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## **The Role of Fun in City Centre Revitalization Projects: Children and Fountains**

### **Abstract:**

History repeatedly shows that the more interactive the urban environment the better. The great plazas and city squares act as people magnets and include features such as markets, seats, sculptures and fountains all designed to make people linger. Interactive, playful designs are becoming an increasingly common element in urban revitalisation, especially projects centred on city squares and plazas. In addition they encourage inclusiveness for families and children in the city. In this paper I focus on a number of water based interactive art installations/sculptures and their role in creating dynamic, fun, yet economically and socially viable urban spaces. Examples presented include Perth's Labyrinth Fountain, Chicago's Crown Fountain, London's Lady Diana Memorial fountain and Wellington's Bucket Fountain. Interactive fountains can now be seen in city squares across the world - from Custom House Square, Belfast, Northern Ireland to Seoul Plaza, Korea, and are an increasingly common feature of city redevelopment programmes. They represent a significant departure from the 'look but don't touch' tradition associated with many of the more traditional city art works. I argue that these and other interactive art installations present opportunities not only to build aesthetically pleasing and interesting fountains or sculptures but also present opportunities to focus children and children's play in the city's commercial heart. They help make children visible and create inter-generational connections in what is too often a primarily adultist urban core.

# The Role of Fun in City Centre Revitalization Projects: Children and Fountains

Cities are people places, where people come to live work and hopefully play together. Fun and indeed play can act as a positive support for urban revitalisation and regeneration initiatives in the public realm. Urban regeneration through the use of culture and art is being promoted by cities across the world Kana, (2012). In promoting city regeneration inclusivity and fun can act as supports for developing more inclusive and simultaneously more economically and socially viable public spaces. Children are a vital yet invariably overlooked population group in regeneration generally but especially in city centre based regeneration where the emphasis is on economic regeneration and a particularly adultist focus is apparent. In this paper I explore how the role of fun through interactive water based public art contributes to city centre revival and to the creation of more inclusive, child focused public space.

## Public squares

History repeatedly shows that the more interactive the urban environment the better. The great plazas and city squares act as people magnets and include features such as markets, seats, sculptures and fountains all designed to make people linger. Projects centred on city squares and plazas are a recognised core element in city centre regeneration and have been the focus of many financially substantive investment programmes. Traditionally public squares have been places that “were invested with symbolic power that could evoke public pride and public interaction” (Giddings et al., 2011, 202). This can be seen in the grand design of well-known squares such as St Peter’s Square in Rome, Red Square in Moscow or Place de la Concord in Paris, with their grand monuments and impressive architecture designed to reflect power and wealth. Other squares such as those that form the focus of this paper are more people focused creating:

...distinctive informal gathering places, they make the citizen feel at home, they nourish human contact, they help create a sense of place and civic pride, they provide numerous opportunities for serendipity, they allow people to relax and unwind, they encourage sociability instead of isolation, and they enrich public life and democracy (Chatterton and Unsworth, p.375)

People are attracted to public squares which are invariably located on major transportation, especially pedestrian routes but also by the potential activities they offer and opportunities for both passive and active engagement with the space. They act as a focal point for city life (Marinkovic et al., 2012) yet certain groups even in recently redeveloped squares remain underrepresented, including children, the elderly, poorer people, women and minority ethnic groups. Giddings et al's (2011) study of Chamberlain Square in Birmingham noted that despite an emphasis on inclusivity in the redevelopment of public space in the city centre only 85 of the 8545 pedestrians counted were aged 11-17. Regeneration and public art done well can act to enhance inclusivity for diverse user groups, especially young people.

