**Q&A**

**What is the mission of Pool is Cool?**

Pool is Cool is a non-profit organization that promotes outdoor swimming in Brussels. Four employees and many helpers engage in daily dialogue with all stakeholders involved and organize actions that highlight the importance and added value of an open-air swimming pool in Brussels.

**How was Pool is Cool created?**

2014 marked a very hot summer in Belgium. The heat wave made the population desperate for refreshment and a water environment to relax with children or friends. The lack of such a place in Brussels unleashed a snowball effect of people who wanted to get involved to help set up an outdoor swimming pool. Many of them had a background in socio-cultural affairs, urban planning, architecture or politics. It gave a positive perception of the opportunities that such a combination of people could bring about. And like that, the foundation of the organization we know today as Pool is Cool was a fact.

**How does Pool is Cool function?**

Pool is Cool works in three languages and consists of four different pillars: Actions, Projects, Research and Debate.

* **Actions** are short snapshots that usually produce beautiful images, such as jumping into a fountain or a bike ride with flags claiming we want to swim. We encourage supporters to participate and produce material that they can then share through their own channels or that we ourselves share with the press.
* **Projects** are activities that take a little longer. They do not offer a solution to the issue as such, but they do show what it could be like to have a swimming pool by highlighting its advantages and by demonstrating that there is indeed a great demand for it. Flow, our most recent project on the Brussels Canal, is a good example. It quickly became clear that an outdoor swimming pool is not just a place for fun, but a kind of social microcosm and that it has an impact on the societal cohesion in Brussels.
* Our **Research** trajectory mainly focuses on finding concrete solutions and references to similar projects elsewhere in the world. It is not our intention to reinvent the wheel in Brussels. That is why we are looking for best practice cases as well as learnings to do it better, both spatially, financially, technically, sustainably and socially. It is important to always be one step ahead of the critical questions that may come up in all the different domains.
* **Debate** is very simply sharing our findings with the public. For this we use different channels, such as the media, our own website and social media channels, but also debates and public meetings. We not only share our point of view, but also give a platform to stakeholders from politics, experts, etc.

**Does Pool is Cool want to host a pop-up outdoor pool in Brussels every year, or is the intention to have a permanent pool?**

Flow, the pop-up outdoor pool that opened its doors for the first time last summer, is an example of a Projects activation. It emphasizes the advantages and added value of open-air swimming in Brussels. The final objective of Pool is Cool is that, thanks to our actions, we can finally convince the stakeholders involved, such as politicians and administrations, to set up permanent public open-air swimming areas.

**There seem to be more and more outdoor swimming pools closing in Belgium in recent years, while you want to open new ones. How about that?**

Today, swimming areas are run either by public authorities such as municipalities and provinces, which often lack resources and sometimes sufficient knowledge, or by private partners such as Lago or Sportoase. These are commissioned and financed by a local government to make democratic income prices possible, but above all they must be profitable. With Flow, we proved that a non-profit organization can be useful for urban open-air swimming areas that are not commercially profitable in themselves but offer great added value for the quality of life in a city. We can operate a swimming pool on a relatively small scale and be very flexible in this, but we can also create social added value by working with specific target groups. A story like that is easier to defend to local authorities and residents than the usual commercial approach.

**Is Pool is Cool working on other projects?**

The Leuven city council has asked us to start up a project in the Vaartkom starting from the summer of 2024. Initially, we were only planned to have an advisory role, but now the management of the open-air swimming pool has also been added to the request. We set up a separate organization for this project to avoid mixing up with the activist group in Brussels. This is how POP, Project Operation Partner, came to life. The City of Leuven provides both the funding for the construction of the pool and the necessary funds to run it.

**What is the added value of Pool is Cool on a societal level?**

Flow, the pop-up pool in Brussels, is so much more than an outdoor pool. It is a place where people who would never meet in other circumstances sit side by side. Flow is an incubator of meetings of people from different backgrounds and different cultures who find each other in a relaxing environment. And not only local residents, but people from all over Brussels find their way to Flow.

Moreover, an open-air swimming pool provides employment in the area. Flow has taught us the power and impact of working with young people who have not yet found their way in the job market. With us they find more than just a job; they get to know different spectrums of work, learn to take responsibility, build up social contacts and expand their own horizons within Brussels. In ART2WORK we found the ideal partner to offer employment to people who experience difficulties in their daily lives. This year we hope to pick up the thread again with a number of young people who worked at Flow last year and give them more responsibilities, supplemented with young people who will work at Flow for the first time this year. We will then disappear a little more into the background in the day-to-day management.

