

# Haptic and Olfactory Experiences of the Perth Foreshore: Case Studies in Sensory History

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The liminal zone where a city meets ‘the water’s edge’ is a place of heightened sensory experiences. In Australia, these settings have been continually reshaped and experienced, individually and collectively, both before and after European settlement, and so they provide a physical domain for reinterpreting Australian history. In Perth, Western Australia, at the turn of the twentieth century, two recreational buildings on the foreshore, the Perth City Baths (1898–1914) and the Water Chute (1905–unknown), promoted new aquatic leisure practices that provided heightened sensory experiences of the Swan River and the city foreshore. These buildings are examined from the perspective of ‘sensory history’, an alternative form of cultural and environmental analysis that has been garnering interest from a range of disciplines over the past several decades (see, for example, the work of Constance Classen, Alain Corbin, David Howes and Mark M Smith). Sensory history seeks to reveal through historical inquiry the informative and exploratory nature of the senses in specific contexts. The potential value of sensory history to studies of built and natural environments lies in drawing attention away from the overweening and frequently generalising dominance of ‘the visual’ as a critical category in humanities research. The case studies explore how evolving swimming practices at the City Baths and ‘shooting the chutes’ at the Water Chute provided novel, exciting and sometimes unpleasant haptic and olfactory experiences and consider how changing forms of recreation allowed for broadly sensuous rather than primarily visual experiences of the foreshore and Swan River. These case studies are part of a larger body of research that seeks to ‘make sense’ of the Perth foreshore and, more broadly, Australian urban waterfronts as sites of varied and evolving sensory experience.

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## KEY WORDS

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Perth, Western Australia, is a city situated at the edge of a ‘waterside’ nation. In Australia, a large percentage of the population lives within 50 kilometres of the continental fringe and almost every major city is situated on a harbour, a coast or a river approaching its coastal outlet. Urban waterfronts are often celebrated for their visual appeal; however, the ‘fluidity’ of water-, river- and ocean-fronts as sites of building and occupation makes them ideal settings for exploring the multi-sensory nature of such places. Sensory historian Alain Corbin (2014) writes that:

... a sensory appreciation of the city does not begin and end in the stones of its architecture, that is to say, in a nature morte or still life. It goes far beyond this materiality. A city’s sounds, odours, and movement make up its identity as much as its lines and perspectives (p 47).

Considering the sensory history of urban waterfronts offers a new perspective on some of Australia’s most celebrated places.

## REFLECTION

In Perth at the turn of the twentieth century, two recreational buildings promoted new aquatic leisure practices that provided heightened sensory experiences of the Swan River and the city foreshore. Case studies of the Perth City Baths (1898–1914) and the Water Chute (1905–unknown) explore how technological developments and cultural change facilitated the rise of new and decidedly modern forms of recreational engagement with the river. Swimming at the City Baths and ‘shooting the chutes’ at the Water Chute transformed encounters between an individual’s body, the bodies of others, and built and natural environments. This paper addresses sensations of touch, movement and smell, presenting a broadly sensuous rather than primarily visual perspective on the Perth foreshore around the turn of the twentieth century.

## Sensory history

‘Sensory history’ is a field of historical, anthropological and cultural inquiry that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s from the work of scholars including Constance Classen, Alain Corbin, David Howes and Mark M Smith. It seeks to explore the different cultural meanings that are attached to particular sensations in specific places and times (Smith, 2010, p 860). Sensory history acknowledges the importance of philosophical (that is, Locke, Descartes), phenomenological (Heidegger, Pallasmaa) and scientific (biological or evolutionary) perspectives on senses, but also recognises how such approaches risk neglecting the cultural construction of the senses and the historical specificities of places and times. It considers the role of the senses ‘in shaping peoples’ [sic] experience of the past, shows how they understood their worlds and why, and is (or, at least, should be) very careful not to assume that the senses are some sort of “natural” endowment, unchangeable and constant’ (Smith, 2007, p 842). The increasing number of publications and scholars from diverse fields undertaking research on sensory history in recent decades is evidence of expanding interest in the field. Examples of recent publications on the subject include *The Cultural History of the Senses* series (Classen, 2014) and the journal *Senses & Society* (published by Taylor and Francis since 2006).

The value (and a primary aim) of sensory history for studies of the built environment lies in drawing attention away from the overweening and potentially generalising dominance of ‘the visual’ as a critical category in humanities research (Classen, 2005; Pink, 2006; Smith, 2010). Sensory seeks to ‘look behind assumptions that the visual is necessarily the dominant sense in modern western cultures to explore how the relationships between categories of sensory experience figure in informants’ lives’ (Pink, 2006, p 42).

