Imagine working in a steel mill all day and coming home to wash up in a basin, or carrying water to a portable wooden or tin tub for a once-a-week cleansing. As late as 1900, most houses in Pittsburgh did not have indoor plumbing and personal hygiene suffered. People bathed in the rivers, but the currents could be dangerous and in 1895 city officials outlawed bathing nude in the rivers between sunrise and 8:30 p.m. That year they also passed a law providing free bathhouses as demanded by “a humane and charitable public policy.” Only in the late 1950s did it become mandatory that each living space have its own bathroom.

In 1894 Andrew Carnegie began to provide bathing facilities in the libraries, initially for his workers, and ultimately for the communities surrounding his mills. A year later members of the Twentieth Century Club and the Council of Jewish Women created the Civic Club of Allegheny County to find ways to increase the number of free or affordable bathhouses in Pittsburgh. Their committee sent letters “to all the public baths of Europe and to those in this country (though at that time there were not many in the U.S.) regarding cost and maintenance” and lobbied...
wealthy patrons for funds. Mrs. William Thaw, Jr., was among the first to oblige, paying for a building at 16th Street and Penn Avenue in the Strip District with 32 marble showers and two tubs, and second floor living space for the superintendent. For a nickel one could shower with soap and a towel included. Named the People’s Baths, the facility opened on Thanksgiving Day, 1897. Thirteen years later, after moving the bathhouse to 1908 Penn Avenue, it was dubbed a “boon to the neighborhood” and had served 846,539 men, women, and children, with 61,267 free baths provided.4

Henry Phipps, vice president of Carnegie Steel and Carnegie’s lifelong friend, took on the cause of public baths with several local projects. He funded half the cost of the Public Wash House and Baths Association at 35th and Butler streets in Lawrenceville. This facility included a sewing room and laundry facilities. Showers (white marble) cost a nickel, but tub baths (limited to half an hour) were 10 cents for women and 15 cents for men. The building has been repurposed, but it survived as a local community club until 1961.5

New York architect Grosvenor Atterbury had designed apartments for Phipps (built 1905 to 1908); Phipps again hired Atterbury in 1907 (completed 1908) to build a four-
story natatorium, a bathhouse that included a large indoor swimming pool, at 540 Duquesne Way near the Sixth Street Bridge. This had a magnificent Guastavino-tiled pool and was a commercial venture, not designed to alleviate the bathing needs of mill workers as tub baths cost 25 cents.6

In 1907 the Soho Bath House at 2408-2410 Fifth Avenue was completed by the city. Although no longer used as a bath house, the structure remains. A 1910 description read: “A beautiful cream-colored brick and terra cotta building, fronting three stories on Fifth Avenue, five stories in the rear, and with an added entrance from Forbes Street.” It had 52 showers and six tubs, an assembly hall, three staff apartments, and men’s and women’s waiting rooms.

In 1914, Henry W. Oliver’s widow and daughter endowed the South Side Baths, now the Oliver Bath House, the only bathhouse still functioning in the city. Designed by McClure & Spahr architects, the indoor pool remains popular in the fall and winter. The Renaissance Revival building at 38 South Tenth Street is ornamented with stylized fish.

By the 1920s the city directory listed nine bathhouses, but the numbers dwindled as more apartments provided indoor plumbing. Often endowed by the wealthy, those bathhouses that remain leave us with rich architecture and a reminder of how far we have come since the days of bathing in rivers. Americans have had well over a century of sophisticated sanitation while as late as 2008, 2.6 billion people in the world have no sanitation or plumbing whatsoever.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

1 W. W. Thomson, A Digest of the Acts of Assembly Relating to and the General Ordinances of the...
City of Pittsburgh from 1804 to January 1st 1897 (Pittsburgh, 1897), p. 363.


4 Ibid. p. 20.

