractive, others campaigned for the creation of swimsuit laws. One women's group in Florida in 1922 insisted that married men must be protected from "the wiles of the sea vamp." See Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 113-114.
50. Wiltse, *id.*, p. 112, 117-118.
51. *Id.*, p. 93.
52. *Id.*, p. 100.
53. Chisholm *et al.*, *Castles of the North*, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
54. Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 112-113.
55. Other contemporary media that glamorized swimming pools included the films *The Kid from Spain* (1932, directed by Leo McCarey) and *Dancing Lady* (1933, directed by Robert Z. Leonard), and the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925, Charles Scribner's Son). Wiltse (*id.*, p. 117) notes that "newspapers recognized the visual eroticism at pools and filled their pages each summer with gratuitous photos from local swimming pools."
56. Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 63, 75.
57. Randl, Chad, 2011, "American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture," review of *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* by Alice T. Friedman, *Journal of Architecture*, London, England, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 306.
58. Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
59. At least one other Canadian Grand Hotel followed this trend. This was the Manoir Richelieu in La Malbaie, Quebec, which, though owned by the competing Canada Steamship Lines Company, not only added a pool in 1929, but also copied the iconic châteauesque architecture employed by the railroads.
60. Kaplan, Justin, 2007, *When the Astors Owned New York: Blue Bloods and Grand Hotels*, London, Plume Printing, p. 6.
61. Mackinnon, Mary, 1996, "New Evidence on Canadian Wage Rates, 1900-1930," *The Canadian Journal of Economics / Revue canadienne d'économique*, vol. 29, no. 1, p. 117-119; Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 107-109. Further research should be done on this. More specific prewar admission prices for the Château Laurier pool could no doubt be found in hotel records, but these are inaccessible at the time of writing.
62. Stewart, "The Public Baths of Ottawa," *op. cit.*, p. 88. That kind of price-based class discrimination was not unheard of. Many other pools in Canada and the U.S. made use of similar systems to regulate which classes of people would use the pool. At the Brookline Bath in Massachusetts, three days a week were free of charge for the use of the working classes, while two days cost fifteen cents for the middle classes, and Thursday evenings cost twenty-five cents for the upper classes. Wiltse (*Contested Waters*, *op. cit.*, p. 40) observes that "while the fee structure clearly shows that the bath committee did not want to force the rich to swim with the poor, it shows just as clearly that the committee members intended the pool to serve the entire community." The fact that initially Château Laurier made few allowances for the lower classes may seem unfair, but is perhaps unsurprising for a hotel of its social standing.
63. Avermaete and Massey, *Hotel Lobbies and Lounges*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
64. Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 107-109.
65. Chisholm *et al.*, *Castles of the North*, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
66. For more on swimming pools and glamour in the postwar period (in a U.S. context), see Friedman, Alice T., 2010, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press.
67. *Id.*, p. 181-183.
68. Rankin, *Meet Me at the Château*, *op. cit.*, p. 126-127.
69. *Id.*, p. 115, 164-165.
70. Chisholm *et al.*, *Castles of the North*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
71. Dawes, *Design and Planning of Swimming Pools*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.