Sources or ‘evidence’ for sensory history come primarily from the period being considered and can be diverse, including writings on hygiene and social practices, letters, diaries and photographs. Period newspaper articles in community newspapers, particularly letters to the editor, provided a forum for citizens to learn about and express their opinion on urban matters or to highlight social concerns. Letters or narratives of events were often lively and descriptive, particularly when photographs were not included and the author endeavoured to convey not only the event but also the physical and human context in which it took place. This, in turn, contributed to communal understandings of places or activities and in some instances facilitated social change. Many early articles do not list an author or

they use a pseudonym. Within this paper, pseudonyms are indicated by enclosing them in single quotation marks – for example, ‘Diver’ or ‘Visitor’.

This paper examines haptic and olfactory senses, which provide specific types of information about places, bodies and environments. The haptic system encompasses the sensations of touch and movement in a perceptual system that provides information about the surrounding environment and the position, movement and tactile encounters of the body (Gibson, 1966). The olfactory system processes scents, which are ‘subtly involved in just about every aspect of culture, from the construction of personal identity and the defining of social status to the confirming of group affiliation and the transmission of tradition’ (Drobnick, 2006, p 1). Smells, and their associated cultural meanings, can indicate whether a place is clean, salubrious and appropriate or contaminated and dangerous. For example, the skin, muscles and joints of a swimmer entering the water sense temperature, current and depth, while the olfactory system detects odours and determines their source. These sensations and their interpretation simultaneously provide an understanding of the state of their immediate environment, determining how they feel (physically and emotionally) and how they should proceed.

Around 1900, the Perth foreshore, situated nearly 15 kilometres up the Swan River, was occupied by light industry, maritime transport infrastructure, parklands and facilities dedicated to sailing, rowing and swimming. Flint (2014) argues ‘the busy thoroughfares of nineteenth and early twentieth-century cities continually stimulated the eye, nose and ear, refusing sensory rest to the perceiver’ (p 25). Perth depended on the Swan River for transport, industry and recreation, and waterside activities would have generated a myriad of sights, smells and sounds, as well as novel and modern material encounters. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Public Recreation Grounds were constructed on the foreshore (Figure 1) along with riverside walls that reduced physical access to the river. Social conventions and restrictive bylaws also limited when and where people could swim and bathe, and thus the City Baths and Water Chute were important as structures that provided socially sanctioned physical access to the river.

### Perth City Baths

The Perth City Baths, designed by Mr GE Johnson, opened in March 1898 after decades of calls for public bathing facilities to address issues of hygiene, public propriety and leisure. The building perched at the end of a wide jetty that extended 91 metres into the river, attempting to avoid the shallow mudflats edging the foreshore (figures 2 and 3). The timber structure had four cupola-topped towers framing a promenade facing the foreshore and was described by *The West Australian* (1898) as ‘Moorish’. The visual appeal of the exotic building was emphasised: it was said to form a ‘pretty backdrop to the Esplanade’ (ibid), a feature that became the building’s only enduring positive attribute. A decade later, ‘Recte et Suaviter’ (1908) wrote in a letter to the editor, ‘the only thing in favour of the present baths is its outward appearance, in that it somewhat resembles an Oriental mosque. But a person need be no cynic to assert that its position is unsuitable’.

The jetty led to two entry vestibules where bathers entered spatially and visually separated men’s and women’s bathing facilities, each providing river bathing, private hot-water bath chambers, showers and changing rooms. Maintaining



Figure 1: Partial image of the Plan of the City of Perth, 1910. The Perth City Baths are sketched lightly in red below the recreation grounds. To the east of Mount Eliza is Point Lewis and the Water Chute. (Image: State Records Office of Western Australia, series 2168, cons 5698, item 1385.)

visual propriety within the baths was a key aim of the building. In a 1902 letter to the editor, H Seiler, a female bather, complained that she was ‘subjected of rude stares and remarks of the men’, who could see into the ladies’ baths while waiting for their turn in the men’s hot baths. Maintaining complete visual segregation, and thus propriety, was crucial to many female bathers at the time.

The baths were well patronised soon after opening; however, early hints indicated that the building’s tenancy on the foreshore would be tenuous owing to negative haptic and olfactory experiences of the site caused by the fetid mud lining the foreshore. The preferential attention given to aesthetics and convenience over haptic and olfactory concerns when selecting the site proved problematic shortly after opening.

### Malodorous mud

Classen (2014) writes that the 1800s and early 1900s were ‘a malodorous time’ for cities and ‘the streets and waterways which traversed cities, in turn, often



Figure 2 (left): Perth City Baths circa 1900. (Photo: Battye Library 001739D.)

