

A bathhouse of the late 16th century at Dieburg/West Germany

In the towns of Central Europe, public bathhouses appeared for the first time in the 11th/12th centuries. They were a part of the urban culture, like town halls, markets, fountains etc. Inhabitants of a town visited bathhouses (weekly or monthly) not only for hygienic reasons, but also for social entertainment.

The number of bathhouses grew continuously until the 15th century.

In Frankfurt e.g., we know of about 15 bathhouses in 1500. 55 years later, only two were still in existence. In Vienna/Austria, 12 of the 21 bathhouses of the 14th century were given up by 1534. Three reasons were responsible for this development:

- the price of wood grew steadily since the 15th century. Since wood, or the derivation charcoal, was the only fuel, its extensive need in a bathhouse became most expensive;
- syphilis, "imported" from America by the Spanish conquistadores, spread over Europe and caused a great number of deaths. A bathhouse was particularly apt for the propagation of such a disease;
- finally, the steady admonitions of the clergy against the sometimes quite liberal manners - men and women used common bath-tubs - were successful.

Despite the decline, new bathhouses were constructed in the second half of the 16th century, or existing buildings were transformed into bathhouses, especially in smaller towns and villages, whereas the bathhouses in the big cities disappeared gradually.

Contemporary descriptions and graphic representations illustrate quite well the appearance of visitors, equipment and details of the building.

Our knowledge about the architectural form of bathhouses and their inner organization is relatively restraint, since there exists no typological research on this subject. The reason for the lack of any systematic work might be the fact that only a few houses have survived until now, and their inner distribution and specific details are mostly altered or have disappeared. Several bathhouses could be identified in Southern Germany in the last years. The research of a bathhouse discovered at Dieburg, made it possible to compare and complete different findings of such structures.

The town of Dieburg is located about 30 miles southeast of Frankfurt. Its origin was a Roman castrum whose precincts were considerably larger than those of the later town.

The bathhouse is situated within the medieval perimeter and close to the market-place.

Despite its local denomination "Badhaus" (bathhouse) and the name of the street where it stands, "Badgasse" (bath street), there weren't any traces which could confirm its prior use.

The plan of the building is a kind of shifted rectangle, about 11 x 13,5 metres long; the ground level is of stone, the first floor is of timber construction, and the house is covered with a span-roof.

Six of the seven rooms on the ground level are vaulted. A kind of key-stone is fixed in one vaulting, it represents a coat of arms dated 1594.

Next to the entrance, a staircase leads to the first floor. A corridor, 2,50 metres wide, gives access to three rooms on both sides. On the eastside, a simple steep flight of stairs leads to the garret-storey.

In collaboration with a plaster-restorer the walls were examined. A dendrochronological analysis of the oakbeams fixed 1579 as the year that the corresponding trees had been cut.

The building was constructed between 1579 and 1581. The ground level originally had wooden ceilings which were, however, soon replaced by brick vaultings: a fire had proved that wood was not an appropriate material in a house where an open fire was usually kept as well as great quantities of water.

In the early 19th century, the building was once again altered. Perhaps only then was the public bath closed and dwellings were established.

Specific details of the house confirm that, in fact, it had served as a bathhouse:

- Remains of the original stone floor, with a draining system;
- a sandstone trough located in the middle of the wall which might have been a container for drinking water.
- particular foundations along three sides of the building's main room were probably the substruction of wooden benches;
- finally, the small central room, the place of the primitive oven: stone built, with a flat surface on which large stones and vessels were heated. Wide openings on three sides made it accessible from the main rooms.

The bath, so to say, was on the ground level. The visitors entered the house from the street, undressed in the entrance room before going into the two large bathrooms, which were heated by the central oven. They sat either on wooden benches along the walls and sweat in the hot steam (just like in a modern sauna), or they chose to bathe in a tub and were served by the house attendants. Because of the expense of soap they were cleansed by steam, brushes and towels. In an adjacent room were further services offered by the barber: hair, beard and nails could be cut and even small injuries were treated.

