

Water and Celebration

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One of the most essential environmental elements, and also one of the most beautiful, is water. The role that water plays in our communities is vital but once the certainty of a water supply can be established then the celebration of that certainty is also important. The celebration of water is a high form of utility to which any good city must aspire. Celebrations of water can be romantic like the Trevi Fountain in Rome or modest like the public water fountains in Assisi. Water can be manipulated to record the rise and fall of tides as found in the work of the late Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa or can be made dramatic as in the swirling dish of water at the Camino Real Hotel in Mexico City by architect Ricardo Legorreta. Water can be in cool repose as arranged at the Dallas Modern Art Museum by Edward Barnes or be an extravaganza as can be seen in the fire and water works in Las Vegas.

One of my favorite public fountains is located in the middle of the great formal steps that lead up to the classically inspired Philadelphia Museum of Art. The fountain is fairly simple – it cascades downwards in successive pools mimicking the steps of the museum. But despite the controlled design the fountain serves as a kind of subversive element within the ceremonial arrangement. On the hot summer day when I visited the museum ten years ago there were a host of poor city kids, fitted out in swim trunks or cut-offs, playing in the cool water. I wanted to plunge into the fountain with the kids and play in the water. I didn't do that but I have taken the plunge in my mind many times since then. I learned that day how water can completely transform a setting. Looking back now I enjoy the fact that the architect provided the water element and that the museum administrator recognized the importance of letting people celebrate water.

The celebration of water can take on many forms and Fort Worth has several examples of waterworks:

- The Water Gardens by Philip Johnson - This park exhibits water in different states; as a motionless surface surrounded by tilted planes of water, as a waterfall at the park entry, as a pool with a fountain at its center or as a dizzying vortex dropping far below street level.
- Burnett Park by Peter Walker and SWA Associates – This park is a diagram of the intersection of a landscape and a skyscraper. Both the park and the building are somewhat two-dimensional in form but the park is still enjoyable and far better than the tame 19th-Century design that it replaced. The primary water features are a string of small fountains dotting the park. The fountains are lighted at night from within and they seem like cool flames. There is also a calm pool that acts as a foreground to a series of Matisse sculptures.

- The Fort Worth Botanical Gardens – This fine example of Depression era Work Project Administration construction has a formal axis complimented by a line of water that cascades down a terrace. Beyond the terrace is a more natural pond that stands in pleasant contrast to the formal arrangement. Back within the trees and to the south is an even more rustic set of water structures and ponds.
- The Japanese Gardens – Water is a subtle element in this case but it is ultimately the most important part of the garden by virtue of a reversal. The water becomes the constant against which the undulating and ever-shifting landscape is experienced.
- Heritage Park by Lawrence Halprin and Associates - This is a wonderful but neglected park just north of the Tarrant County Courthouse and overlooking the Trinity River. The water is sometimes vertical and sometimes horizontal - is planer and then linear. It lifts at certain points and drops at others. The water establishes both place and path.
- The Kimbell Art Museum by Louis Kahn - At the Kimbell the water slips past a crisp edge to create a sheet of water folding into the pool below with just a hint of sound. The porches at the pool side step down to the edge of the water and invite children and the youthful at heart to dip their toes into the coolness. One of the courtyards within the building contains a simple pedestal for a sculpture that incorporates a gentle fountain.

The celebration of water would be incomplete without mentioning the domestic setting - the water hose or irrigation system in our yards. These can open themselves up to the fantastic with just a bit of imagination and attention. Irrigation systems create inverted cones of water; the slow stroke of a sprinkler waves water into the air; a hand-held hose, squeezed down at the tip, creates a wild spray – what child, inner or otherwise, fails to be thrilled at these? Each catches the light, delights the skin and invigorates the sense of smell. Water transforms a setting like no other material and can change how we enjoy our world. A celebration of water is a celebration of life.

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