Soap and water have worked a visible cure already that goes more than skin deep. They are moral agents of the first value in the slum.

—JACOB A. RIIS

During the Progressive Era the public bath movement achieved its greatest success, as urban reformers, now far more numerous and exploiting new weapons, renewed their efforts to solve the problems of America's cities. Structural reformers sought to end boss rule by changing the structure of city governments and introducing better control of finances, business efficiency, and management by experts. The social reform urban progressives pursued social justice, which they believed was most threatened by the urban slum, as already appalling conditions were exacerbated by the Depression of 1893 and its aftermath. To them, as to their predecessors, the slum was, as Arthur Mann has pointed out, the epitome of the primary evils of the day: "unemployment, racial and religious prejudice, spiritual and physical want, class oppression, filth, disease, prostitution, drink and corrupt politics." Not only was the slum an economic and sanitary problem, but also its very existence threatened the social stability of the city as a whole.¹

The social reform progressives were not consistent in their approach to the problems of the slums. As Paul Boyer and others have observed, they either adopted coercive and repressive strategies as exemplified by their attacks on prostitution and the drinking of alcoholic beverages or turned to "positive environmentalism," which would improve the surroundings of the poor and in so doing elevate their character and morality. These strategies were not mutually exclusive and many reformers ad-
Public Baths in the Progressive Era

vocated both types of reform. In both cases the reformers wished to exert social control over the slum population. The familiar litany of demands of the "positive environmentalists" included parks, playgrounds, kindergartens, tenement house regulation, public school reform, effective garbage collection and street cleaning, and public baths. Provision of these services by municipal governments would help to "humanize the city environment" and "redistribute at least in part some of the amenities of middle-class life to the masses" as well as give them an opportunity for "a decent life: that is, to be well fed and housed, to be clean, and to be moral human beings."²

The reasons that public baths were almost always included in this list of reforms are complex and illustrate several aspects of progressive reform motivation and its rhetoric. Although many of the arguments in favor of public baths in the Progressive Era echo those of bath advocates in the mid-nineteenth century and the Gilded Age, they also demonstrate the progressives' more sympathetic attitudes toward the poor. They tended to place less emphasis on the defective character of the poor as the main cause of poverty and also considered the effects of social and economic conditions and the slum environment.³

Obviously, public baths would provide for the poor a means of attaining personal cleanliness which their crowded tenements lacked. The progressives not only linked dirt with a poverty that grew out of individual habits of laziness, weakness, degeneration, or thriftlessness but also connected dirt to deficiencies in the environment in which the poor lived. The New York Tenement House Committee of 1894 (established by the state legislature to investigate slum conditions and successor to the 1884 committee of the same name) reported sympathetically that in New York City the only way in which the occupants of tenement-houses can bathe is by using a tub of some kind, filled from the faucet in the kitchen or from that in the hall, or with water carried up from the yard. It is apparent that such conditions as these do not encourage the practice of bathing. Nor is this all. The number of rooms occupied by a family in a tenement-house is so small that every inch of space is occupied. Even when the occupants are willing to incur the labor of carrying water from the faucet in the hall or from the yard it is difficult to secure the privacy which is necessary for the bath.

The poor were perceived as dirty, bearers of the "tenement odor," not because of cultural variance from American middle-class bathing habits
but because they lacked bath facilities. A New York City Health Department inspector wrote in 1884 that poverty and uncleanliness went hand in hand "because these poor people have not the facilities to keep themselves clean, . . . they have no baths."4

Growing acceptance of the germ theory of disease in the 1890s by both American physicians and the general public added a scientific argument and an increased urgency to the demand for public baths and brought more support to the movement from the medical profession. As medical researchers identified the bacteria responsible for diseases such as typhoid, tuberculosis, cholera, and diphtheria, sanitarians transferred their attention from the environment to the individual as a source of contagion and emphasized the importance of personal cleanliness.5