**Do you have support on a political level?**

The outdoor swimming story is politically a complex one. It is not only about sports, but also about health, nature, ecology, social issues and urban development. On the one hand, this provides many partners and points of contact with administrations, but it also means that have have to convince a lot of people to be able to realize something. This reality is reinforced even more by the complexity of the Brussels political landscape. This slows down the process, but also gives more potential for support.

Back in 2008, from a noble point of view, there was an attempt to install an outdoor swimming pool. However, there was not enough political and social support and the abundance of critical questions caused the idea to fade into the background. Hopefully, this time we can convince everyone of the social importance of an outdoor pool.

**Who is in charge of managing Flow?**

The management of an outdoor swimming pool entails a varied range of tasks; from providing information in different languages to checking at the entrance, from cleaning to general coordination. In ART2WORK we found the ideal partner last year to employ people who experience difficulties in this area in their daily lives. We hope to continue the successful collaborations with our employees from last year to this summer. This will allow us to pass some of the coordination, which used to be entirely in our own hands, on to them. This will give them the opportunity to prove themselves and take on more responsibilities. We will of course always be available should problems arise, but the intention is for us to move more into the background when it comes to day-to-day operations. We trust our employees and we are convinced that they have the right capabilities to correctly apply lessons learned from last year.

We have also chosen not to rely on structural volunteer work. The outdoor pool is a public infrastructure that should not be dependent on people who have to commit themselves in their spare time to keep the pool running. Of course, this does not mean that people who are in favor of our initiative cannot lend a hand here and there.

**What about safety in and around the pool?**

Safety in and around the pool is essential and it’s a no-brainer that we take it very seriously. On the one hand, there is the safety of swimmers in the water. A professional lifeguard is always present. In addition, we encourage some employees to take lifeguard training with an organization we work closely with.

On the other hand, all employees bear the responsibility of ensuring that everyone feels comfortable and safe. Since many visitors know our employees as neighbors, friends, or people from the neighborhood, they respect that we all need to contribute together to create a nice environment. This worked very well last year except for a few skirmishes. We are also working on including specific trainings in the training process for new employees to help them deal with difficult situations. While we don't want to risk a situation getting out of hand, such things can happen in any context where many people come together.

**How does Pool is Cool collaborate with partners?**

Pool is Cool's projects would not be possible without its many partners. Each partner offers access to a new and differentiated network and areas of expertise. The partners differ from project to project and are determined based on the specific objectives of that project.

Flow is a great example of how the diversity in partners can take a project to a new level:

* Set designer Jozef Wouters was responsible for the design and much of the construction of the outdoor pool. The social link the Molenbeek artist has with the neighborhood and its youth was at least as important.
* ART2WORK, an organization that helps young people get back on track when they have lost direction in their studies or professional lives, was in turn an essential partner for the management of the pool. They guided young people to successfully carry out simple tasks around the pool. In addition, the organization has an interesting network of youth centers.
* Fix Brussels is an association that helps people when they experience barriers on the job market. They guide people in the construction sector. Flow was able to count on their workers for the technical part of the pop-up outdoor pool. In addition, the organization brought in a network that Pool is Cool would otherwise never have reached.
* Kunstenfestivaldesarts provided a substantial budget for the construction of Flow which subsequently became the place to showcase an artistic performance to the public during their festival in 2021.

But also the previous projects of POOL IS COOL would not have been possible without the close collaboration with various organizations such as Au Bord de l'Eau, BOZAR or Leefmilieu Brussel and many enthusiastic Brussels citizens.

**Can an open-air swimming pool be sustainable?**

Sure. We can talk about sustainability at scale on the one hand and the sustainability of the project itself on the other. The alternative to a public pool is that everyone places a private pool - inflatable or otherwise - in their garden, fills it with countless cubic metres of water, but only uses it a few times and has to maintain and possibly heat it throughout the summer. On a large scale, a public pool is much more sustainable than many Brussels residents each seeking an individual solution for refreshment.

Moreover, when we compare an outdoor pool to an indoor pool, our project turns out to be much more sustainable as well. Indoor pools are very expensive due to costs for heating both the room and the water, ventilation and large heat losses or attempts to keep heat in by recuperation. Outdoor pools are much more sustainable because they do not require ventilation and heating. Heating is an option, but we saw last summer that there was no need for it, as the pool maintained a constant temperature of 18 to 20 degrees, despite the exceptionally gray summer. People might not stay in the pool for two hours, but for a refreshing dip and the experience, that temperature is ideal.

