

People, Pleasure & Other Populations

DESIGNS ON WATER

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The design of water in contemporary parks, plazas, riverfronts, and gardens draws on age-old concepts of delight, from reflecting pool to constructed wetland and from splash pad to misting environments. Technological advances and sustainability requirements create novel water effects as well as efficient drainage and runoff management. As examples, the sheer power of the World Trade Center Memorial waterfalls perceptually transports us into a physical and mental void; on a more intimate scale, the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain manipulates our sense of time and stimulates our senses with rippling, whirling, swooshing, and calm waters. Yet, the motive behind such sophisticated water designs remain remarkably simple: the pursuit of atmospheric and emotional control. Across time, mastery over water was seen as a pleasure trigger and a source of financial gain, not to mention health. Water as power in the territorial and political ambitions of Louis XIV is a well-rehearsed narrative, from the gardens of Versailles to the Canal du Midi. The 1,400 fountains of Versailles required a complete hydrological restructuring of the region and the creation of a hydraulic infrastructure to transform “the most ingrate site, without views, woods, nor waters” into André Le Nôtre’s landscape vision. Water redistribution for royal pleasure was not without social and ecological implications on city, agricultural landscape, and wildlife. Versailles, after all, was also a productive landscape with farms and hunting woods, and the shift from stagnant to moving and clean water had repercussions for game and fish as well as for people.

This presentation highlights the key objectives of designing, displaying, and interacting with water across time and scales, from spectacle to social and environmental health in four canonical examples. The political might expressed in the water management of the gardens and hunting landscape of Versailles; the celebration of shipping and hydroelectric power at the 1939 Exposition of Waters in Liège, Belgium; the recent reclamation of Zurich’s Letten canal into a public bath and conservation area; and the iconic pool of Thomas Church’s Donnell Garden in Sonoma, California, all offer lessons on the expansive and hidden qualities of water landscapes. In each, concerns for humans and biodiversity, flood control and conservation, to name a few, bring landscape designers to address the intricate interconnection of nature and culture. This idiosyncratic list is not intended to illustrate the multitude of effects, expressions, or manifestations of water, but rather to offer a compelling cross section of the motives behind designed waters.