## Regeneration and public art

Public art not only has a prominent role in urban design (Sharp et al.,2005) but has been embraced as not just contributing to itself acting as a catalyst for economic development (Scheurmans et al, 2012). Financial support for public art has been seen as a worthwhile investment and an aid in arresting urban decline. This decline is especially evident in cities with strong trends towards suburban economic decentralization, a process reasonably common in Australian cities. Public art is also seen as encouraging tourism (Miles, 1995). Art is viewed as a powerful social and economic tool which is increasingly written into regeneration plans as a matter of course (Percy-Smith and carney, 2011). Since Miles seminal paper in 1995 art has become significant in its own right in development and a core element in UK flagship developments. Examples include Arcelor Mittal's ‘Orbit’ in the London Olympics regeneration initiative and Anthony Gormley’s ‘Angel of the North’ in Gateshead which forms part of a wider Tyneside regeneration plan. As both these flagship artworks demonstrate, public art can itself

generate heated debate and controversy. In particular debate has focused on the economic aspects. Some artworks have been seen as too closely associated with economic ends such that they have been referred to as 'corporate baubles' (in Hall and Robertson, 2001). Others point to the possible "over privileging of cultural justice at the expense of socioeconomic distribution' (Sharp et al, 2005). Whilst there is some validity in both of these, such arguments are in most cases more than offset by the positive benefits most public art creates. These benefits are ably summed up by Miles (1995) as follows: "Imagination and skills of artists have a role in reclaiming cities for human well-being and as much as they address the diverse needs of people, in diverse communities who live in cities" (p,252). Further, "The art that is important is that which has the power to bring about changes in the city" (Kana, 2012 p.162). I argue that it is this art that can bring about a profound change through enabling the repopulation of the city centre by children and their families".

### **Public art and children**

Children can be direct beneficiaries of public art initiatives and can in themselves also directly contribute to its creation. Children have become increasingly involved in the design of public art. In Wollongong children worked with artists on the design of tree surrounds in a local park. In the UK children and young people worked with artists on the development of art installations in Corby. One member of the public commented on the project as follows "The children's presence brought Corby town centre to life ...the sounds of their playing, spontaneity and laughter. I hadn't realized what a difference that could make to the town centre" (Percy-Smith and Carney, 2011, 32). Children and adults can feel threatened and afraid in public space, the presence of a playful atmosphere and the presence of a space well populated by children and families assists in dissipating these feelings. For children three types of public art stand out (after Freeman and Tranter 2011). a) Appreciative art; art to be admired and art as history. Such art can appeal to children for its historical connections such as memorials to early Australian settlers, convicts and aboriginal people and impressive art such as the magnificently sculptured Trevi Fountain in Rome b) Fun art; art that creates a sense of playfulness such as Adelaide's bronzed pigs rooting in the litter bin. c) Art as interactive; this is art designed to be touched, felt, played with and can even create a sense of adventure. One of the oldest and best known examples are the lions of Trafalgar Square which have had generations of children climbing them. Some fountains similarly invite interaction, not all of it welcomed by the city fathers. However, a recent development has been the installation of water features purposely designed to appeal to a sense of fun and that invite interaction. It is to these that attention now turns.



Figure 1. The tree surrounds in Wollongong



Figure 2. Public art that frustrates, these spheres in Brisbane invite climbing but it is an activity that is not encouraged

### **Interactive public art: The Labyrinth Perth Australia**

Last summer Australia experienced record temperatures with its highest ever recorded national average. But, whilst the country wilted and bush fire warnings dominated the freeways, overheated frazzled adults skulked indoors and kangaroos were reported as launching themselves into swimming pools in the interior, children in Perth revelled as did the 'city fathers' as their regenerated city square sprang into life. Seldom is Perth the focus of a good news story, except perhaps in the pages of economic bulletins through its mining activities. More usually Perth is defending itself from reports highlighting its unsustainability, its profligate use of water for domestic use from ever diminishing aquifers, its susceptibility to bush fires and general predictions of environmental gloom (Weller, 2009). Tom Flannery one of Australia's best known and outspoken environmentalists predicted Perth will become Australia's first 'ghost metropolis' (Ayre, 2007). So why is Perth revelling? In the process of revitalizing Perth's rather bland city centre some \$36 million has been spent on the redevelopment of Forrest Place a large square surrounded by shops and other buildings. In its centre is the recently opened interactive water feature designed by renowned artist Jeppe Hein<sup>1</sup>. Named the Water Labyrinth, it contains nine rooms (set out like a chess board) around which are jets of water shooting into the air that continually emerge and disappear. The water is harvested from storm water and chlorinated to swimming pool standards. Around the labyrinth are masses of well designed seating areas, some shaded others not, a large covered podium (a gathering spot for skateboarders and BMX riders) and beyond that an un-missable bright green sculpture locally known as 'the cactus'. The Labyrinth is not just a fountain but a fully interactive play space that acts as a magnet for children and their families, as well as many adults, drawn to its playful water jets. A previously rather hot barren square becomes, especially when Perth's temperature soars, a playful, interactive, playground seething with life at its most joyful.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.woodhead.com.au/news/forest-place-urban-redevelopment-featuring-the-labyrinth-fountain/>