The upper storey was originally used as a hospital, a religious foundation for elder people, e.g. or a brothel.

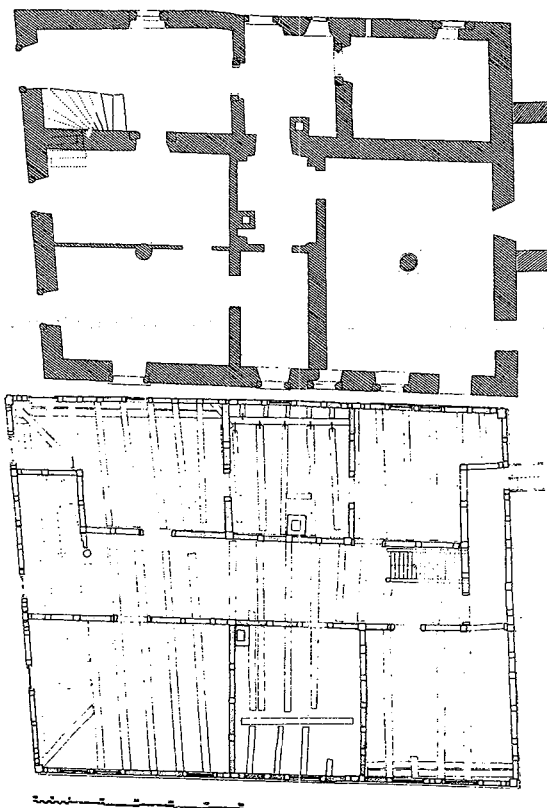
Other findings, such as layers of plaster and paint, ceramic tiles, window glass, table utensils, etc., completed the architectural and archeological analysis.

It was not our intention to recreate a kind of late medieval bathhouse with all its different details. The reconstruction tried to keep as much of the original substance as possible and to correct later interventions only if absolutely necessary.

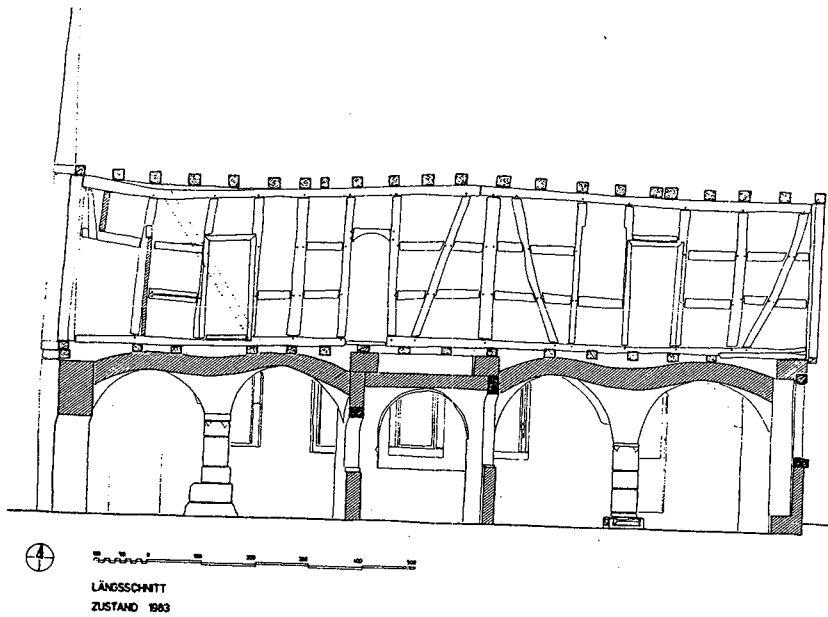
Nevertheless, it was possible to regain the flow of space whose disposition and shape reflect the appearance of the building as it was at the end of the 16th century. It is now used as a restaurant and can be visited.



