

A pond in a park: Social Geographies of adolescents at public swimming pools in Tasmania.

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By Shane Gould

Student # 103158

Candidate for Masters of Environmental Management by coursework

University of Tasmania
Department of Geography

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ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that there are significant nourishing social and physical health benefits from being outdoors in natural environments, such as parklands, beaches and forests. While a public outdoor swimming pool is traditionally identified as a sporting venue, I propose in this study that it can be considered as a body of water in a community parkland setting. This broader description focuses attention on how public outdoor swimming pools can contribute to the physical and social health of a community in diverse ways, as an outdoor public space. A finding from the field research, is that public outdoor pools are a common space for heterogeneous social groups to interact and co-exist. Getting into the water or being around the pool, is the reason for being at the spaces of a pool rather than a waterless park, but the research showed that swimming in a horizontal position was, usually, not the reason for getting in the water. The main reason for being at the pool was social - to be amongst other people with friends, in or out of the water. However the focus shape of the pool for competition may inhibit inclusive social uses.

This research was undertaken at four public outdoor pools in Launceston, Tasmania, in the summer school holidays of January 2010, on warm to hot afternoons. Out of 30 direct observations and 100 indirect observations, for an average of 33 minutes duration, just 21 seconds or 1% was spent swimming in a horizontal position – in chunks of 2 to 4 seconds. Chatting, watching and playing occupied 82% of the time at the pool and 71% was spent in the water or at the edges of the water. Another finding was that the swimming abilities of all people at the pools (excluding the competitive swimmers observed) when they did swim horizontally, was of a poor standard for adequate life preserving skills in a critical situation. Tasmania with a population of 500,000 people has 9 x 50 m swimming pools and at least 80 swimming pools where school lessons are taught and the public can use. Swimming skills noted in field research do not reflect the use of these venues for skill acquisition. Only 50% of 11 year old Tasmanian children achieve national swimming skill benchmarks.

This study explores the potential for enhancing social capital in public spaces, in the context of one specific social grouping – adolescents. Youth tend to be marginalised and criminalised for their play in public spaces, a process of exclusion that can inhibit their citizenship behaviours and reduce social cohesion. This censure is evident at the

public pools studied. One research question asked: “how would you make the pool more user friendly?” revealed that the play and social needs of youth were inadequately catered for. I conclude this is due to the shape of the pool - designed for competition, not enough deep water, restrictions on risky activity, not enough semi-private spaces, and under staffing of pools by lifeguards/activity supervisors.

Many of the pools in Australia and Tasmania are old and in need of renovation or demolition. Outdoor pools are valuable amenities worthy of preservation and regeneration, but how they are to be renovated requires a re-conception of their functions and uses. The research indicates that re-imagining an outdoor pool, as a metaphorical ‘pond in a park’ is one archetypal model. Historically, swimming pools originated as public bathing houses in England based on angular functionalistic Roman architecture. Socially they were built to get physically and morally ‘clean’, and then later to train young people in an authoritarian militaristic style for nationalistic projects. These ‘moral projects’ are not as relevant in the 21st C. Furthermore, 21st C sedentary lifestyles and privatisation of social life are a rising concern. Both organised and casual activities at pools have adapted to the historical design of swimming pools. These activities are now either culturally accepted or institutionalised so the expectation at many levels is that the design of new swimming pools will serve these activities that originally evolved largely from the design of the pools themselves. For example there are no ‘steeplechase’ obstacle swimming races. Swimming pool designs are not keeping up with other outdoor type playgrounds and parks that are using sensory stimulus, and bio-mimetic features to meet some social and physical health issues that can be eased by contact with nature, in its broadest sense. Children’s play is more inclusive, creative and active, in playgrounds with rocks, logs, ditches and mounds, than on colourful, prefabricated equipment. Aquatic parallels have not yet been fully developed.

The research contributes knowledge to the possible solutions of a dilemma, ‘what to do with the old pool’ by demonstrating that there is more socialising happening at pools than there is swimming horizontally. As there is a decline in public spaces, public swimming pools have the potential to be a nourishing, vibrant space with a high user density, for the building of trust, social networks and self-regulating behaviours that build social capital. Re-imagining a swimming pool as a metaphorical ‘pond in a park’ is stepping stone to this end.

Conclusions and recommendations.

In retrospect, this study has been very broad, too broad perhaps. However, swimming pools have not been studied in this way before, so in order to inform the topic adequately, the breadth of view was required. Further, narrower studies of youth play and recreation opportunities in Launceston generally and specifically at Australian pools is needed.

