

# The Fish That Never Swam – The Parable of Govanhill Baths

By Claire McCallum

On 9 November 2007, Glasgow was chosen to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games. A significant part of the bid dealt with the 'legacy' of the Games, the impact that would be left upon local communities in Glasgow. Richard Moore noted in the *Scotsman* that Tessa Jowell used the word 'legacy' no less than 30 times in the presentation of stadium plans for the 2012 London Olympics.<sup>1</sup> Since the partial collapse of the British imperial project, the emphasis of this legacy has shifted, towards a sense of multiculturalism, and the promotion of healthy living in deprived areas.

A focus on sport as a regenerative force for both individuals and communities within a city should have come as a welcome boost to the people of Glasgow.

Nicola Sturgeon, the deputy First Minister, highlighted this in her assurance that 'the Government is determined that the Games will provide a springboard for regeneration in some of our most deprived communities right here in Glasgow, as well as an opportunity to create a lasting sporting legacy for Scotland.'<sup>2</sup> The

residents of Govanhill, where I've lived for the past year, would be forgiven for finding this new-found community spirit a bit baffling. Since 2001, they have been campaigning to save their local baths, closed by the same Council who have pledged unwavering support for Glasgow's 2014 Games. Swimmers were told to use instead the Gorbals complex, or Bellahouston, where money had been invested in building large modern facilities. Both pools are difficult to get to without the use of a car, and it is calculated that almost 70% of households in the Shettleston voting constituency, where the Baths are situated, do not own a car. This logic affects the people who a local pool benefits the most – the unemployed, elderly, disabled and those with young families; exactly the social

groups the Government want to target, albeit in seven years, with their regeneration from the Commonwealth Games.

Banners in support of the Games bid hang on lampposts only a few minutes walk from the beautiful old Victorian bathhouse on Calder Street, where the rotting wood of the pool's sign sits uneasily below the city crest depicting miracles, and the 'Let Glasgow Flourish' motto. The building, which houses three swimming pools, a sauna, Turkish bathhouses and a steamie remains closed to swimmers, as it has been for the past six years. As part of the campaign to re-open the building for public use, the Friends of the Baths have appealed to every avenue open to them. Historic Scotland published a Statement

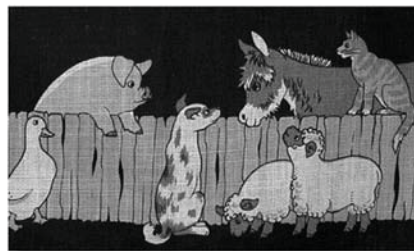
of Significance, detailing the historical importance of the building, in January 2005. The statement records the design of the baths, built 1912-1917, and lists the different cultural considerations for the building's future. It concludes that 'Govanhill Baths are therefore recognised as an architecturally and historically important part of the city's



history. They are particularly important culturally in that until recently they offered a valued and distinctive facility open to all members of the community. Any proposed reuse of Govanhill Baths must take into account more than simply the preservation of a façade: the spaces given over to the pools are of importance and their reuse must be considered extremely carefully.' Govanhill Baths was the last remaining Victorian bathhouse open for swimming in Glasgow; baths such as these have been closing all over the UK and replaced with gleaming, new faceless complexes. Manchester's Victoria Baths, a similar building to the Govanhill pool though on a grander scale, won the BBC's *Restoration* programme in 2003 and their campaign is still trying to raise the funds to complete the project.



Kate Hoey, the former minister for Sport, in a 2005 article about the closure of similar pools in London for the *Telegraph*, writes ‘... all the fine words about tackling obesity and the fitness of the nation proclaimed by politicians are worthless if not translated into resources to keep our swimming pools. Decades of cutting corners in maintaining the pools built by municipal authorities who understood civic pride has resulted in decrepit, crumbling and now closed pools. Each pool closure is a local scandal, but add up all the closures and it becomes a national scandal that can no longer be ignored.’<sup>3</sup> Considering the Scottish Government’s own sport initiatives, the decision to close the Govanhill Baths strikes a particularly odd chord. *Sport21*, a document produced by SportsScotland, lists as one of its core values that ‘participating in sport can improve the quality of life of individuals and communities, promote social inclusion, improve health, counter anti-social behaviour, raise individual self-esteem and confidence, and widen horizons’. There is nowhere in Scotland where health needs a jag in the arm more than in the Baths’ resident constituency of Shettleston, where the average male life expectancy is 63.5, compared to a UK average of 77, and over half of adult men are registered as overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup>



The pool closure has affected the Muslim population of Govanhill more than most. Ironically, the Victorian structure of the building provided the privacy and possibility for separate male and female bathing that the new pools do not; both the Gorbals pool and Bellahouston are glass-fronted. The council’s obsession with the new and modern has not taken the needs of Muslim swimmers into consideration. A survey conducted by the Baths campaign indicated that, six months after the baths closed, 55% of former users had not been swimming, and this rose to 90% of Indian and Pakistani former swimmers. The Kingston Club, Glasgow’s only multiracial swimming club, used the Govanhill Baths before the closure – and some 200 or so of their users would not be able, under religious code, to use the alternative pools suggested by the Council. The same old buildings that local authorities reject as out of date gain a new relevance in multicultural communities like Govanhill, where the old-fashioned layout of the building is what

makes it suitable for purpose. The social inclusion that the Government hoped to promote through sport was, in some communities, already flourishing in Glasgow.