Noting that "the better situated classes" came in contact with the poor as employees, servants, laborers, tradespeople, and mechanics, Simon Baruch, a physician and foremost leader of the public bath movement, stressed that everyone's health would be protected if the poor were clean. More alarmingly, another physician and member of the board of health, Moreau Morris, warned his fellow New Yorkers that "the body exhalations of an unwashed sample of humanity sitting next to us in our crowded cars may communicate a deadly typhus germ without our consciousness." Although sanitary reformers did not abandon the effort to achieve a cleaner slum environment through effective garbage collection, street cleaning, sewer systems, and other means, they stressed the role played by the infected individual as a bearer of disease. For example, in urging the provision of public baths, the New York Tenement House Committee of 1894 reiterated: "Cleanliness is the watchword of sanitary science and the keynote of the modern advice aseptic surgery. If it apply to the street, the yard, the cellar, the house and the environment of men it most certainly should apply to the individual." By 1916, Charles Zueblin would write in American Municipal Progress that public baths were "an indispensable protection of the public health."6

Public bath advocates were not content with asserting that the provision of baths would guarantee the attainment of middle-class standards of bodily cleanliness among the poor and safeguard the public health; echoing their predecessors throughout the nineteenth century, they also stressed the salutary effects that cleanliness would have on the moral character of the poor. Writing in a United States government publication, G. W. W. Hanger stated that public baths would "stimulate in a powerful
 way a feeling of self-respect and a desire for self-improvement” and “ele­ 
vate the material and moral tone of the poorer classes.” Boston’s mayor,  
Josiah Quincy, stated that “when physical dirt has been banished, a long 
step has been taken in the elimination of moral dirt.” Bath reformers 
equated physical cleanliness with moral purity. As John Paton, president 
of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, 
proclaimed, “With very large classes of society cleanliness of person, 
apparel and home are inseparable from thrift, industry and prosperity, 
and it is the absence of this which distinguishes upright, honest poverty 
from the condition of the improvident, the depraved and the worth­
less.” Public baths therefore would at the same time reform both the 
slum environment and the character of the individual.

Cleanliness was also extolled as one of the hallmarks of civilization and 
progress. Simon Baruch observed, “The civilizing influence of soap and 
water has long been recognized,” and, recalling the opulent Roman baths 
as earlier bath reformers had, he declared, “It is a sad commentary on 
our boasted civilization” that we do not “emulate their generosity in sup­
plying the poor with means for keeping their bodies clean and unde­
filed.” Public baths would, he thought, assist in creating “civic civiliza­
tion” out of “urban barbarism.”

Nativism, in a paternalistic but not xenophobic sense, also played a 
role in the rationale for public baths. The bath reformers asserted that 
the encouragement of regular bathing habits would assist in the Ameri­
canization and assimilation of the immigrant, and indeed most public 
baths were located in immigrant neighborhoods. They argued that one 
characteristic of immigrants which most emphasized their difference from 
the native-born was their lack of cleanliness. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle 
noted in a 1902 editorial calling for the building of municipal baths: “It is 
safe to say that some of our new citizens have never bathed since they 
came to America, and that others look upon a bath as a ceremonial to be 
indulged with caution . . . hence to be observed not oftener than once a 
year.” Immigrants, the Eagle had asserted in an earlier editorial, must “be 
weaned from” their practice of not bathing “and made to comport them­
selves like self-respecting Americans.” One bath reformer stated that the 
existence of public baths among the foreign element of all nationalities 
made them more cleanly in homes, shops, factories, and attire. Their 
children were less neglected and one no longer saw “dirty faces, unkempt 
hair and tattered and soiled clothing.” A Chicago bath advocate was of
the opinion that "the greatest civilizing power that can be brought to bear on these uncivilized Europeans crowding into our cities lies in the public bath." 9

In spite of this nativist stereotype, not all immigrants were unwashed. Traditional religious ritual and social customs required that the Eastern European Jewish population bathe regularly. Although few Jewish families had bathing facilities in their dwellings, the number of privately owned bathhouses to serve them increased. Moses Rischin observed that in New York City, for example, "By 1897 over half of the city's sixty-two bathhouses (including Russian [steam], Turkish [hot air], swimming, vapor, and medicated bathhouses) were Jewish." The comparatively good health and low death rate among Jewish immigrants can probably be attributed in part to their standards of personal and home cleanliness. Although it might be expected that Jewish immigrants would be in the forefront of groups demanding the provision of public baths, they do not seem to have been particularly active, nor were other immigrant groups. Simon Baruch, although a Jew, was more interested in baths for reasons of public health than because of his Jewish background. 10