Figure 3 (right): The Perth City Baths in 1905. (Photo: State Library of Western Australia 010021PD.)

stank of refuse and waste' (p 5). London's 'Great Stink' of 1858 exemplified the trials of providing sewerage and refuse disposal for a rapidly increasing urban population (Daunton, 2004). The 'smellscape' of the foreshore was a noted and widely reviled aspect of Perth around 1900. In 1894, four years before the opening of the baths, a column in *The West Australian* expostulated:

... daily, as the tide recedes, the atmosphere in the vicinity of the river is poisoned by a smell, or rather by a variety of smells, which baffles description, and while the water is low, a walk along the bank is an ordeal which no one with a normal nostril would willingly undergo.

(See also *The West Australian*, 1903.) Natural river smells, including brine, tannin, and riverine flora and fauna, were significantly altered by human waste generated over seven decades of settlement. Sources causing the odours were manifold, such as sewerage, runoff, refuse, animal waste and fertilisers, which over time altered the biological and chemical balances of the river. Boats manoeuvring along the foreshore and swimmers in the baths churned up the silty riverbed, turning the water fetid and murky.

Smells were a major source of anxiety and preoccupation before Pasteurian notions of germ theory became widespread (Corbin, 2014). Odours were often associated with the threat of disease-causing miasmas, and towards the end of the nineteenth century campaigns for sanitation and initiatives to introduce sewerage and garbage collection began to address the issue (Classen, 2014, p 5; Corbin, 1986). Corbin (2014) argues that, in the urban context of the nineteenth century, the sense of smell, considered a more animalistic sense, 'could detect and evade the threats posed by this organic matter, this human swamp associated with sin, sickness and mortality' (pp 50–51).

Many found the bodily pleasures of a bath (such as relief from the hot climate) sufficient to disregard the muddy, foul-smelling conditions of the site; however, some believed that, far from being merely malodorous, the foreshore emanated a vaporous threat to human health. It was only after the baths were in operation that the physical and olfactory experiences of the muddy water generated anxieties about miasmas, concerns about health and debates about the baths' location. An anonymous visitor from the Goldfields wrote to the *Sunday Times* in 1903 after a visit to the baths, declaring that 'when one emerges from the sewer (mistakenly called a bath) a shower is absolutely essential in the interests of cleanliness'. At a 1904 City Council meeting, Councillor Haynes described the baths as 'a duck pond' that generated work for the city's doctors, and argued that removing the baths would 'be better for the people and worse for the doctors' (*Daily News*, 1904). While many perceived the facility to be operating in opposition to one of its original intentions and detracting from the overall health of the population, the need for enclosed bathing spaces to maintain visual propriety, prevent open bathing in the river and cater to an increasing number of swimmers kept the baths in operation.

### Haptic pleasures of swimming

Swimming, as both a competitive sport and a recreational pastime, was an active form of engagement with the river that garnered increasing interest and

participation around 1900. The Perth Swimming Club promoted swimming as a ‘manly and delightful’ activity, ‘which improves the health, physique, and cleanliness of the community and the individual’ (*Daily News*, 1905a). The physical lifesaving skills frequently learnt alongside swimming, and the associated moral mindset, were cited as reasons that the sport could ‘act as a legitimate counter attraction to gambling on horses and other demoralising habits’ (ibid).

Swimming was a decidedly haptic activity, connecting the body with a series of distinct objects and activities, such as swimming costumes, the riverbed, the swimming enclosure and swimming styles, which were associated with cultural traditions of bathing and swimming. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the sport of swimming was evolving, with new ways of moving through water being developed, tested, displayed and promoted. As one Perth observer noted, ‘this race (220 yards) will be an eye-opener to swimmers and spectators, when they see the Australian champion “crawling” with his unique stroke over the course’ (*Diver*, 1908). New strokes were novel both in the way they appeared to spectators and for the sensations they induced in swimmers. The preceding observer continued, ‘it was thought at the inception of this mode of swimming that the “crawl” would be of little use over 100 yards. That this has proved a wrong prediction is evinced by the fact that Healy has proved successful in all distances up to the half-mile with this stroke alone’ (ibid). The baths and the river became a site for exploring new relationships between the body and water.

Swimming carnivals during hot summer months featured exhibitions that both demonstrated and inspired new swimming, diving and lifesaving techniques. An 1899 exhibition at the City Baths by Captain Gore’s professional swimming and diving troupe included:

... ornamental swimming, imitations of the whale and porpoise, swimming with the hands and feet tied. The best methods of rescuing the drowning, the Monte Christo feat, a long dive, and a laughable water sketch entitled ‘Angling; or, a bite at last.’  
The final item is a sensational high dive (*The West Australian*, 1899).

Ornamental swimming had links to forms of dance, with the physical challenge of simulating the fluidity and tempo of dance against the resistance and buoyancy of water. New diving techniques allowed participants to experiment with height, distance and the moment of weightlessness before the powerful haptic experience of impact and immersion. Escape acts such as ‘the Monte Christo’ feat provided spectators with excitement and suspense, playing on the risks associated with water. In opposition to such risky feats, lifesaving displays demonstrated the potential to mediate the risks and dangers of water.

