

# Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

## ***The Pool Is Closed: Segregation, Summertime, and the Search for a Place to Swim***

By Hannah S. Palmer

*The Pool Is Closed: Segregation, Summertime, and the Search for a Place to Swim* is 252 pages, including an introduction and 48 short chapters in three parts. There are also acknowledgements and notes. It was published in 2024.

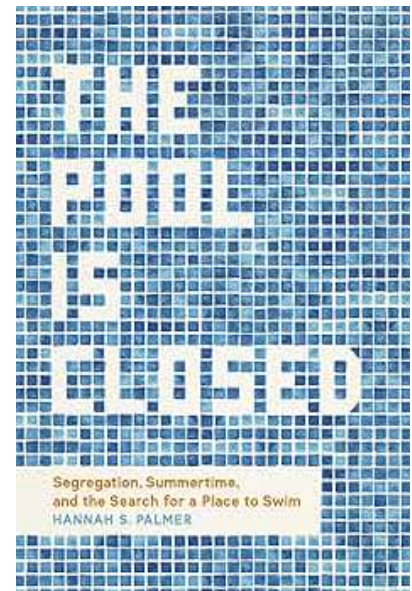
Hannah S. Palmer is an Atlanta-based writer and designer with an interest in how history and nature shape urban landscapes.

The book is about how urban children learn to swim and grow into adults who enjoy swimming. Why is this important? For safety reasons. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 4,500 Americans die each year from drowning. But also for recreation and connection with others. Swimming pools, lakes, beaches and rivers are natural gathering places and always have been.

Palmer's book begins with simple questions: Where can you swim in cities today? And why are there so few public places for children to learn to swim and for families to enjoy? The answers: There once were far more public swimming venues, some owned by cities, others by businesses. Many of the public pools and private venues closed in the 1960s to avoid integration. As they did, swimming became privatized.

In a conventional urbanist book, the author would walk us through the public policy implications of this neglect of recreation and public safety, piling statistics on top of statistics. Experts would be interviewed. We might learn how some cities and other countries kept public swimming accessible to urban families and helped generations of children learn to enjoy the water safely. Such a book might close with a set of reforms cities should consider.

This is not that kind of book. *The Pool is Closed* is more personal. What we get is some history and geology lessons and a quest (Palmer and her two small sons set out to visit all of Atlanta's 19 public



pools), wrapped inside a memoir. You'll learn along the way about Atlanta's swimming pools. You'll also learn about Palmer's children, her neighborhood in East Point and even her husband's health issues.

The challenge for urbanists, then, will to fill in the missing parts, including the public policy questions. Here are a few to consider:

- Granted that there are recreational benefits to swimming, should cities invest in public pools? What benefits do pools offer that alternative investments, such as parks or pedestrian and cycling trails, do not?
- If we built and staffed more public pools, where should they be located? Inside neighborhoods, in large public parks or someplace else?
- What makes one public pool highly successful and another not? Palmer visited some where hers was one of the few families in the water; she visited others where there were multitudes.
- We've learned that some parks and trails dramatically raise nearby land values. Do public pools have similar effects? If so, how should that guide where we build them?

*The Pool Is Closed* does not ask or answer these questions. It has a different value. It takes you inside a single urban issue—where can children learn to swim and families enjoy swimming—through a user's eyes. By the end, you'll know what it's like to search for affordable places to swim in a city, and what those (lamentably few) places are like when found.

It helps that Palmer is a good writer, so you'll learn how varied Atlanta's public pools are. (They vary in size, scope, placement and look.) You'll also feel what it's like to visit them, splash in their water, talk with lifeguards and staff, and lie on a towel on their concrete and tile sidings.

Why is it important to know these things? Because urbanists should not change cities for reasons other than they make life better for citizens and visitors. If we're going to have public places, it's helpful to know how they are used. Palmer tells us how public pools and other swimming venues are actually used.