Although the bath reformers claimed that public baths would change the moral character of the slum dweller and Americanize the immigrant, they never clearly explained how this would happen, nor did they seek to ascertain if the introduction of public baths actually produced any of the desired changes in the poor. They simply assumed that the poor and immigrants would change their ways once they were exposed to proper behavior in regard to bathing, and that other aspects of the American middle-class way of life would soon follow.

Bath reformers insisted that the solution to the problem of uncleanness among the poor was a civic responsibility. The notion that slum landlords should be required to provide bathrooms for their tenants was generally disregarded. For example, although the Tenement House Law of 1901 in New York City did require private toilets, it did not require private bath facilities. In writing about this law, housing reformer Lawrence Veiller asserted that it was "felt that to require a private bath for each family as a matter of law, was not practicable and might with difficulty be sustained if attacked in the courts." It is probable that bathrooms were considered too expensive to be included in low-rent private dwellings, and such a requirement might violate the property rights of owners. Bath reformers made only token efforts to urge private enter-
prise to provide bath facilities for the poor. A good example is a *New York Times* editorial which asked why the owners of tenement houses should not be compelled to provide these facilities but concluded that, if this could not or should not be done, it was the city's responsibility and not that of private charitable associations to provide this service for the needy. At the same time, the editorial counseled that "the city should confine itself to the erection of modest baths" which should be as close to "self-supporting" as possible.\(^\text{11}\)

The ambivalent attitude of bath reformers toward the provision of private bath facilities can be further documented. In Baltimore, partly as a result of the bath movement, a law was passed requiring a bath to be built in every new house. This law, instead of being seen as a victory for bath advocates, invoked the following response from one New York bath leader: "Of what good is such a law unless it is followed by a clause compelling every man to take a bath at stated times? I say let us have public baths and still more public baths." The *Philadelphia North American* hoped for a future when "public baths will be as common as public schools, and bathing, like education, will be made compulsory." Obviously some bath reformers felt that the poor could not be trusted to bathe in the privacy of their own homes. This may be one reason that they never mentioned the alternative of paying higher wages to the poor, thus allowing them to afford homes equipped with baths. However, advocating higher wages, like requiring tenement house owners to provide bath facilities, would infringe on the property rights of landlords and employers, something the bath reformers were unwilling to do.\(^\text{12}\)

The question of whether cities should spend the taxpayer's money to build public baths, which raised the issue of municipal socialism, appears not to have been seriously considered by the proponents of this reform, although an occasional dissenting voice was heard. In the opinion of the *Rochester Herald*, free baths would teach the people that they had a right to what they had not earned. "Gloss the matter as you may," the editor wrote, "the person who accepts a free public bath has accepted what another person has been compelled to pay for. In ethics it is no more honest than would be the theft of 25 cents spent on a bath in a private establishment." However, most contemporaries agreed with the *New York Daily Tribune* that this was a responsibility the city must accept. The failure of the city to build public baths, something that could be done by nobody else, was "little short of criminal," the editor asserted.
"The provision of baths and other conveniences is a proper municipal function, which should no more be neglected than street lighting or sewers." The Baltimore Bath Commission stated that public baths were no longer "a luxury nor charity, but a public necessity and obligation." Public baths, like parks and playgrounds, were becoming an essential part of the expanded number of services to be provided by municipal governments in this period.\(^{13}\)

Further impetus to the bath movement came from the example of European cities as well as from civic pride and rivalry among American cities. Cultural deference in the form of imitation of European responses to urban problems often spurred and legitimatized urban reform in this era and the bath movement was no exception. As we have seen, many of the major European cities had municipal bath systems, and the American proponents of municipal baths frequently alluded to this. For example, the authors of the New York Tenement House Committee Report of 1894 wrote: "It would conduce greatly to the public health if New York should follow the example of many of the cities of the Old World and open municipal baths in the crowded districts." In 1897 the Mayor's Committee on Public Baths and Comfort Stations in New York reported that "New York and other American cities are far behind those of Europe, especially London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Paris and Berlin." Rivalry among American cities was reflected when advocates of public baths in Baltimore concluded that the Maryland city was lagging behind New York and Boston and urged it "to make a beginning without delay and to lay the foundations for a more elaborate [bath] system in the future."\(^{14}\)