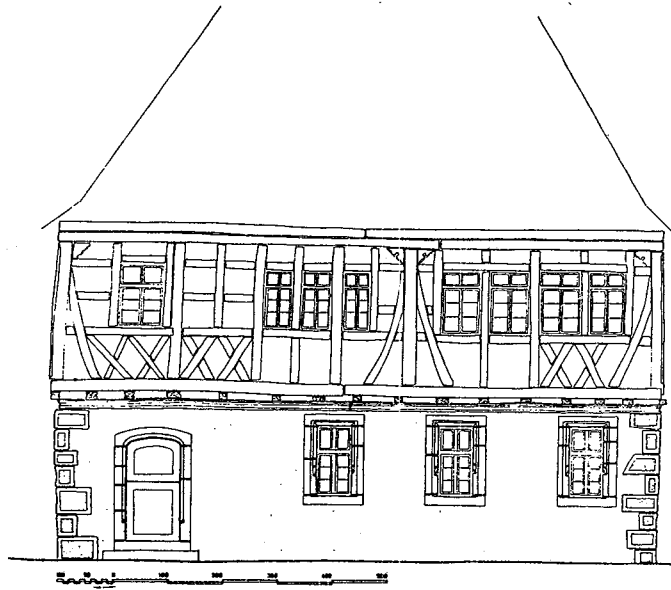
Interior of a bathhouse
Woodcut from: Michael Hero, Schachtafeln der
Gesuntheit, Strasbourg 1533



above: ground floor plan before
restoration
below: first floor plan before
restoration



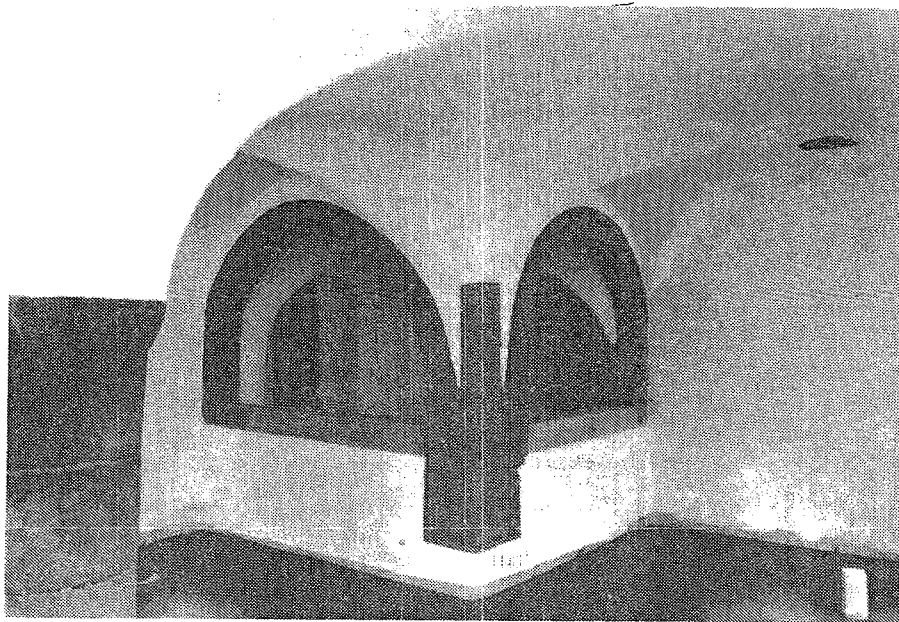
Longitudinal section



Street facade as it had been in 1581



Ground floor, main room. In the background,
site of the original oven with its arches.
Photo taken during the restoration



Ground floor, main room. Same situation.
Photo taken after the restoration

RESUME: A bathhouse of the late 16th century at Dieburg/
West Germany

The highly developed Roman bathing culture had perished, like most of the achievements of their civilization, in the tempests of various migrations of nations.

Bathhouses appeared again in the towns and villages of Central Europe in the 11th and 12 centuries.