*Figure 3. The Labyrinth on a scorching summer day soon after its opening*

What makes this public artwork of particular interest to planners, designers and environmental professionals is that this transformation was no accident. It was part of a deliberate plan that puts children at the heart of regeneration where a costly but quality product (AUD\$1.3 million for the fountain alone) is the keystone on which a major regeneration initiative depends. If you sit awhile it becomes clear that as people become initially drawn to the fountains a series of events occur. Firstly children 'drag' adults towards the fountains either literally or for unaccompanied adults by their sheer vitality as adults want to see what is going on. Children pretty quickly whether dressed for it or not, enter the fountains getting wetter and wetter. Adults to start with linger on the outside but soon one of two things happen, either they retreat to the seats and just accept that they will be there awhile, or they enter the fountains themselves, initially sticking to the dry points but gradually some join the children and play in the water accepting their wetness. Whatever approach, sitting or joining in, the joy is infectious and a 'happy space' emerges. A space that simultaneously produces economic benefits as food and drinks are consumed from surrounding vendors (few children emerge from the Labyrinth quickly), replacement dry clothes are purchased from surrounding stores and the Labyrinth itself attracts families who might otherwise avoid going into the city centre. Perth's Labyrinth is not unique and other water features produced as part of urban revitalisation strategies have been similarly successful.

### **Interactive public art: The Crown Fountain, Chicago, USA**

In Chicago, the Crown Fountain opened in 2004, comprises two tall towers that face each other and on which are displayed facial images of Chicago residents. In between the towers is a dark granite reflecting pool. From the towers water intermittently cascades and from the mouths of the facial images water spouts. The fountain cost some \$17 million dollars and was constructed and designed by Krueck and Sexton Architects and Catalan artist Jaume Plensa (City of Chicago,

2013<sup>2</sup>). The fountain operates in summer months and like Perth's Labyrinth acts as a magnet for children, and as in Perth a number of adults are drawn into its playful nature. Unfortunately I haven't seen the fountain but the YouTube videos of the fountain explode with noise, activity and laughter (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NziRaGxl8Ow>). Artist Plensa is reported to have been pleasantly surprised to find his fountain transformed within hours of its opening into a children's water park and indeed the park now features as a 'cooling point' during extreme summer heat.



Figure 4. A very well used Crown Fountain, children play by one of the two towers  
<http://lynnbecker.com/repeat/chicagochildrensmuseum/ccm.htm>

### **Interactive public art: The Diana Memorial, Hyde Park, London, UK**

Both the Labyrinth and Crown fountain represent a significant departure from the 'look but don't touch' tradition associated with many of the more traditional city fountains. In the first interaction was planned into construction and in the second interaction though not necessarily planned emerged and enhanced the structure. A much more confused scenario is that surrounding the Lady Diana Memorial in Hyde Park London. The memorial was different in conceptual function from the other two fountains, being located in a park and not as intended as part of a design initiative based around the wider urban fabric, however, the fountain illustrates some key principles in relation to the development of potentially interactive water features.

Opened in 2004 the Memorial Fountain takes the form of a circular stream constructed from granite that includes both smooth and rippled sides through which water flows to a pool at the bottom. It was designed by Kathryn Gustafson, an American landscape artist, at a cost of £3.6 million with the concept of 'inclusivity' to be reflected in the design. However, inclusivity while fine in theory became problematic in practice. After opening it was found that two key interlinked factors had been overlooked in its construction. The memorial became a huge attraction for families and the grass surrounding the memorial unable to cope with numbers and active use became a quagmire. Also the fact that children love playing in was not accounted for, as is the fact that polished granite becomes very slippery when wet and thus less than ideal when used for