Not only was civic pride a factor in supporting the construction of municipal baths but it was also gratified once the bath system was a functioning reality. The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia boasted that its first bathhouse had been visited by representatives "from St. Louis, Chicago, New York, Baltimore and other leading cities, with the result of stimulating the bath-house movement throughout the country." The Baltimore Sun asserted that the city's portable baths "are making quite a sensation in the bath world, and other cities are talking of adopting them." The Baltimore Bath Commission stated that the successful management of its bath system has "given our city a national reputation in this department."\(^{15}\)

Although no doubt existed in the minds of municipal bath advocates that there was great need for public bath facilities in the congested slum
areas of American cities, they, like most reformers of the Progressive Era, began to gather more facts and statistics to prove their claims. In 1887 Dr. George H. Rohé of Baltimore reported to the American Medical Association convention in Chicago that a large proportion of the inhabitants of American cities had no proper bathing facilities. In the 18 cities that he surveyed he found that only 23 percent of the residences were supplied with bathtubs. In Baltimore, of 70,000 houses, only 20,000 had bathtubs.16

In 1892 the chief of the Bureau of Statistics of the Labor Department of Massachusetts conducted a tenement house census in Boston. Studying 71,665 families renting tenements or apartments, he found that only 18,476 families (25.78 percent) had bathrooms. In one of the slum wards (ward 6), fewer than 1 percent of the families had bathrooms, but in ward 11, exclusive Back Bay, 72.15 percent had bathrooms.17

Further proof of the lack of bath facilities came in 1893, when the Bureau of Labor, a federal agency, investigated the most congested slum districts in four major cities. Table 2.1 summarizes the results. By calling attention to the lack of bathing facilities in urban slums in this report, which was prepared in compliance with an 1892 congressional resolution, the federal government further legitimized the bath movement and its concern with the lack of cleanliness of the poor. Subsequently it gave more support to the movement in 1901, when the Bureau of Labor and Commerce presented an exhibition on public baths in Europe at the Pan-American Exposition, and in 1903, when the same agency mounted an exhibition on public baths in the United States at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The federal government published extensive reports...
Public Baths in the Progressive Era

on each of these exhibits illustrated with photographs and floor plans of public baths. These exhibitions and reports not only publicized the bath movement but also gave it the official imprimatur of the federal government by emphasizing that baths were an essential part of city services.\(^\text{18}\)

Statistics on the lack of bathing facilities continued to appear. In addition to recommending the building of public baths, the New York Tenement House Committee of 1894 reported that out of a population of 255,033 people, only 306 had access to bathrooms in their dwelling places. Another study of workingmen's families in New York, conducted in 1907, found that the number of families having bathrooms was directly proportional to family income (for example, in families with an annual income of \$400–599, 4 percent had bathrooms and in those with incomes of \$900–1,099, 24 percent had bathrooms). Of the entire group studied, however, only one family in seven had bathrooms.\(^\text{19}\)

In *The Battle with the Slum* Jacob Riis gave more dramatic evidence of the lack of bath facilities in New York's slums. His photograph of a bathtub hanging under a tenement apartment window high above street level in an air shaft was captioned "The only Bath-tub in the Block." This block, a model of which was displayed at the Tenement House Exhibition of 1900 organized by the Charity Organization Society, contained two acres bounded by Chrystie, Forsyth, Canal, and Bayard streets. In its 39 tenements housing 2,781 persons, including 466 children under five, there were only 247 water closets and this one bathtub.\(^\text{20}\)