Swimming, and the body of the swimmer, was legitimised in part by association with an appropriate venue under certain visual conditions, as opposed to taking place in the often restricted or contested river. Above water, the walls of the baths limited visual access into, or out of, the facility but, as they were unroofed, subjected bathers to local climatic conditions. The underwater portion of the structure was partly enclosed by timber pickets spaced three inches apart, partially screening the view of the bodies of bathers, but allowing water to move through the enclosures (Figure 4). The motion of tides, currents, wind and bodies in the baths provided a participatory haptic experience of the river water as swimmers

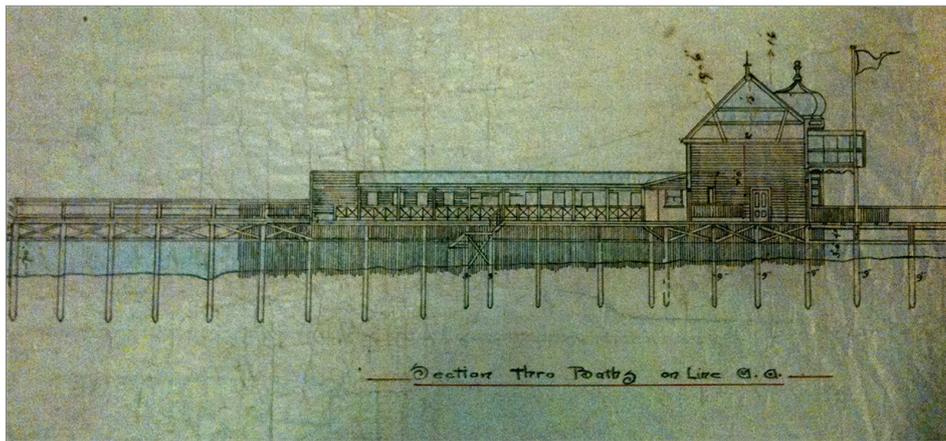


Figure 4: Section of the Perth City Baths showing changing rooms and partially enclosed bathing areas. (Partial plans for the baths, State Record Office of Western Australia. Photo: author's own.)

both touched and were touched by the water. They were conscious of the impact of aquatic conditions on their sensory experiences and physical performance. A 1905 race commentator wrote:

... though the temperature of late has been more akin to winter than to summer conditions, the swimmers did not find the water too cold for the sport, though several complained that the stream had rather too much 'body' in it to permit of record-breaking performances (*Western Mail*, 1905b).

Thermal encounters between the skin and material surfaces or substances are reciprocal in nature as temperature transfers between surface and skin, not only making one or the other warmer or colder but also providing a sensation that may have an emotional component such as pleasure or dislike (Heschong, 1979, p 19). Repeated haptic experiences of the water and riverbed generated individual, place-specific environmental knowledge of daily and seasonal patterns, such as temperature and flow, making people increasingly familiar with both the river and their own bodies in ways that could not be attained through visual experience alone.

From the opening of the baths, it was clear that the site, depth and river conditions during certain tides and seasons were not conducive to swimming. In an 1899 letter to the editor, J Cullen, protesting the results of a swimming race, describes the physical trials of racing within the baths:

[T]he depth of water at the shallow end of the baths on that day was from 2ft. 3in. to 2ft. 6in., and, the top of the push-off board (which was 6in. wide) was 9in. clear of the water ... I touched the board at each end of the bath with my hand out of water, and there being nothing for a swimmer to push off from under the water, he is compelled to stand and turn.

The conditions of the riverbed (generally mud, silt, sand or shells), and how it felt underfoot or behaved when disturbed, could also render the haptic experience of swimming pleasant or otherwise. 'Four Amateur Swimmers' wrote to the editor in 1906, describing how:

... anybody who has been in the Perth baths can testify that there are two or three feet of mud at the bottom of the baths, and it is simply impossible to walk on it, while any unfortunate who takes a dive, and puts his head in the mud will remember the

occasion for a long time. There are often dead fish in the baths, and the water turns as thick as soup when two or three people begin to swim. It can not be healthy, it is certainly not pleasant.

'Cygnet' (1907) observed that 'the piles are covered with sharp barnacles which are a source of danger to the unwary bather, as I can testify, having cut my feet severely on them on one occasion, whilst I have seen many others similarly injured'. In a January 1908 letter, 'Recte et Suaviter' wrote that 'one need only see [bathers] come out of the sluggish water with slime caked on their faces and cut and bruised feet to also assert that the water is dirty and unhealthy and the bottom jagged and uneven'.

