# ground 09

# Water

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# Cultures of Play

## Wading into water's delight

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I recently went to a public charrette for input on parks in my west-end neighbourhood of Toronto. One of the items that the group raised for discussion was the local wading pool. Is it used? By whom? In our climate, which affords us only about 60 days of wading, do wading pools warrant such a large chunk of the park? I have not seen a new wading pool built in Toronto in my lifetime, but I have seen many wading pools destroyed, filled in with soil, or transformed into a "splash pad," our era's standard take on water play.

A splash pad is a wet zone without standing water, where objects can be triggered or programmed mechanically or electronically to spray water. It does not require pool attendants, or the labour of filling and emptying. While spraying is something enjoyable that we can do with water, splash pads reduce the variety of opportunities for water play in comparison to wading pools. What you are really engaging with in the splash pad is an electronic sensor. No doubt, sensors are cool. But playing in a tub of water is perhaps cooler for a wider variety of ages—what we do with it is an exploration requiring our active participation and imagination synchronized with our senses. What I notice about wading pools is how everyone brings their own level of development and interests to the space in a way that nearly precludes boredom. In thinking about water and landscape, I'd like to make an appeal to maintain existing outdoor pools and create more watery spaces for unstructured play in urban environments.

Play does not have a purpose, although purposes and interests become readily attached to the play impulse and then tend to destroy the play spirit. Play has a generative cultural function whose dynamism is maintained through lively participation. When a cultural game becomes stagnant, it suffocates, and so must remain flexible enough to adjust rules that no longer seem vital. One thing I have learned from Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (in particular, his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*) is that all environments can be seen as settings for some type of play; another is that the rules of the game must be understood; then, that the rules must be able to shift continually and so the environment must adapt.

The playground as a feature of urban life has a rather brief history. The dense industrial working class city increasingly made the street the only outdoor play space for children. In the early twentieth century, American social reformers began the charge for people to create spaces expressly for working class children to play in, at the same time as they were pressuring cities to create public baths to get these same children clean. The aims were to alleviate the physical suffering of the poor, and moreover to morally improve a group now seen as a hygienic and social threat to the middle and upper classes. Olmstead's great American parks arose in this same movement. These three roots of public playgrounds, baths, and parks are still intertwined in our cities' recreation spaces, and merge in the children's wading pool.

Early playground equipment was principally made of steel to be vandal proof above all else, and swings, slides, and monkey bars are

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design essays in the mechanical means of production—basically machines for playing in. While the inventive can usually discover the latent possibilities of anything, there is a "right way" to use a slide or a swing.

In the 1960s, the adventure playground movement began to form. The focus on experience, rejection of authority, the human potential movement, and the attempted reconstruction of certain cultural games all inform the adventure playground. This is more than an unstructured play space: it is a proposition to build and destroy. Landmark 1960s and 1970s playgrounds, such as Jacob Riis in New York by M. Paul Friedberg, were fixed miniature landscapes of basic elements such as steps, hills, and walls, and appear inspired by Van Eyck and Isamu Noguchi's provocative playground designs of highly abstracted landscape elements. Lawrence Halprin is part of this wave of 1970s play spaces with a focus on water. In a Seattle playground, designed by Halprin, for example, you can walk in water, stand under a fountain, and climb to its summit. Halprin's legacy of fountain playgrounds emerges from a less litigious and more sensually optimistic time. The Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain in London, England, by Kathryn Gustafson (2004) is a fine example of a more contemporary design based on wading for un-programmed play in an abstracted simulation of a river in solid granite. Barefoot children and adults explore its irregular ring-trough of changing section and elevation that speeds up or slows down the flow of the water. Textures beneath your toes transform from smooth to rough to pebbly to stepped.

The potential for water play is great. I wish that we could explore more seasonal uses for outdoor water play spaces in cold climates. I wish that we could resist somewhat the fashions of technology and ideology when we come to design spaces for play, grounded in our experiences of water's sheer delight.

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01/ Louis Laberge-Cote dancing in Dufferin Grove Park wading pool, Toronto; choreographer Peter Chin.

IMAGE/ Cheryl Rondeau

02/ Projection work on water at night, by Tony Stallard, in Bellevue Square wading pool, Toronto.

IMAGE/ Cheryl Rondeau

03/ Bellevue Square wading pool, Toronto, where Chrysanne Stathacos has floated rose petals.

IMAGE/ Christie Pearson