The lack of bath facilities for urban slum dwellers cannot be disputed. What is in doubt is whether there was a "long-felt want" for public baths among the slum population. Even the public bath adherents themselves had to admit that where private bathtubs did exist in tenements, they often were not put to their proper use. As tenement landlords like to point out and tenement house inspectors had to agree, they often were used instead as storage areas, coal bins, and the like. This misuse of bathtubs may be attributed to the lack of hot water in tenements and the fact that the poor had not acquired the habit of bathing regularly. Public bath advocates, however, never asked whether slum dwellers wanted public baths. The assumption was that they did, and the fact that they failed to use private bathtubs when they had them only reinforced the idea that public baths were necessary.\(^\text{21}\)

Seizing upon the example of European municipal baths, the statistical and other evidence of the need for public bathing facilities in American
 Public Baths in the Progressive Era

"The Only Bath-tub in the Block." Bathtub hanging below a tenement window in an air shaft, New York City. Source: Photograph by Jacob A. Riis, Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

cities, and the impetus of the general reform attitude of Progressivism, American public bath advocates gathered their forces in the 1890s and met with little opposition and much support. Open disapproval of the municipal bath movement was rare, and the movement’s worst enemy was indifference or apathy on the part of municipal governments and the general public.

Private philanthropy was often first in responding to the urgings of the bath advocates. In city after city public baths for slum dwellers were established first by private charitable organizations. The hope was that these baths would serve as a model and further illustrate the need for a municipal bath system. Settlement houses, for example, often provided limited bathing facilities for the neighborhoods they served. This was true
Public Baths in the Progressive Era

of Hull House, the University of Chicago Settlement House, and of the University and College settlement houses in New York City. Settlement houses also took an active role in urging cities to supply municipal baths for slum dwellers, although baths were generally not high on their list of reform priorities.\(^22\)

The largest and most influential prototype of the public bath was the People's Baths erected in New York City by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor in August 1891 at the urging of Simon Baruch. With John Wesley's maxim "Cleanliness Next to Godliness" inscribed above its door, this two-story building cost $27,025, raised through private contributions. It was located on the Lower East Side on land owned by the City Mission and Tract Society. It had 23 showers and three bathtubs; each bathing compartment was divided into a dressing room of 3½ by 4 feet and a shower area of the same size. Future baths followed this model. The five-cent fee, which included towel and soap, nearly covered operating expenses. The Colgate Company donated eighty pounds of soap to be distributed to patrons of the bath as free samples. The People's Baths were well patronized, furnishing 10,504 baths in 1891, 88,735 in 1895, and 115,685 in 1898. The baths received coverage in the New York and Boston press and were also publicized by the AICP itself. A local poet and physician, Gouverneur M. Smith, celebrated the opening of the bath and expressed the mixed motives and hopes of the bath reformers with these concluding verses:

The man who is clean from his scalp to his toes,
Should always be jolly, wherever he goes.
To be clean without leads to pureness within.
Where lurks germs, the vilest of terrible sin.

So hurra! Yes, hurra! that this bathhouse is built.
At sin and at filth to make a brave tilt.
May the AICP by this right royal gift,
Save many a soul now wrecked and adrift.

Dozens of bath advocates visited the People's Baths, as did official delegations from cities also planning to build municipal baths, such as Yonkers, New York; Trenton, New Jersey; and Boston. The privately sponsored Public Baths Association of Philadelphia also carefully inspected these baths. In New York City other private charitable associations quickly
followed the example of the AICP, and small public baths were opened under the auspices of the DeMilt Dispensary (1891), the Baron de Hirsch Fund (1892), the Cathedral Misson (1892), and the Riverside Association (1894).\textsuperscript{23}

At the same time, some businesses began to supply bath facilities for their employees. In 1893, J. H. Williams and Company, an ironworks
located in Brooklyn, modeled its bath, consisting of 12 showers, after the People's Baths and also provided laundry facilities where the workers could wash and dry their work clothes. Williams commented:

As it is acknowledged that habitual bathing prevents disease and promotes health and morality, baths for working people affect all classes of society. Employers are, therefore, under moral obligations to supply such facilities and health, decency and humanity demand it, because few opportunities for personal cleanliness are afforded to any but the privileged classes.