**How is the pool kept clean?**

Our ambition in the future is to purify swimming pool water using natural water treatment with plant filters that can ecologically guarantee water quality without the use of chemicals. Unfortunately, the current dated legislation in Brussels does not yet allow this approach for Flow. We have been lobbying the Brussels government for the past year to amend the legislation and next winter we will be able to carry out a first pilot project so that the natural water purification of our pool will be up and running by the summer of 2023.

In addition, our crew is always ready to keep the immediate surroundings of the pool clean. Visitors are also encouraged not to leave any litter lying around.

**A swimming pool is nice for the summer, but what happens to the location during winter?**

Our core ambition is to open an outdoor swimming pool that is anchored in the neighborhood and accessible to the entire city. People link swimming primarily with the summer, but the desire for outdoor swimming has also grown in the winter, partly due to the pandemic. Of course, the number of interested people will be lower than during summer, but the demand is certainly there. It is more a case of health and wellness reasons. The largest winter swimming club in Belgium in Antwerp, for example, can no longer accept new members because it is so popular. Many people in Brussels are also enthusiastic but are forced to move to Antwerp.

For the future, we dream of combining an outdoor swimming pool with a public sauna. Next to the health aspect, a sauna is a social experience, just like an outdoor pool. You get to sit almost or completely naked next to people you would perhaps never meet in other circumstances. In addition, you appeal to a completely different audience than with the outdoor pool. In 2019, we already launched a test project with a public pop-up sauna in Terkamerenbos. The success of that initiative strongly motivates us to really work on this.

**Won’t an open-air swimming pool cause disturbance?**

An outdoor pool is a kind of microcosm that reflects the society around it. Just like in society, it sometimes happens that there is some annoyance, or someone does not clean up their mess properly. That being said, the bad reputation for nuisance and problems that open-air swimming pools have certainly do not apply to our project. Since Flow is organized for and by the population of Brussels, we can count on strong social control. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood around the swimming pool, young and old, don't tolerate anyone causing nuisance. They see the swimming pool as an added value in the neighbourhood, which brings life to the area, but also provides employment for young people.

**How do you deal with the presence of different cultures in the pool?**

The core of our thinking is that swimming is for everyone. But everyone is unique and has different standards when it comes to feeling comfortable and safe, especially in the setting of a public pool. We count on visitors and staff to respect the gathering of different cultures and ages with different needs and desires to ensure a pleasant and safe environment for all.

**Does that also mean that all types of swimwear are allowed?**

We do not want to deny anyone access to the water, so we choose to be as open as possible to the choice of swimwear. The only guideline we strictly follow is that the choice of clothing should not impede the water quality and therefore we only allow specific swimwear. For example, in swimming pools it is often a challenge to keep underwear out of swimming trunks, so we have to be strict about that. We want to provide flexibility in a way that doesn't hurt or disturb anyone and be accessible to everyone in the way that each person feels most comfortable.

**Why do you organize an exclusive swimming hour for women on Saturday mornings?**

Last year we launched a swimming hour exclusively for women on Saturday mornings. Visitors as well as lifeguards and the team in attendance were exclusively women. This was so well received that we plan to run it again this year. Despite what critics think, we are not responding to a demand that stems from religious beliefs. We want women who have difficulty showing up in public in swimwear or who do not feel comfortable around men to also be able to enjoy the pool. If we can make that possible by making the pool accessible only to them for one hour a week, we’re happy to do so.

**Is outdoor swimming a good idea in a city where it supposedly always rains?**

This is a comment we hear regularly. In fact, the weather in Brussels is no worse than in London or Paris, cities with plenty of great outdoor swimming spots. And even in Scandinavia, which is undoubtedly a lot colder than Brussels, you can find outdoor swimming pools in every city. The summer of 2021 in Brussels was indeed quite cold and wet. And yet, every time Flow was open, there were swimmers in the water. While on warm and sunny days it was mainly families and young people, the sporty swimmers had plenty of room to swim laps on the greyer days. But the trend is clear anyway. With global warming, summers will only get hotter in the future. The need for refreshment for the inhabitants of Brussels will increase in the coming years. All the more reason to quickly set up permanent open-air swimming areas in Brussels!