



METROPOLIS OBSERVED

Reclaiming the River

Pete Seeger and friends promote a permeable swimming structure for the newly cleaned-up Hudson River.

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Meta Brunzema's design for a Hudson River swimming pool recalls New York's historic bathhouses.

Courtesy Meta Brunzema



A New York bathhouse at 51st Street and the Hudson (circa 1897).

Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York

Train tracks and industrial buildings are not the only things that separate so many Hudson River communities from the water itself. Decades of pollution have long discouraged people who live on the river from using it in any pleasurable way. Certainly that was the case in Beacon, New York. While the transformation of the old Nabisco packaging factory into the Dia: Beacon museum in 2003 has been one celebrated effort to revitalize the town, another smaller project less than a mile away addresses the riverscape more directly. Longtime environmental activist and folksinger Pete Seeger and New York architect Meta Brunzema have formed a unique alliance to construct a “river pool,” whose intent is not simply to bring swimmers back to the river but to promote a broader sense of river stewardship.

There is nothing new about the idea of a river pool—a permeable enclosure that allows people to safely wade or swim in a river. From the 1880s to the 1920s, floating bathhouses resembling square donuts were common along the perimeter of Manhattan. These cagelike wooden structures—with adjacent changing rooms and walkways—allowed the river to flow through them, providing swimming facilities for immigrant communities. But as Seeger, who lives just outside Beacon, says, “By 1928 or so the water was too polluted, so the pools were discontinued. But since then a lot of people have said, ‘One of these days, we’ll have those pools again. We’ve got to clean up the river.’”

Some 60 miles downstream, Brunzema was one of those people. A 1990 graduate of Columbia University’s school of architecture, she had worked in the offices of Gwathmey Siegel and Steven Holl. Less interested in the residential and office renovations that came her way, and believing that “architecture can change the world,” Brunzema opened her own office in 1998 in the Hell’s Kitchen section of Manhattan to focus on public projects, particularly community work and waterfront planning.



Brunzema’s original design for a river pool took its cues from a city parks council feasibility study for a floating recreation center: a barge parked next to a city pier with a hole cut out of it to form a pool. But the shadow of the barge would be detrimental to the river’s aquatic life, so Brunzema developed a design more like a transparent plastic bowl suspended in the water. “My goal was to have this be as progressive as possible,” she says. “But the environmentalists, in an effort to promote clean water, told me they wanted the river pool to use actual river water instead of filtered water.” Her second plan was for a totally permeable structure, a 66-foot-diameter pool with a steel-cable netting floor and sides composed of vertical bars held in place with a steel ring at the bottom. A lightweight collapsible structure, it can be folded up and stored during winter months.

Word of Brunzema's design traveled through the waterfront-activist community. When it reached Seeger, "He flipped," Brunzema says. "He fell in love with this round pool, maybe because it looks kind of like a banjo." Seeger's reaction more likely had to do with his long-standing conviction that—27 years after passage of the "Clean Water Act"—the Hudson is safe and public projects ought to be bringing community life back to the river. Within days of learning about her plan, Seeger contacted Brunzema to articulate both his excitement and his design refinements, chief among them the inclusion of a toddler pool. He went on to suggest that the riverfront in Beacon might provide the ideal site for the first pool.

Working with assorted federal, state, and local agencies—the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and the local Department of Health—to determine the criteria for permeable pool enclosures, Brunzema faced extensive water-quality testing requirements. As it turned out, the river water at Beacon proved to be some of the cleanest tested in Dutchess County. Because the river is an estuary, construction also required extensive environmental studies. Unfazed, she determined that a 20-foot-diameter wading pool should be built as a prototype to test both design and environmental concerns. "I believe there is a design solution to everything," she says.

Seeger is fond of saying, "You can't expect people to fight for a cleaner river until they learn to love it," a theory I was able to test the day I visited the site. Getting to the Beacon waterfront ordinarily requires crossing a bridge over the rail tracks into an expansive commuter parking lot at the train station. That day, though, I came to the site by way of the river itself. The Beacon Sloop Club—an organizing entity for the river pool, which counts Seeger among its founding members—had organized a one-mile swim from the city of Newburgh, across the river, to Beacon to raise money for the pool's construction, now planned for summer 2005. On a windy, gray September day, I stood on the Newburgh pier with Brunzema and 61 other swimmers ranging in age from 13 to 78. Some 35 kayakers worked as spotters, a Coast Guard escort was on hand, and river traffic had been stopped for the duration of the swim.

Swimming is by nature a solitary activity. The river was choppy that afternoon, and the Hudson always has high turbidity from its natural aquatic life, both of which made it difficult to keep track of fellow swimmers. Yet a sense of communality prevailed. At one point midriver, I found myself next to a woman who was singing; I later learned it was a 13-year-old's mom keeping her daughter going. On reaching the other side, we were offered roasted corn on the cob, sweet potato pie, and chocolate-coconut energy bars—a hybrid menu of soul food and power bars that somehow seemed appropriate to the enterprise.

Earlier Brunzema had mused that the drawing of the pool "looks a little like a petri dish," and what seemed to be germinating most robustly was Seeger's sought-after community allegiance to the river. Concerned about health department requirements, however, Seeger favors different parlance. Throughout summer months, public lakes and ponds in the state may be closed by the department if water turbidity hinders lifeguards' underwater vision. "But beaches don't have to close," he says. "I say this is not a pool but a swimming net. It's a nomenclature thing. This is a floating beach, if anyone asks."

It was the end of the afternoon by then, and Seeger was standing on an old wooden pier where Sloop Club members had propped several aluminum ladders in the river for swimmers' egress. He took the ladders from the water one by one and laid them on the ground nearby. It was the assured gesture of a river steward who knows that the swim—and the summer—are over. The gesture also invited one to imagine a season or two hence when river access would not be an improvisational arrangement of old ladders but a more reliable and gracious construction that reconnects communities and the people in them with the river that runs through them.