The sovereigns or the self-conscious citizens "equiped" their towns with a number of public institutions like town- and guild-halls, markets, hospitals etc. - and bathhouses.

Then bathing was scarcely possible in private dwellings which were mostly small and simple. Thus people went to bathhouses to get cleansed and to meet other people. They used to stay there for several hours, eat, drink and hear music. The more inhabitants a town had and the richer it was, the more bathhouses existed.

Between the 11th and the 15th century, a certain building-type was developed and slightly varied according to local needs and building traditions.

The ground level, always stone built, was the bath so to say.

The upper storey/storeys served to rest in, or could be occupied by a hospital, a religious foundation or a brothel.

The sovereign or the town council accorded the privilege for keeping a bathhouse, controlled its prices, hours of aperture and certain "activities" which often provoked the clergy.

Since the 15th century, the number of bathhouses diminishes rapidly. In an atmosphere where both sexes were in close contact, an epidemic disease, like syphilis, "imported" from America, could spread quite easily. Nevertheless, one continued to build bathhouses, particularly in smaller towns and villages.

There exists no serious typological research of this building-type, perhaps because only a few bathhouses have survived until now.

At Dieburg, a bathhouse of the late 16th century was identified recently. Its restoration made it possible to examine the whole building thoroughly and to discover parts of its former equipment. Its original function and appearance could be reconstructed theoretically. Most of the substance was saved and it is now possible to visit this building, one with a very specific history.

RESUME: Une maison de bains de la fin du 16° siècle à Dieburg/
RFA

Les Romains avaient construit partout dans leur empire de grandioses thermes. Dans les troubles des migrations des peuples, ces art et culture s'étaient perdus.

Il n'est qu'aux 11° et 12° siècles, que des maisons de bains re-apparaissaient dans les villes et villages en Europe Centrale. Les souverains ou les bourgeois eux-mêmes ont "équipé" leurs villes avec un nombre d'institutions publiques, comme des hôtels de ville, maisons de corporation, marchés, hôpitaux etc. - et maisons de bains.

Comme les maisons particulières étaient pour leur plupart petites et simples, il y était à peine possible de prendre un bain. Aussi les gens fréquentaient-ils les bains publics pour se nettoyer, mais aussi, pour y rencontrer d'autres gens. On avait le coutume de rester dans une maison de bains pendant des heures, on y mangeait, buvait et écoutait à la musique. Plus une ville avait d'habitants et était riche, plus de maisons de bains l'on y rencontrait.

Entre les 11° et 15° siècles, un certain type de construction s'était développé qu'on variait selon les besoins et traditions de construction locaux.

Le rez-de-chaussée, toujours en pierre, était l'espace de bain proprement dit, tandis que les chambres à repos se trouvaient à l'étage. Là encore, d'autres fonctions étaient possibles: hôpital, fondation charitable ou bordel.

Le souverain ou le conseil municipal accordait le privilège pour l'entretien d'une maison de bains, contrôlait ses prix, heures d'ouverture et certaines "activités" dont le clergé était souvent provoqué.

Le nombre de maisons de bains diminuait rapidement dès le 15° siècle. La syphilis, "importée" de l'Amérique, allait se répandre en Europe. Les maisons de bains, lieux de rencontre des deux sexes, étaient des endroits "idéals" pour la propagation de l'épidémie. Pourtant, on continuait à en construire, particulièrement dans les villes plus petites et dans les villages.

Il n'existe aucune recherche typologique sur les maisons de bains, peut-être parce que il n'en subsiste très peu de leur substance.

A Dieburg, une maison de bains de la fin du 16° siècle, fut identifiée récemment. Sa restauration a permis une recherche poussée, au cours de laquelle des restes de l'ancienne équipement furent découverts. La plus grande partie de sa substance primitive fut préservée. Il est ainsi possible de se promener aujourd'hui dans un bâtiment avec un passé très particulier.