Between her pool visits, you'll learn how public swimming has changed in the past century. There once were municipal pools in many cities, including in three small cities just south of Atlanta, East Point, Hapeville and College Park. Those cities built their pools with Depression-era funding from the federal Works Progress Administration—the same program that built courthouses, city halls, water systems, libraries and park facilities around the country.

Of the three, only College Park still has a public pool. In fact, College Park opened a second municipal pool in the 2000s. The other two closed their pools. Why? Officials at the time would have offered a number of reasons, but once municipal pools were integrated in the 1960s, most white residents would not go to them. With that loss of support, cities closed their pools.

It wasn't only city governments that walked away from public swimming. In the mid-20th century, the Atlanta area had a number of privately owned recreation areas that offered swimming at low cost. One was Lake Spivey in Clayton County. This 600-acre amusement park had a beach, water shows and a western-themed village. It closed in 1969 rather than integrate. The land was redeveloped into an exclusive country club community.

There were two results of this abandonment: First, swimming became privatized. Middle-class families that had gone to public pools built small ones in their backyards. New subdivisions built pool and recreation centers for the exclusive use of their residents. And private, member-only pool clubs opened in older neighborhoods. To join these clubs, you had to apply, be approved and pay an annual fee.

The second result: Many African Americans grew up not learning to swim, which is reflected in federal statistics on drowning deaths. Among 11- and 12-year-olds, swimming deaths are 10 times more likely among black children than white.

Palmer writes: “When we talk about water, we’re talking about race and class. How we swim—and whether we have access to water at all—is tied up in the landscapes that shape our identity I was surprised at first, then less surprised, at how many people shared that they had never learned to swim at all. All of them were black.”

If there’s a slight reason for hope, it is that some of these private swimming clubs—including some built in the 1960s and 1970s to escape integration—are mending their ways. Palmer visits one such club, Forest Vale, not far from her home. One of the members tells her about the growing diversity of its members, who now include African American, Hispanic, Asian, biracial and same-sex couples. Why? “The younger people are changing it,” the member says. They want the pool to look more like the community around it.

And something else: Some cities have opened pools in recent decades, and some of the pools have been enormously successful, usually because they are grander than the bare-bones ones built in the past. She takes us to a pool in Piedmont Park, which is Atlanta’s largest and most heavily patronized public park. It was built by the park’s nonprofit support group, the Piedmont Park Conservancy.

The Piedmont Park pool has some unusual conditions (dues-paying members of the conservancy have exclusive use for a few hours on Saturday mornings), but at other times it was exactly what you want in a public pool: a safe, attractive, popular place where children can learn to swim and families can gather at a low cost. As Palmer describes it, this was “by far the most crowded and lively public pool we’d see all summer,” one that “looked and sounded like a truly integrated public place.”

In short, then, we can build public pools that work. But in cities with many needs, should we? As we said earlier, Palmer does not address this question directly, but it’s not hard to see the argument for pools.

First, we need to teach children to swim for safety reasons. Having access to a pool doesn’t guarantee a child will learn to swim. Palmer describes what’s involved in children losing their fear of water and learning to swim. But not having one guarantees they won’t.

Second, even the modest pools she visited were often neighborhood gathering places on weekends, with families barbecuing nearby when they weren’t splashing in the water. Numerous books we’ve read make the case: Such gathering places make neighborhoods stronger, safer and more connected. Connected neighborhoods improve cities.

Finally, it is likely that pools could be part of a neighborhood turnaround effort. Palmer finds examples of neighborhoods that were developed long ago because a nearby swimming venue made them desirable. Her own neighborhood in East Point was built in the 1940s around a place called Cold Springs.

As we attempt to build mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods in Urban Atlanta where people of all races and incomes feel connected to one another, could public pools help? Palmer’s book suggests they could.

**When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we'll discuss Hannah S. Palmer's book about the value of public swimming venues. And we'll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.**

Our meeting will be **Oct. 1, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There's more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

### **Preparing for the discussion**

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *The Pool Is Closed*:

- You can download an e-book edition from the Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Apple websites.
- You can buy a hardback edition at [Virginia-Highland Books](#).
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).