The Fifth Avenue Bank of New York provided bath facilities for its employees, as did the United Shoe Machinery Company of Boston. However, Parke, Davis and Company demurred, asserting that it had "found that good wages and short hours are preferred by the people to elaborately furnished toilet rooms, baths, gymnasia and similar devices."24

While gaining support and seeing their ideals becoming reality through private charity and business, public bath advocates could not agree among themselves as to what type of baths municipalities should build and whether the baths should be free or available at a minimal charge. Bath supporters did agree that shower baths were more efficient and easier to keep clean than tub baths, and almost all American public baths had showers rather than tubs. In this case Americans were following the German rather than the English example, for English baths usually contained more bathtubs than showers.25

The question that confounded bath reformers was whether public baths should be large, imposing, expensive, even monumental structures or small, simple, and unpretentious. European cities, especially in Germany, had built both types: small, inexpensive neighborhood people's baths that consisted mostly of showers, and large, monumental, centrally located municipal bathhouses that offered a variety of baths including showers, swimming pools, and even Turkish baths. Most American municipal bath advocates favored having many small, inexpensive public baths easily accessible to slum dwellers rather than the elaborate, expensive, centrally located bathhouse. This position was reiterated constantly, as in the federal government report written in 1901 by the Boston bath proponent Edward M. Hartwell:

Baths for the people should be centrally located in populous districts, where they are easily accessible. Numerous relatively small and comparatively inexpensive self-contained bath houses are vastly more desirable and useful than are struc-
tures of the costly monumental type for which architects and municipal coun­
cilors have too often shown so marked a predilection.26

Yet some cities succumbed to the temptation to erect bathhouses that
were also imposing public buildings. Boston’s reform mayor Josiah Quincy
defended this practice in his remarks at the formal opening of Bos­
ton’s first bathhouse, which cost about $90,000:

The expenditure which the city had made in erecting its first permanent bath
house of this substantial and ornamental character had been incurred with a
broader end in view than that of merely providing facilities for the bathing of a
certain number of persons. The number of shower-baths and tub-baths con­
tained in this building could have been furnished at a much smaller expense,
and the city might, perhaps, have leased a building for the purpose, instead of
purchasing a valuable lot of land and erecting an expensive structure. The
purpose . . . was to erect a building of such character and appointments that it
would be worthy as an architectural monument of the city which owned it, and
would raise the whole idea of public bathing to a high and dignified plane.

The building of monumental municipal bathhouses was no doubt in part
a manifestation of the City Beautiful movement which swept through
American cities between 1890 and 1910. Basically, proponents of the city
beautiful believed that a more attractive, aesthetically pleasing, and im­
pressive urban environment would produce social cohesiveness and civic
loyalty and pride on the part of urban citizens. As a Boston resident put it,

A city which does nothing except to police and clean the streets means little. But
when it adds schools, libraries, galleries, parks, baths, lights, heat, homes and
transportation, it awakens interest in itself. The citizen cares for the city which
shows some care for him. He looks upon it as his city, and not a thing apart from
him; and he becomes a good citizen because it is his city.27

Bath advocates also could not agree as to what facilities beyond shower
baths should be included in municipal bathhouses. Some insisted that
showers were all that was necessary. Others urged that swimming pools,
gymnasiums, or public laundries be included. American cities varied in
their responses to these demands. Chicago built simple bathhouses with
shower baths and little else. Baltimore and Philadelphia included public
laundries in their public bathhouses, whereas New York and Boston usu­
ally included swimming pools and gymnasiums, especially in bathhouses
built after 1900.28

Reformers also disagreed about whether municipal baths should be
Public Baths in the Progressive Era

free or should charge a small fee. Some bath advocates felt that a small fee was "highly desirable as promoting a feeling of self-respect among the patrons . . . and an appreciation of the privileges afforded." Others felt that municipal baths should be absolutely free so that no one would be denied this privilege. Generally the public baths operated by private charitable institutions charged a minimal fee, usually five cents. Municipally operated baths, however, were usually free, and a New York State law required that city-owned baths could exact no fee. Nevertheless, a five-cent fee was often charged for soap and towel.29