Glasgow Shettleston was also the constituency with the lowest voter turnout in the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary election, with just 33.43%. This continued distance from participation in politics by less affluent communities was overshadowed in the aftermath of the election by the voting system fiasco. The area consistently returns a Labour majority, and in the face of service closures in the locality by the Labour council, frustration at the polls seems inevitable. This is not to be mistaken for apathy towards the issues on party manifestos. In the days, weeks and months after the initial closure of the Govanhill Baths in March 2001, 30,000 people signed a petition not only in favour of keeping the Baths open, but in support of the public occupation of the property. Local residents manned a 24-hour occupation of the site for five months, bringing much-needed publicity

to the cause, brought to an end in scenes of violence as police forced their way into the building, supported by a 250-strong team of officers; horses and even helicopter surveillance. This is not, as the electoral statistics would have you believe, a depoliticised area – it is an area that just has to shout louder, and in

more inventive and radical ways, to be heard. Bridget McConnell, Director of Cultural and Leisure Services for Glasgow City Council, unwittingly provided the Baths Trust campaign with an epigraph when she said, in a 2006 speech on the social economy: ‘Culture and sport in the hands of the people of Glasgow [...] will work most effectively when all of those with a stake in culture and sport in the city, whether in the public, private, community or voluntary sectors work together.’<sup>5</sup> The community’s hard work and persistence has brought the council round to this point of co-operation.

On 18 August 2006 the Council granted the Govanhill Baths Community Trust a 99-year lease on the baths in order to convert it into a ‘wellbeing and sporting complex’. The Trust was given 12 months to demonstrate that they could raise the capital and provide a working business model for the Baths. Should



that fail to materialise, the Council would put the building on the open market. The Friends of the Baths and the Baths Trust (now a registered charity) continue to meet regularly at the Community Centre, and events such as concerts, sponsored runs and bric-a-brac sales are organised. The hub of the operation is now the charity's shop, a minute's walk from the bathhouse, which is staffed by volunteers. NORD Architecture, an award-winning firm that is currently involved in a number of Glasgow community projects, such as the renovation of public conveniences and steamies, as well as the redevelopment of the Tramway Theatre, is now involved in the Baths project. The current plans involve a restoration of all three pools and Turkish baths; a fitness suite (the original steamie was a gym from the 1970s until 2001); a 'healthy eating café'; crèche and roof garden. The structural elements of the building will be kept intact to allow maximum social inclusion, whilst bringing in modern elements in keeping with the changing needs of the community. Its website shows awareness of the complex issues surrounding the development: 'Govanhill currently has a population of 8,500 people, around 20% of whom are from black or minority ethnic communities. 7.5% are unemployed but only 42% are economically active. Recent high profile concerns have highlighted the lack of amenities for children and young people, lack of employment opportunities, and the poor state of the environment, drug misuse and increase in racist incidents. In many ways Govanhill is representative of the problems facing inner city communities across the country.'<sup>6</sup> With an understanding of the particular community the building is in, the campaign now has people working with it who can really make the project work for the people who would use it.

The 2014 'Glasgow Games' will see many events being held at the National Stadium, 30 minutes leisurely walk from the Baths in Govanhill. It remains uncertain whether much of the projected tourist revenue will pass through the tills of local business in the area. There is a note of caution for the Baths campaign amongst the jubilant displays of others in light of the bid's success. Fatima Uygun, a longtime Baths supporter, commented prophetically in 2004, 'We contacted the London Pools Campaign. This campaign is liaising with all the pools in London which are being demolished – each year in London at least one pool closes. This year Charlton Lido has closed, Northolt Swimarama will close in the autumn and Ladywell Pool has announced its closure. It's something atrocious. There is a pool in London that's actually shut and

falling to bits but they've waited until the end of the London bid for the Olympics before they actually demolish it, because you couldn't really bid for the Games if you're demolishing existing infrastructure.'<sup>7</sup> The worry that Glasgow's success may be Govanhill's loss has not yet proven justified. What is certain is that the community activists in Govanhill have overcome far more in the past to see this facility reopen, and the Baths will not close permanently without another hard fight.

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 *Scotsman*, 10 November 2007.
- 2 Press release, can be read in full on <http://www.holyrood.com/content/view/1668/10552/>
- 3 Kate Hoey, 'Swimmers left high and dry by neglected pools', *Telegraph*, 1 November 2005.
- 4 Figures from NHS Constituency and Wellbeing profile, 2004, for Glasgow Shettleston.
- 5 Quoted in the *Evening Times*, 8 March 2006.
- 6 NORD architecture website, [www.nordarchitecture.com/bathhouse.html](http://www.nordarchitecture.com/bathhouse.html)
- 7 Govanhill Baths Trust, 'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk, Along the briny beach', *Variant* 21, Winter 2004.