The shallow, muddy and malodorous conditions of the baths along with increasing participation in the sport of swimming prompted demands for larger, cleaner facilities. In 1905, local swimming clubs put forward a petition calling for 'the removal of the baths from the present mud-hole to a spot where immersion is calculated to produce cleanliness and not increased dirtiness' ('Trudgeon', 1905). The petition demanded new facilities 'at the nearest spot at which clear and deep water can be found or formed, with a clean and sloping bottom' (*Western Mail*, 1905a). The strongly haptic nature of swimming meant that having a clean bodily condition, and encounters with clean water, surfaces and materials, were central concerns for swimmers. A 1912 article argued that 'the first essential for swimming baths is, of course, cleanliness' and listed 'everything that could be desired for the purpose [of bathing and swimming] – unpolluted water, a gentle slope to depth, and a clean, sandy bottom' (*The West Australian*, 1912).

One proposal was to relocate the baths to a site at the foot of Mount Eliza, below Kings Park. The Kings Park Board expressed concerns about the visual and auditory experiences of park visitors, insisting that 'there should be no chance of persons on the high grounds of the Park, the terraces, for example, looking into the baths' and demanded that new baths be located 'out of ear shot of the frequented parts of the Park', citing concerns over 'disgraceful' language (*The West Australian*, 1905c). The president of the Western Australian Amateur Swimming Association declared that concerns about noise and disgraceful language were unfounded and it was 'the exception to at any time hear bad language in any of our public swimming baths' (Mitchell, 1905, p 3). The swimming clubs endeavoured to promote their sport, and the bodies and behaviours of swimmers, as physically and morally principled, while others perceived the activities and bodies at the baths to be morally questionable.

To allay concerns about the potentially negative visual and auditory experiences of park users, the proposed site was shifted further west towards the local breweries. Swimmers argued that it was 'bad enough in all conscience to have to swim in practically mud, without having the refuse from two breweries as well' (*Sunday Times*, 1905a). Selecting a site proved problematic for years to come (Figure 5).

During the debates over the location of the new baths, keen bathers and swimmers visited potential sites to experience the physical conditions themselves. In a 1911 letter to the editor, 'Swan Riverite' presented an explanation of why one site was unsuitable, drawing from multi-sensory observations. The material conditions, discovered through physical exploration of the riverbed, were



Figure 5: Cartoon depicting potential conditions inside the new baths. (Image: *Western Mail*, 11 November 1911, p 23.)

described as ‘silt fully three to four feet deep, on hard clay and oyster shell in patches’. Sight was also used to understand the patterns of the area: ‘one has only to view the waters from the terraces on a calm morning to witness proof of the moving of the silt, and see the resultant banks or spits of silt and sand jutting out’. Finally, ‘Swan Riverite’ suggested that one should ‘visit the site during the prevailing sea breezes, and if you care for a mouthful of the water, try it. You won’t want another, let alone swim in it with the bottom churned up by bathers and the wash of the ever-increasing river steamers and traffic passing’. In another 1911 letter, ‘Motor Launch’ wrote:

I used to visit the proposed site, and on one occasion was foolish enough to enter the water to bathe. The tide had carried the refuse discharged from the breweries to the place in question, the result being that the river at this spot was a mixture of salt water and brewer’s dregs, whilst the bottom was covered with a deposit which rendered bathing the reverse of inviting.

## New Crawley Baths

In February 1914, after delays due to bureaucracy, finance and disputes over location, the long-awaited Crawley Baths opened along the shoreline west of the city. The site was less conveniently located, but it was favourably received for the haptic experiences it provided: ‘the site of the baths is an exceptionally good one, the water being beautifully clean, and the sand bottom hard and white’ (*Daily News*, 1914).

A marked difference between the physical structure of the City Baths and the Crawley Baths was that the latter used social behaviours rather than physical and visual barriers to demarcate men’s and women’s bathing areas: ‘for the present it is not intended to divide the swimming enclosure into hard and fast division for the different sexes – men will be expected to keep to the left of the central block, except round the extreme outside near the back fence’ (ibid). For some, this situation caused ostensible concern over the potential for women to be

'insulted', though the root of the anxiety was not the welfare of women as much as uncertainty over undesired social change (Stoddart, 1981, p 669). Greater separation from the city and the behaviours associated with an urban context, as well as wider social changes, eased expectations of visual and behavioural propriety. Along with increased physical participation in swimming and bathing came a loosening of social codes, allowing for more extensive visual encounters with other bathers, but maintaining physical gender separation (Figure 6).

The opening of the Crawley Baths resulted in the closure of the City Baths, which soon came to be regarded as an 'eyesore to be removed' (*The West Australian*, 1918). Following the removal of the baths, opportunities to haptically encounter the river on the immediate foreshore were limited; it instead became a place of primarily visual and terrestrial sensory experiences.