Boys and girls have divergent approaches to recreation. This gender difference necessitates discrete solutions. A 'muscular' approach to pool activity such as lap swimming, or diving, does not suit every adolescent customer, male or female. Both organised and casual activities at pools have adapted to the historical design of swimming pools. These activities are now either culturally accepted or institutionalised so the expectation at many levels is that the design of new swimming pools will serve these activities that originally evolved largely from the design of the pools themselves.

Youth are at the doorstep of adulthood, they require experiences in public social locations in order to learn what behaviour is demanded of them as they become a responsible adult citizen. Censuring youthful behaviours at public swimming pools, unless dangerous or inconsiderate, excludes youth from the socialising process. The report '*Fair Play: a consultation on the play strategy*' by the UK Department for Culture Media and Sport in 2008 has some guidelines for the provision of play opportunities for youth. Councils and pool managers could review this and other similar reports about youth inclusive, unstructured and structured, recreation options.

‘Young people too often get labelled by the behaviour of a few of their peers, and can start to feel alienated from the community in which they live. *Aiming High for Young People* sets out proposals on proactive action to address the challenge which young people face in growing up in a culture that has widespread negative perceptions of youth, and in which nearly three-fifths of the media coverage of young people focuses on negative stories.’ (DCMS 2008) p.40.

The following further findings about public swimming pools emerged from this study:

- The weather primarily determines how much an outdoor pool is used, warm weather means more people and more social activities.
- Diverse social groups interact and coexist in the shared pool spaces.
- Swimming pools have embedded meanings as a representation of seashore, beach, lakeside and as a place of healing.
- Only 1% of time is spent swimming horizontally, 20 seconds in an hour.
- Pools are used more like a pond in a park than a competition venue, but the shape facilitates competition uses more than social uses, limiting social use, possibly reducing customer numbers.
- There are historical reasons for the rectangular shapes of pools.
- Financial accounting of old pools is prioritised rather than social values.
- There are more than 90 public-use pools in Tasmania.
- Of these, nine are 50 metres long, and four are open all year-round.
- Poor standards of swimming skills are exhibited in Tasmanian pools.
- The pools studied are understaffed to supervise adolescent activities.
- Youth activity is censured, alternative activities are inadequately provided by staff and facility design.
- Semi private spaces are deficient at the public pools studied.
- Adolescents are numerically underrepresented at public pools.

Recommendations:

- Consider social values and affordances when a council renovates or builds a pool, not just financial accounting.
- Conduct mapping of the social uses of indoor pools.
- Create a system to score a pool's social capital building capacity, which could be applied to other recreational facilities.
- Train staff and demonstrate alternative ways in which adolescents can use the pool water and surrounding facilities, making them feel welcome.
- Facilitate semi-structured youth activity both muscular and calm.
- Assist competitive swimmers to adapt to using pool water and spaces in a more socially inclusive manner while still developing fitness and skills.
- Evaluate 'policing' signage, access and regulatory fencing.
- Provide opportunities for youth dissatisfaction to be heard and acted upon.
- Increase the number of respected, mature lifeguard/activity leader staff, at times of youth-dense patronage.
- Generate a concierge-type hospitable atmosphere, away from 'guarding' and surveillance, without reducing safety.
- Create more semi-private spaces in the facility.
- Pools could be designed or retrofitted with, sensory stimulation features, echoing biological and geographical systems, which might increase patronage and diverse uses of facilities.
- Most accidental drowning occurs in natural water locations, however this could be reduced by installing biomimetic features and programs in pools, which in turn, could be utilised for teaching transitions to unpredictable, natural water.

- Imitating landscaping features of outdoor pools could help indoor pool customer numbers, eg light, greenery, rocks.
- Build or renovate aquatic recreation spaces for 21st C lifestyles deficient in nature engagement, with the ‘human – nature connection’ as guidance.

Seasonal outdoor pools are expensive to operate – water evaporation and heat dissipation from uncovered water – as well as damaging effects of the sun on human skin, establishes seasonal and outdoor pools less viable than 50 years ago. Cultural change toward expectations of comfort and climate controlled environments, such as heated water, cause outdoor pools to contain less public appeal. However there are other options for the use of the all of the spaces of a pool facility. The pool water could be a backdrop to assorted functions, as a pond in a park is a backdrop to picnics, watching others, reading the paper, or a café outlook. The water at a pool doesn’t need to be swum in. It can be looked at! In some towns pools are considered as water storage for fighting fires. Alternately, the surface is suitable for small boats, water craft, or dangling legs. A body of water is suitable as a school outdoor classroom, so a swimming pool can be used as an aquatic classroom. If possible, the water of a seasonal pool could be used as a fish pond in the cooler seasons if it didn’t damage the infrastructure. Finally an outdoor seasonal pool could be converted to a ‘natural pool’ where a third of it is planted with reeds as a biological filtration system.

Germany sports over 100 public natural pools. These are unquestionably swimmable ‘ponds in the park’.