Bath reformers also urged that shower baths be located in public schools either exclusively for the use of schoolchildren or for the use of the children during school hours and for the general public after school hours. There was some objection to this. For example, the Boston Schoolhouse Committee felt that it was not the duty of the school authorities "to bathe the children in the public schools because they may not be clean, for if this be granted, we see no reason why we should not clothe them if they be improperly clothed, or feed them if not properly nourished at home." These misgivings were overridden, however, and school baths were established in some of Boston's public schools. School baths were also built in public schools in New York City and Baltimore.30

Despite all these disagreements, the experience of using a public bath was remarkably similar throughout all bath systems. The baths were meant to be utilitarian and simply to furnish an opportunity for personal cleanliness. Generally a bath cubicle was divided into two parts—a dressing area and a shower, separated by a curtain. Men and women were strictly separated and order was stressed. Patrons were given a numbered check on entering the waiting room and, as cubicles were vacated, numbers were called. Usually twenty minutes were allowed for undressing, bathing, and dressing. Generally both the water temperature and the duration of the shower were controlled by bath attendants. Water temperature ranged from 73° to 105°F; anything hotter was thought to be "ennervating." Bath patrons apparently would have preferred to stay for longer than the allotted time, for a minor scandal erupted in New York City when officials discovered that attendants were permitting users who paid them five cents to use the baths as long as they wished. The guilty attendants were promptly dismissed.31

Many bath advocates also urged their cities to build public toilets, or comfort stations as they called them. Their main argument was that lack
of such facilities forced men who worked outside, like policemen, into saloons. In New York and Baltimore bath reformers were instrumental in the establishment of public toilets. In general, however, bath reformers concentrated most of their interest and efforts on securing public baths and were only secondarily concerned with public toilets.\(^\text{32}\)

After 1890 the municipal bath movement met with varying degrees of success in many American cities (see table 2.2). The first year-round municipal bath in the United States was the West Side Natatorium, which opened in Milwaukee in 1890. In this same year *Cosmopolitan* magazine held a competition offering a $200 prize for the best design of a public bath for the poor in a city of 100,000 population or more. The winning plan from over twenty submitted was for a monumental type of bath. It included separate men's and women's sections, with showers, bathtubs, and a swimming pool in each section plus a Turkish bath and a public laundry. *Cosmopolitan* advocated the building of public baths and set up a committee of its own editors and writers and some prominent New York citizens to seek ways of fulfilling this purpose. It also urged private philanthropists to consider the donation of a public bath: "It would be an American imitation of the noblest work of a Roman emperor—a truly imperial gift not out of keeping with the highest ambitions for the welfare of one's fellow citizens." There is no evidence, however, that *Cosmopolitan* 's bath committee succeeded at all in obtaining the construction of any public baths, although the publicity which the competition engendered probably aided the bath movement.\(^\text{33}\)

As the 1890s progressed, several more cities built public baths. Chicago opened its first year-round bath in 1894. In 1895 impetus was added to the bath movement when the New York State legislature passed a law requiring all first- and second-class cities to build municipal baths. Yonkers promptly complied with this law, opening its first bath in 1896; Buffalo followed in 1897, and after some delay public baths were opened in Rochester in 1899, in Syracuse in 1900, and in Albany, Troy, and New York City in 1901.\(^\text{34}\)

Brookline, Massachusetts, an affluent Boston suburb, opened what was probably the only public bath for the middle class in 1897. The bath was large and elaborate and had a sizable swimming pool (26 by 80 feet) as well as showers and tubs. It was built by the city after agitation led by a local physician and cost about $60,000. The Brookline bath received quite a bit of publicity and was considered "one of the most perfect in the country."\(^\text{35}\)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population 1900</th>
<th>Bathhouses</th>
<th>Total Number of</th>
<th>Total No. of Baths for Year</th>
<th>Free or Fee</th>
<th>Total Cost of Land and Buildings</th>
<th>Yearly Cost: Maintenance and Operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>Total No. Year Opened</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stoves</td>
<td>Showers</td>
<td>Tubs</td>
<td>Landries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Municipally operated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>94,151</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>508,957</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>560,892</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookline, Massachusetts</td>
<td>19,935</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>352,387</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>1,698,575</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>381,768</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville, Kentucky</td>
<td>204,731</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>285,315</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>3,437,202</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland, Maine</td>
<td>50,145</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester, New York</td>
<td>162,608</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse, New York</td>
<td>108,374</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy, New York</td>
<td>60,651</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yonkers, New York</td>
<td>47,931</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Nonmunicipally operated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegheny, Pennsylvania</td>
<td>129,896</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>3,437,202</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>1,293,697</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania</td>
<td>321,768</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>342,782</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*For infants.