### Perth Water Chute

Around the world at the turn of the twentieth century, developments in technology and transport along with cultural changes led to the increasing popularity of mechanical amusements such as merry-go-rounds, swinging boats and water chutes in amusement parks and recreational areas. Sally (2006) argues that Coney Island, the birthplace of many mechanical amusements, became:

... a beacon of technological innovation that reconfigured the consumption of leisure as participatory and kinaesthetic. Spectacle became not solely a visual experience but a corporeal one, an experience that catapulted pleasure seekers out of their everyday experiences into unexpected and fantastic circumstances (p 300).

In Perth, 'shooting the chutes' at the Water Chute was to create strong multi-sensory experiences of the river and the foreshore (Figure 7).

It was Manly, however, that saw the first chute in Australia opened in 1903 (Figure 8). The author of a 1904 article described the experience of the chute as 'ultra sensational' and 'a thrill of particularly thrilling character, earthly and unearthly at the same time' (*Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 1904). The appeal of this new form of amusement lay in the power of modern technology to create novel, pleasurable, thrilling and potentially risky bodily experiences.



Figure 6: The Crawley Baths in the 1910s. High walls no longer visually separate male and female bathers from each other and mixed-gender bathing is permitted. (Photo: Perth History Centre, 2012.)



Figure 7: The Point Lewis Water Chute.  
(Photo: *Western Mail*, 4 February 1905.)

As word spread, new chutes opened in St Kilda, Bendigo, Brisbane, Perth and elsewhere.

In early 1905, the Perth Water Chute was erected at Point Lewis, modelled on the highly successful Bendigo chute (*The West Australian*, 1905d). Stairs leading up a three-storey (11-metre) Jarrah tower brought participants to the start of the chute, which consisted of two sets of slide rails angled down at 26 degrees, with a slight upward shift at the end to increase the trajectory of the boats. Boats holding 8 to 12 people were launched down one set of rails and pulled to the top on the other by an electric motor. Given the chute was a new form of entertainment for Perth, before its opening, the *Daily News* (1905b) described not only the structure and how it operated but also what was enjoyable about it: ‘the fun, which is described as exciting and exhilarating, is derived by descending the chute in specially built boats at great speed, and dashing into the water at the foot of the incline’.

The opening ceremony and inaugural launch were staged as a spectacle containing moments of excitement and dramatic tension. Hints that it was the first time the boats had been trialed added an element of potential danger, exacerbated by delays and ‘extra’ safety checks. *The West Australian* (1905d) described the first launch:

[T]he word was given, the cradle tilted, and the boat slid with the velocity of an infant avalanche down the slippery rails. In a second she struck the water, flinging off a huge shower of spray on either side, and rose gracefully several feet above the surface; dropping again, again she jumped, and flitted out into the river as neatly as a skipping pebble. A sigh and a cheer from the crowd on shore hailed the successful launch.

A month after opening the chute was described as a ‘great novelty to Perth in the way of amusements’ (*The West Australian*, 1905a), an ‘exhilarating enjoyment’ (*The West Australian*, 1905b), ‘the subject of much curious speculation’ (ibid),



Figure 8: 1903 Panorama of The Manly Water Chute and Toboggan. The toboggan ride is in the foreground on the right with the Water Chute behind. The high tower leading up to the start of the chute provides an aerial view of the ride and its surrounds. A 1904 visitor described the 'gradually ascending platform leading to an elevation of some 50-odd feet, the view from which is magnificent' (The Worker, 1904). (Photo: Melvin Vaniman, State Library of NSW, a113010.)

and 'something very new and very amusing in water sports' (*The West Australian*, 1905d). It was noted that while 'the sensation of a ride ... doubtless would not be appreciated by many ... there are scores who enjoy the fun' (*Western Mail*, 1905a).

### Sensational chutes

Many descriptions of water chutes cite speed and trajectory as the physically appealing aspects of the experience, noting how the boats would 'rush with lightning speed' and would be 'travelling with great velocity when they strike the water, and consequently they leap four or five feet into the air, repeating the leaps until they lose their impetus' (*Catholic Press*, 1903). The boat's descent and trajectory and the body's movement as part of the boat's inertial frame of reference resulted in novel experiences of touch and movement, potentially enhanced by momentary sensations of weightlessness. The emphasis on the body as the locus of exhilaration and excitement was a shift from more traditional understandings of excitement as an emotion often associated with visual or auditory experiences (as a spectator), or even experiences of taste and smell. Sally (2006) argues that 'mechanical amusements celebrated and fostered thrill seekers as sensuous beings who experienced leisure not just through their eyes, but with and through their entire bodies' (p 294).

