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INSPIRATION FOR INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

## Pool Britannia Special spaces for swimmers

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A photograph of a modern house at dusk. The house features a large glass-enclosed swimming pool and a glass staircase. The interior is warmly lit, and the pool area is visible through the glass. The sky is a deep blue, and the background shows a traditional brick building with chimneys.

# Pools winners

As the summer approaches and given last year's heatwave, demand for swimming pools is set to soar. British architects are making a creative splash with pools that seek to overcome the issue of weather by blending indoor and outdoor space. New urban pools are increasingly the focus of a house rather than an afterthought, creative solutions to the frequent problem of limited space in modern cities

WORDS BY KATE BURNETT





**T**wenty years ago, there were less than 2,500 private pools in the UK. Estimates now suggest that there are as many as 130,000 of them. Not only has the number increased, but the amount spent on each installation has also gone up. Most of the UK's pools are indoors, so a major consideration – in terms of both budget and design – is how the pool and related plant and facilities will be housed, as well as the design of the pool itself.

However, the opportunities to design pools are still not as common a part of most practices' experience as the numbers would suggest, although it is a challenge relished by most designers. In the UK, where more than 80 per cent of pools are indoors, architects are often approached to add one to an existing property, often in the basement or on the ground floor, away from the main social space.

A pool was not originally included in the brief for a house built by Belsize Architects on Sheldon Avenue in north London. 'The clients were interested in water as part of the design, so we added on the pool after persuading the client to extend the brief,' explains practice principal Shahriar Nasser.

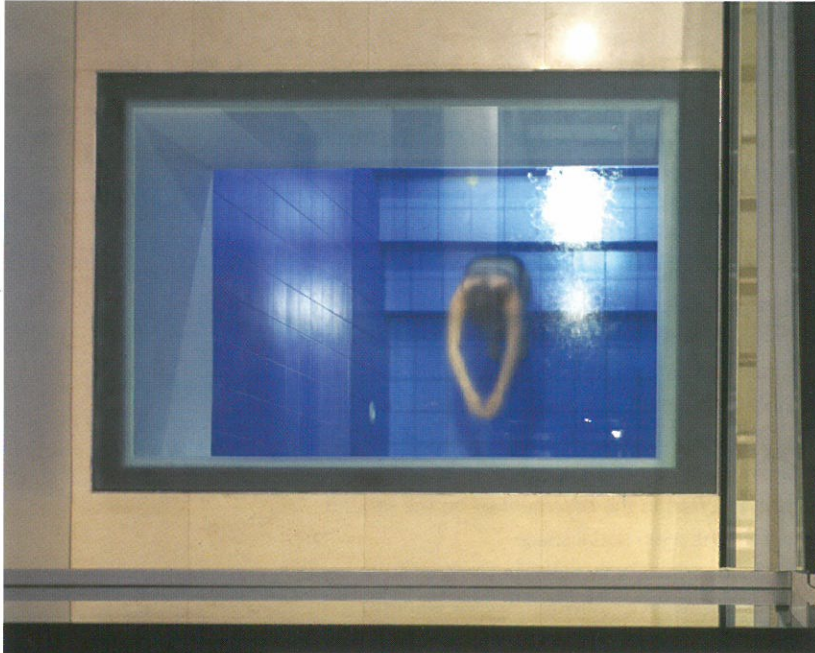
Placing a pool below ground level can create structural and decorative challenges. However, in Belsize Architects' north London house, the pool now occupies the basement but appears as an integral element of the design of the building as a whole. 'Basements are never especially exciting places to live in,' explains Shahriar. 'The design of the pool was a visual continuation of the house. The transparent atrium cascades down through the house into the basement and the pool, with glass vision panels within the floor on the ground-floor level. The pool follows the volume of the atrium but also extends out of the house at basement level. The pool is something that affects the perception of the whole building.' It is, therefore, almost the visual focal point of the house.

In design terms, the rectangle is still the geometry of choice in many UK pools – its simple, uncluttered lines allowing the materials to express themselves, often enhanced by their proximity to water. The Sheldon Avenue pool is completely enclosed, but with four glass doors that separate the end of the pool from the garden. The basement and ground floor is a concrete structure supported by 80 to 90 minipiles, whereas the first and second floors are steel and timber. Using deep-blue ceramic tiles to surround and line some of the pool also reinforces its presence visually. The rest of this lower-level space was given over to changing rooms, a games room and plant for the pool itself.

Advances in building techniques have allowed for increasingly fluid designs and more inventive landscaping, particularly for outdoor pools. Understandably, the possibilities of these new techniques are best explored in the

**LEFT, ARCHITECTURE PRACTICE KSRA BALANCED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE POOL AND NATURE, WITH THIS STUNNING PROJECT IN HAMPSTEAD, LONDON**





**ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT, BELSIZE ARCHITECTS MADE THIS BASEMENT POOL THE FOCUS OF THE HOME BY CREATING A VISUAL ATRIUM THROUGH THE HOUSE**

more conducive climates of, for example, the US, Mexico, Australia and South Africa, than in the UK. These more temperate zones have been home to some of the names behind classic modern pool design – John Lautner, Richard Neutra and Oscar Niemeyer.