*Year of figures varies from 1902 to 1904 depending on fiscal years.

*Recently opened.

*No figures for four baths recently opened.

*One bath only; the others not reported.

*Free 3 days per week to residents; other days, residents 10 cents, nonresidents 25 cents.

*Not reported.
Public Baths in the Progressive Era

Boston's first year-round bath was opened in 1898 and Baltimore's in 1900. Cities as diverse as Portland, Maine, and Louisville, Kentucky, opened modest municipal baths in 1901 and 1902, respectively. Even the city of Davenport, Iowa (population about 36,000), was urged in 1901 to build a public bath and swimming pool for its working-class population because it was "advancing beyond the country-town period and entering the progressive-city stage." By 1904, a total of 15 cities had at least one municipally operated year-round public bath; and 18 other cities were operating summer baths such as swimming pools, floating baths, or beaches.36

Private philanthropy also continued to be active in the public bath movement in the 1890s. In 1890 the James Lick Bath was opened in San Francisco, followed by New York City's People's Baths in 1891. In 1897 the People's Baths of Pittsburgh were opened. Donated by Mrs. William Thaw, Jr., as a memorial to her husband, they were operated by the Civic Club of Allegheny County. The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia produced that city's first year-round bath in 1898 after raising funds in a city-wide campaign. In Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Henry Phipps donated a bathhouse in 1903 which was operated by the Public Wash House and Bath Association.37

Of the ten largest cities in the United States in 1900, only two, Saint Louis and Cincinnati, did not have either municipally or charitably operated year-round baths by 1904. In the decade of 1900–10 the municipal bath movement reached its peak as cities which already had baths built more, and new cities were added to the number which had municipal baths (Saint Louis opened its first bath in 1907). By 1922, more than 40 cities operated municipal year-round baths. Of the cities with large bath systems, Baltimore reported that it had 11 public baths (including school baths), Boston 12, Chicago 20, and New York City 25. Western cities, such as Denver, Omaha, and Salt Lake City, and southern cities, such as Dallas, Mobile, and Nashville, also had one or two public baths.38

There was no generally accepted way of administering municipal bath systems. The bath reformers felt that an unpaid bath commission composed of public-spirited men and women appointed by the municipal government to administer the bath system was the best solution. The bath commission usually appointed a full-time paid secretary who was responsible for the day-to-day supervision of the system. The bath systems of Baltimore and Boston were administered by this type of commission. In
other cities there was wide variation. Buffalo’s bath system was under the jurisdiction of the Department of Health, while Yonkers’ was under the Department of Public Works. Saint Louis’ baths were operated by the Public Recreation Commission. New York City’s baths were at first operated by the Department of Public Buildings, Lighting and Supplies and later were transferred to the Public Works Departments in offices of the borough presidents.\textsuperscript{39}

To the bath reformers a standard of cleanliness was necessary for participation in the common urban community. The “great unwashed” were a menace to the public health and moral well-being of their cities. Public baths would remove this danger and would help to make cities decent, healthful, safe, and enjoyable places to live.\textsuperscript{40}

In the following chapters we will turn to detailed case studies of the actual process of how and why the public bath movement achieved success in five American cities. This achievement reveals the interrelationships of social reformers and urban governments as the nation moved from the Gilded Age into the Progressive Era. Public bath leaders, municipal governments and their officials (both bosses and reformers), state legislators, private philanthropists, and some of the slum dwellers themselves all played roles in each of these cities as they acted out the complex process of urban reform.