The spectacle of the water chute was consumed physically by participants and visually by spectators. Both spectators and participants heard the shouts of the riders and smelled the river and their surroundings, while the haptic sensations were something spectators could only speculate on. A 1904 spectator described watching a descent at the Manly chute: 'it looks to the spectators as if the occupants must inevitably be pitched out into the water or irretrievably drenched, but as a fact, not a drop of water touches them and the exhilarating ride is safe' (*Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 1904) (Figure 9). The amusement parks of Coney Island during the same period were 'an invitation to spectators to become corporeally engaged in the manufacture and consumption of spectacle, spectacle that was not solely visual but that appealed to all of the senses' (Sally, 2006, p 299). For the owners of the chute, the sensory spectacle of the chutes and accounts of the riders were the primary means of promoting and capitalising on the experience, as they would encourage spectators to imagine the bodily sensation and then choose to experience it for themselves. Spectators and riders experienced similar sounds and smells associated with the chute, but the haptic experience, central to the chutes, was only available to riders. An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1903) declared that 'the "thrill" of "shooting the chutes" exerts so unique a fascination that visitors return and again and again to the boats to experience the sensation'.

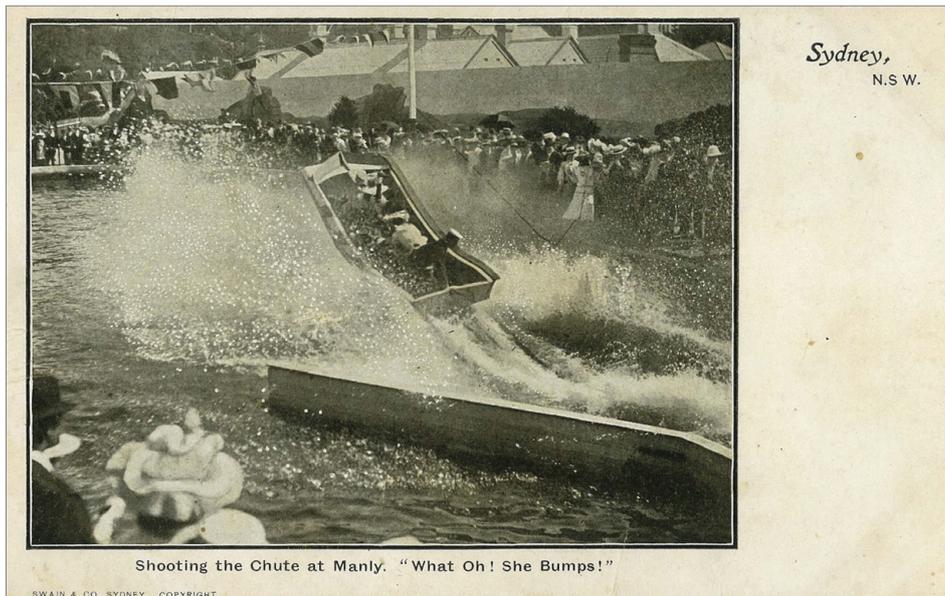


Figure 9: Shooting the chute at Manly.  
(Photo: Manly Library.)

Sensationalised accidents in newspapers, countered by assurances from proprietors that human error was to blame, fostered perceptions of the chutes as a risk whose benefits, in the form of novel and pleasurable bodily sensation, were worthwhile. Rabinovitz (2001) argues that imagination and the ‘fantasy of seeing technology go out of control’ (p 90) were a significant part of the experience of mechanical amusements. Imagining disaster was linked to the surrender of the body to the control of mechanical technology (Sally, 2006, p 301). The bodily sensations of speed and trajectory were associated with the potential for disaster, and the lack of personal control over the situation generated ‘thrills’ or a domesticated sense of terror, in which technology played a central role. Rabinovitz (2001) argues that mechanical rides:

... reversed the usual relations between the body and machinery in which the person controls and masters the machine: the person surrendered to the machine which, in turn, liberated the body in some fashion from its normal limitations of placement and movement in daily life (p 89).

Highly publicised accidents at the chutes also highlighted the element of real corporeal risk associated with such entertainments and the links between risk, technology, novelty, sensory pleasure and emotional thrill. Accidents, and even a death at the Manly chute in 1903, were ultimately blamed on human ignorance, miscalculation or poor decision making rather than technological malfunction (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1903).

Water chutes also generated concerns relating to behavioural propriety, as ‘rapid-motion mechanical rides had explicitly sexual overtones: couples (or complete strangers!) were thrown together from the movement of the rides’ (Sally, 2006, p 301). Shortly after the Perth chute opened, a gossip columnist wrote, ‘the water chute is the most thrilling invention that has yet struck Perth. That the girls hang grimly on to the nearest man when the boats strike water. That seasoned shootists agree that this is the most satisfying thrill of the show’ (*Sunday Times*, 1905b). Sally (2006) notes that, at the turn of the century, such active, public

physical encounters between men and women were a profound shift away from traditional Victorian understandings of public bodily propriety. They were also evidence of the way technology and mechanised entertainments were beginning to reshape social expectations relating to behavioural propriety (p 301).

