

## **AESTHETICS OF WATER IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

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### **The significance of water to people**

Water has long held a place of deep significance to people. Historically, springs were important to the Greeks, the mythical 'fountain of youth' and 'water of life' were among the mythologies of the ancients, the association of Eden with an eternal spring, the Christian sacrament of baptism symbolising purification and rebirth, fountains being symbols of purity, and throwing coins in fountains for a wish or good luck probably originating in appeasing the gods of the waters, are all examples of the cultural significance of water.



Morialta falls – a stone's throw from Adelaide

Delight in water does not result from its utility value – for transport, fishing, recreation, industry, etc. Nor does its appeal derive merely from being essential for life; why do we like the sea even though it is undrinkable? Rather the appeal of water is deep seated within the human psyche for reasons which remain unfathomable.

### **What do we like about water?**

Many studies of landscape aesthetics have examined the role that water plays in enhancing scenic attractiveness. The presence of water in a scene has often been found to be the most important attribute, ahead of trees and vegetation, hills and valleys and attractive land uses. Water symbolises nature and naturalness always enhances the appeal of the scene.



Brownhill Creek in flood November 2005

Moving water such as waterfalls and rapids can produce feelings of awe. Turbulence focuses attention but reduces the sense of tranquillity associated with calm water. The scenic appeal of moving water

increases up to a point then tends to diminish as rushing turbulent water such as floods can engender fear.



Adelaide Botanic Gardens lake – lots of edge

The scenic attractiveness of water increases with the length of the water/land edge, the area of water and the depth of the water. Many straightened streams reduce the water/land edge. Placid water bodies such as ponds and lakes engender calmness, tranquillity and serenity. In urban areas, water holds one's attention, has a stabilising effect on emotions and, in particular sharply reduces feelings of fear. Water (along with trees and flowers) act as natural tranquilizers, helping people cope with the stresses of urban living.

#### **What don't we like about water?**



Water feature in front of Art Gallery. Dirty water reduces its attractiveness

While clean, sparkling, clear water is judged as attractive, dirty water, poor water quality, coloured water, stagnant water and algae growth on the water are all regarded as unattractive. Litter, erosion and channelisation also are negatives. Such is the importance of naturalness in water that a scene of water labelled as artificial will rate lower than the same scene labelled natural (e.g. a reservoir vs a lake).

#### **How can we maximise the aesthetic benefit of water?**

It is striking that compared cities in with more temperate climates, Adelaide does not have extensive water bodies such as lakes and rivers. The Torrens Lake and the River Torrens have significant water colour issues which diminish their attractiveness.



River Torrens – on a good day!



Wayville Creek – an opportunity lost

The urban creeks across the Adelaide plains flow only temporarily after rain and have been largely confined in concrete channels. Their potential role in enhancing urban amenity have been largely lost in the older suburbs of Adelaide by urban development encroaching too close to establish linear parks.

The creation of water bodies at new urban developments such as Mawson Lakes and Andrews Farm demonstrate the appeal that water provides, as well as its real estate value. The lessons from these are being applied in new urban areas where creeks have been retained as part of the open space and water bodies formed.



## Mawson Lakes – blending of housing and water

Urban wetland initiatives such as the Urrbrae wetlands, the Warriparinga Wetland, the Paddocks and other extensive wetlands at Salisbury and many small wetlands that have been established over recent years are of great aesthetic benefit. The layout of such wetlands should aim to maximise the visibility of the water body to passer-bys.



Parklands Ck adjacent Victoria Park – an opportunity

Where-ever possible, opportunities to create lakes and wetlands should be realised. For example, the Parklands Creek which enters the southern end of Victoria Park could be diverted into a large water holding basin which, as well as providing flood relief, would serve as an attractive water body in an otherwise open paddock.

In designing water bodies, the water/land length should be maximised through indentations rather than a smooth round edge. This will maximise its visual appeal. The water body should be extensive and islands provide excellent visual contrast and further edges. Water depth is important, partly to ensure the retention of water as long as possible, and also because deep water is more visually attractive. Measures to trap silt, debris and pollutants before the water enters the water body will provide cleaner, more attractive water.



Botanic Gardens Mediterranean garden fountain – water in a dry climate



Mawson Lakes fountain – lovely sound of falling water

Fountains provide a very effective means of enabling many people enjoy the psychological benefits of water in the city. The emphasis of fountains should be the water, not the structure that conveys it. Pools of water should be clear and deep. The sound of water provides additional cues.

Adelaide is situated in a Mediterranean climate with its moist winters and hot dry summers, and in such conditions water bodies can play a significant role in enhancing the liveability and attractiveness of the city.