

Ripple Effect

A string of proposed projects aims to reclaim urban waterways for people.

By Joann Gonchar, FAIA



RENDERING: © FAMILY NEW YORK, COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF + POOL

AS ARCHIE LEE COATES tells it, + Pool—a concept launched in the summer of 2010 for a swimming facility that would float in New York’s inner harbor and be filled with river water filtered by the pool’s own walls—was created almost on a lark. He and Jeff Franklin, his partner in the multidisciplinary design firm PlayLab, along with Dong-Ping Wong and Oana Stanescu, founders of the former architecture firm Family, wanted to make it possible for their fellow New Yorkers to swim in the city’s rivers without worrying about the dangers posed by currents, boat traffic, floating debris, or pollution.

By Coates’s own admission, the four friends, then all in their mid- to late 20s, and who had all launched their firms only a year before, were incredibly naive: “We didn’t understand anything about water quality, how to build in New York, or how to fund-raise,” he says. But they had hardly any work—it was the depths of the Great Recession—so they spent a few weeks developing a scheme for a cross-shaped pool 50 meters across in both directions. They made a website (pluspool.org) and a pamphlet that they sent to the parks department and other city agencies. They received little response at first, but the project started getting attention after a friend wrote an article for a business newsletter. A few weeks later, the idea caught the eye of the engineering firm Arup, which offered to help develop the filtering system.

In the intervening years, more than \$340,000 dollars has been raised for + Pool in two Kickstarter campaigns, the project has attracted support from corporate sponsors (including Heineken), and it has won grants for the development and testing of its filtration system and for other activities. Friends of + Pool—a nonprofit established in 2015 whose primary mission is to support the development of the facility but which also oversees a number of other initiatives, including a children’s learn-to-swim program—has an annual operating budget of \$1 million. Significant hurdles remain. The one that looms largest is finding a site, but, according to Coates—who serves as the organization’s executive director—the mayor’s office has committed to helping identify a spot in the Hudson or East River by the end of the year. Clearly, this seemingly outlandish idea has legs.

New York is hardly the only city considering a swimming facility for waters previously thought unsuitable for such a use. In the U.S. and Europe, there are several active proposals.

JUST ADD WATER The walls of + Pool, a proposal for New York, will be made of fabric membrane that will filter river water. Though shown here near Brooklyn Bridge Park, the location of the pool is not yet determined.