Natural pools are being created which use plants and organisms to form and sustain a more realistic ecosystem as part of a man-made pool. These waterscapes not only look more natural but also use less chemicals than conventional concrete-and-tile pools. Landscaping plays an important part in creating this effect, with water flowing between organically shaped tiered pools arranged around gardens. This is something that is still not common in the UK – since most pools are indoors, where it is hard to control the environment – but companies such as Anglo Aquarium (Anglo Swimming Ponds) are developing the concept here.

While it may be difficult to recreate a living outdoor pool, the relationship between water and nature, and inside and outside space, is frequently addressed by designers and demanded by clients. Mark Ruthven of KSRA is working on two pools and has recently completed a third in a house in Hampstead which won Garden of the Year Award from the British Landscape Designers Association. 'I would say we were recognised not so much for the pools, but for the design of fairly seamless indoor and outdoor spaces. We look at designing the pool holistically. I wouldn't say our reputation was exclusively built on designing pools, but we have won clients who came to us because we had experience in this area. The spaces are not the easiest to work with and it is a very technical area of design,' says Mark.

Mark seeks to blend the interior and exterior spatially, as

well as in his use of materials. Stone is used inside and outside the pool at the Hampstead house and a large relief sculpture down one side of the pool highlights the different surfaces. Stone, particularly limestone, continues to be a popular decorative choice and works well with wood and concrete in terms of tone and texture.

Slate is also an increasingly popular choice for lining and surrounding pools. De Matos Storey Ryan used slate in its pools at Cowley Manor, a new hotel in a listed country house in Gloucestershire. Its pools are another successful example of blending outdoor and indoor spaces. 'Our work is not loud – we wanted it to be buried and hidden, closer to landscape than architecture,' says Angus Storey. 'We were working with a Grade II listed garden and the conservation department of the local authority. We decided to notionally bury the pool in the landscape, creating an underground courtyard filled with pools of water – we wanted to create a pool such as you might find in a cave or lake. We had to excavate 6,000 cu m of earth, so this was started before the main work. The roof is a thick slab of concrete with planted lavender on the surface. A wall of rough Cotswold stone rises on one side from a low level to a height of 4.5m, while on another there is a concrete retaining wall covered in Cumbrian slate, and all other ancillary rooms are hidden behind these walls. The water in the pools is almost level with the surface of the courtyard.'

Designing pools demands a certain technical expertise and many architects will call on specialist pool companies and consultants to make sure the client gets the best value in terms of cost and technical efficiency. Consultants can advise on lighting and acoustics, and a few specialist swimming pool





consultants have the experience to bring together the whole team of engineers, architects, contractors and interior designers.

Michael Braid has nearly 40 years of experience in designing and building pools, and has worked on every conceivable type of public and private pool with many leading architects and designers. He feels that contractors often cut corners which ultimately let down the whole design process: 'Because of the competitive situation, contractors look to drive cost – and therefore standards – down. The situation hasn't improved much in recent years. Many clients don't realise how much of an improvement they can achieve by spending another £10,000 – just a fraction of much larger budget. We need to re-educate people and raise standards.' He points out some particular problems: 'The biggest mistakes are bad circulation in terms of water distribution, underfiltering and insufficient design input in water treatment. Environmental standards must be raised.'

Climate control is always an issue with indoor pools, but particularly in areas where ventilation is limited. Advances in humidity controls have allowed for a wider range of decorative materials, including soft furnishings, to be used in the vicinity of the pool. A private pool in London was recently built complete with cinema screen for the owner and guests to enjoy movies in unconventional surroundings, something that might have been technically inadvisable just a few years ago, when climate control was less sophisticated. More durable materials are still preferred around the immediate area of the pool, with many designers looking to use stone and glass finishes. Wood is perhaps less frequently chosen, due in part to the overuse of decking in recent years. 'We've used

black slate on both indoor and outdoor pools recently and it looks fabulous,' says Veere Grenney of interior design company Veere Grenney Associates. 'However, aqua can be successful as a colour too, despite its clichéd reputation in pool design. We recently lined an underground pool in white mosaic, which creates a beautiful aqua effect and works very well.'

Lighting is a critical factor in creating atmosphere in and around the pool but can often be neglected. Minds Eye is a lighting consultancy with experience of private and public pool-lighting design. 'Good lighting plays a crucial part in making a pool a relaxing space,' asserts Minds Eye director Douglas James. 'Lighting is probably neglected, often left to the contractor who will often put in what he put in last time. Light plays a supporting role to architecture and surfaces. We look for places to conceal lighting. Water does make things difficult. We have to consider low-voltage, non-corrosive

**ABOVE, DE MATOS STOREY RYAN'S PROJECT FOR COWLEY MANOR INVOLVED BURYING THE POOL IN THE LANDSCAPE**