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/millennium\\_park\\_-artarchitecture.html](http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/millennium_park_-artarchitecture.html) accessed 20-August2013

play. One spectacularly unsuccessful approach subsequently adopted was to ban children from playing in it – an approach later sensibly modified to providing a supervisor to be present at the fountain in case of accidents. Similar debates have raged around access and use for play of the ‘interactive’ water features in Darling Harbour, notably the spiral fountain and Tumbalong fountains. In all these fountains children frolic in the water and again some of the more playful adults also take to its waters but not all support or even allow interaction and thus rather than being a source of playful inspiration become a source of frustration and alienation for children<sup>3</sup>. The lady Diana Memorial presents a strong argument in regeneration projects for considering both the intended (Visual and memorial) and the unintended (water play, climbing, hide n’sseek...) affordances that public artworks present. It is particularly necessary to consider these potential ‘unintended’ uses in the design stage when the artwork will be in a space that is known to or encourages the presence of children.



*Figure 5. Children on a summer’s day play in the Lady Diana Memorial Fountain, a ‘safety guard’ can be seen at left in the background*

### **Interactive public art: The Buckets, Wellington New Zealand**

The final example and the oldest is the Buckets Fountain in Cuba Street Wellington, New Zealand. Cuba mall is one of Wellington’s major pedestrian thoroughfares and known for its trend setting, ‘funky’ vibe. Erected in 1969 and designed by Burren and Keen the fountain was an integral part of a very early pedestrianisation initiative. It is a kinetic sculpture comprising a vertical series of buckets that fill with water until they tip cascading water into lower buckets

<sup>3</sup> In Syracuse police enforce laws that prohibit wading and bathing in the fountain. Those who wade may be arrested, and risk a fine of up to \$500.

causing huge splashes in the process. Like much public art it was not universally appreciated as in this extract from the magazine *Designscape* written soon after its installation<sup>4</sup>

"Admirable in concept, as something different and interesting, the mobile has not has the careful thinking out it obviously needs [...] with sporadic and sudden cascades of water often missing the bucket below, or hitting as it swings upside down, with resulting large splashes onto the pavement and roars of laughter from onlookers"

Fortunately the 'laughter from the onlookers' prevailed and the Buckets over time have become well-loved Wellington feature and the splashes welcomed even though in windy wellington water can be carried well away from the sculpture. Indeed in 2003 the buckets were adjusted to enhance their pavement splash quotient. The Buckets have survived two Mall makeovers and remain a much loved part of the city. They are a great attraction for children as recognised by the council who have installed a small fixed equipment play area nearby.



*Figure 6. A young girl waits patiently for the Buckets to fill and overflow*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bucketfountain.co.nz/history.html> and <http://www.sculptures.org.nz/tours/courtenay/bucket-fountain>

## Concluding thoughts

There are a number of design principles that planners, urban designers, regeneration specialists, public artists, recreation managers, economic developers and others involved in enhancing and maintaining urban vitality should heed when developing such water features. The first is that if children are considered as central to urban well being and the development is designed with children at its core the development is also likely to have much wider benefits for the population in general, including local businesses - it makes economic sense. Water attracts children, children come with families who use and thus enhance economic viability of the locally adjacent businesses and amenities. If water is part of the design children will use it, to think otherwise is naïve, so it is best to design the artwork at the outset as an interactive development ensuring appropriate materials and surroundings are included in the design. Good design also considers local conditions, in the case of Chicago and Perth the fountains are a positive response to the summer climatic conditions as well as being exemplars of environmental thinking through effective water recycling techniques. History repeatedly shows that the more interactive the urban environment the better. The great plazas and city squares act as people magnets and include features such as markets, seats, sculptures and fountains all designed to make people linger. Interactive fountains such as the Labyrinth can now be seen in city squares across the world - from Custom House Square, Belfast, Northern Ireland to Seoul Plaza, Korea, and are an increasingly common feature of city redevelopment programmes. What these interactive fountains offer, apart from aesthetics is an opportunity to build not just a fountain but to put children and children's play in the city's commercial heart, making children visible and creating inter-generational connections in what is too often a primarily adultist urban core. If the 'inclusivity' and 'fun' arguments are insufficient to persuade planners, architects, politicians and others involved in urban decision making that they are worthy investments then the economic spin off they generate through attracting people into the city centre will. Playful spaces are successful spaces.

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