Recreational pleasure in Perth took on new forms at the turn of the century, gradually through the transformation and expansion of swimming practices at the baths, and more powerfully in the encompassing bodily experiences of the water chute. These features of the foreshore are distinctive because both activities were primarily valued and actively sought as entertainments that induced pleasurable and exciting haptic experiences. The quest for pleasure and thrills, whether through bodily immersion or the corporeal rush of the chute, was often satisfied through novel experiences that in some instances also incorporated elements of risk and fear. At the same time, the olfactory experiences of waterside places warned bathers and swimmers about the potential dangers of water. While developments in early twentieth-century swimming and the bodily thrills of the water chute may seem pedestrian a century on, and it is impossible to understand fully the experience of an early-twentieth-century swimmer or thrill-seeker, accounts from the time suggest that such sensory experiences partially transformed people's experiences of the environment and their own bodies.

### Sensory speculation: Elizabeth Quay 2015

Today, the Perth foreshore remains a place of primarily visual rather than active physical experiences of the river, though this is changing as the Elizabeth Quay waterfront development proceeds (figures 10 and 11). The project, scheduled to partially open in December 2015, centres around an inlet, which is being dredged at the time of writing, in an area that was previously reclaimed from the river, and will bring part of the river back to its original shoreline at the time of European settlement. An artificial island in the centre of the inlet is planned to have a series of paths, gardens and opportunities to physically encounter the river via softened-edge design, possibly mimicking a 'natural' beach. Details about the form of the island remain to be seen; however, as a wholly constructed feature, any 'beaches' or shorelines will likely endeavour to present the 'clean' water, sand and surrounds so favoured by early swimmers, but will have little in common with the historical foreshore at any earlier time, particularly the malodorous decades around the turn of the twentieth century.

*Figure 10 (left): The Perth foreshore in August 2015, showing the ongoing Elizabeth Quay redevelopment.*

*(Photo: Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, 2015.)*

*Figure 11 (right): Computer-generated model of the Elizabeth Quay project.*

*(Image: Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, 2015.)*



Elizabeth Quay will offer another opportunity for physical interaction with water at the Station Park water feature, an AU\$10 million project by BHP Billiton (Figure 12). The water feature is positioned at a major entry area to the precinct and will incorporate water jets, lighting and sound, inspired by the seasonal nature of many Western Australian lakes (Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, 2014; 2015). Information on the specific materials and characteristics of the water feature is yet to be released, but computer-generated images suggest concrete will be the main material, and it is likely that the water will be fresh and filtered. Concrete is a ubiquitous urban material with tactile and olfactory characteristics that reveal little about the ‘place’ in which it is situated. Likewise, fresh, filtered water carries none of the scents or physical characteristics, pleasant or otherwise, that define the brackish Swan River. The only aspect of the water park that suggests ‘Western Australia’ is the ability to drain the water feature in minutes to create a public event space, a ‘drying’ process vaguely akin to the seasonal drying of local lakes, and at the same time a feat of modern technology.

The sensory encounters with filtered fresh water, concrete, tile or whatever materials are used to make the water feature will certainly be considered more pleasant than the noxious smells, murky water and muddy riverbed of the 1900s. However, these experiences are also likely to be more generic and more controlled, and there is little to suggest that it will include room for sensory experiences that are novel, thrilling or risky (real or imagined) in these waterside places. A lengthy discussion of sensations on contemporary waterfronts is beyond the scope of this paper; however, in creating safer and more pleasant places, it is also worth considering the types of sensations that have been lost or curtailed, and what this means for people’s experiences of natural and built environments as well as of their own bodies.

## Conclusion

Sensory history offers an alternative perspective from which to consider urban waterfronts. This article has highlighted the role of the senses of touch, movement and smell on the Perth foreshore. Closer scrutiny of the non-visual components of



*Figure 12: Computer-generated image of Station Park with its interactive water feature. (Image: Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, 2015.)*

sensory experiences, particularly haptic and olfactory experiences, can enhance understanding of places, bodies and environments in ways that are not easily disregarded as matters of ‘taste’ or ‘style’, but can contribute to understandings of places, including what is natural or constructed, and what has been sustained, or not, over time.

We are all ‘in touch’, through our skin, muscles, joints, noses and ears, with our immediate environment, though we are often most consciously aware of the view from our eyes. Exploring the ‘view’ through our fingertips and toes, arms, skin and joints, our bodily experiences of waterfront places, reveals how bodily experiences and, importantly, expectations of these places have changed over time as our cities have grown and their waterfronts have developed. The history of the full range of sensory experience is also a history of human society and relations between people, including power relations and connections (however partial, misleading or abused) between individuals, communities and the natural environment. It seems timely for us to consider these relations and connections at a time when the sustainability of our physical relationship with the natural world has become one of our greatest challenges. These case studies are a portion of a larger body of research that seeks to ‘make sense’ of the Australian urban waterfronts as sites of varied and evolving sensory experience.

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