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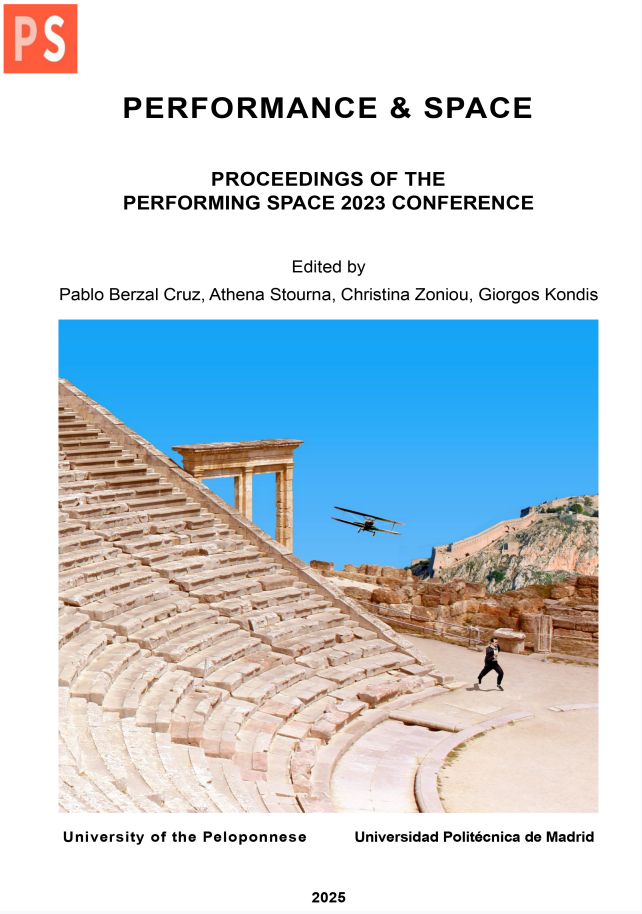

Collective Bathing in Urban Waters

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doi: 10.12681/ps2023.8053

Collective Bathing in Urban Waters: Three North American Episodes (1970-1984)

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Abstract

Performed in the heartland of the North American context at a pivotal time in thinking about public spaces after the post-war boom, the opening of Portland's Keller Fountain in 1970, the founding of the Save Barton Creek Association (SBCA) by Austinites in 1979 and the Beach Party at Dallas City Hall serve to explore how the performativity of space was involved in the transformation of urban waters into bathing waters, or in the creation of an intimate relationship between the bathers and their surroundings. Therefore, following a social and spatial analysis of these three episodes of urban bathing, a number of conclusions are discussed. An initial observation is that, despite the differences between the three situations studied, the spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that favour collective bathing, and thus spatial performativity, can be grouped together and compared, since there is a certain resemblance between the cases. A further reflection is that, beyond the spatial and architectural aspects considered above, the three cases also provide an opportunity to reflect on several properties bounded with collective bathing. In light of the foregoing observations and reflections, it seems clear that collective bathing in urban waters may have the potential to provide cities and citizens with performative ‘places’ where agency, community, responsibility, regeneration and testing can flourish.

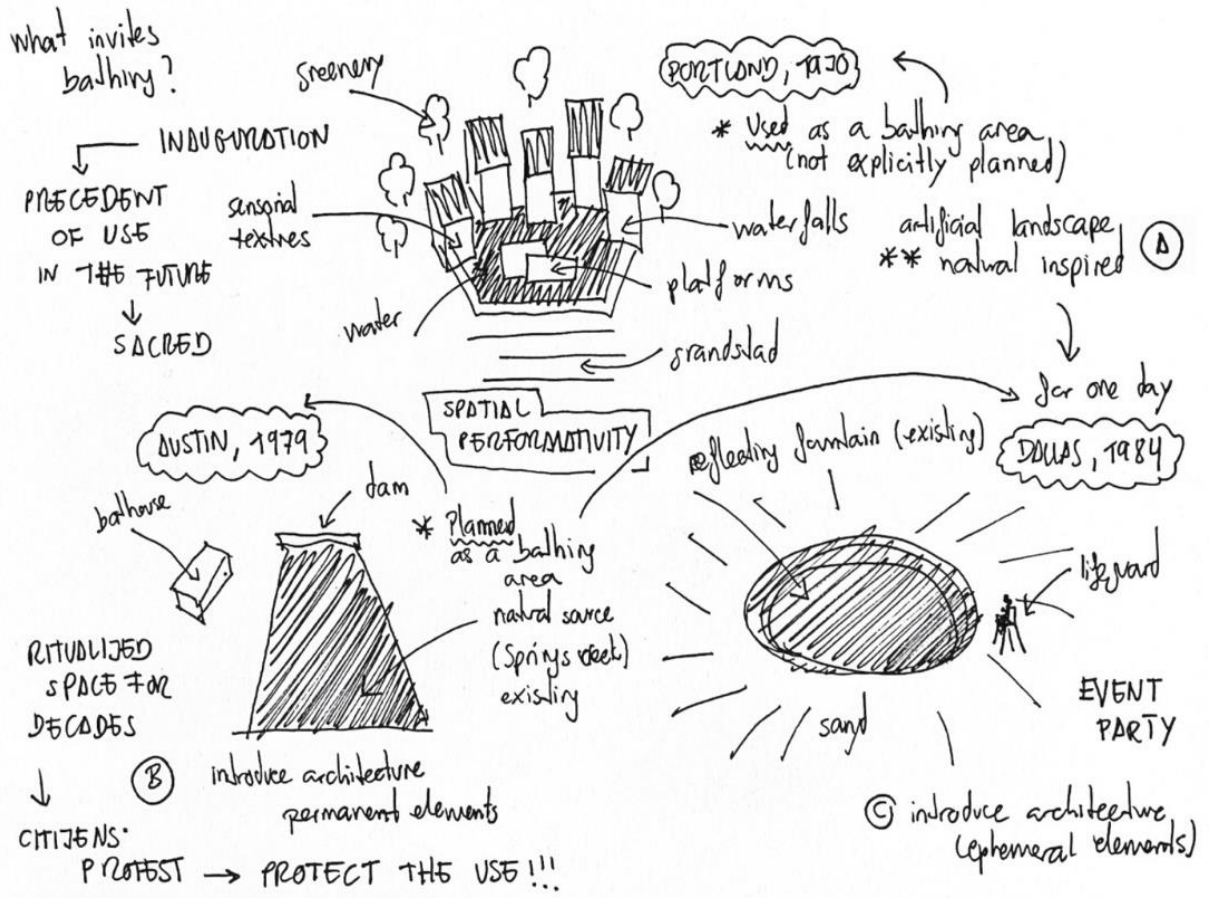
Keywords: Urban rituals, public space, citizen innovation, water culture, bathing practices.

Collective Bathing in Urban Waters

This study focuses on three episodes of collective bathing in urban waters that took place in North America between 1970 and 1984:[1] The opening of Portland's Keller Fountain in 1970, whose design by Lawrence Halprin & Associates began in 1963; the founding of the Save Barton Creek Association (SBCA) by Austinites in 1979 to protect Barton Springs, a public bathing area since 1918; and the Beach Party at Dallas City Hall, a complex designed by Ieoh Ming Pei and opened in 1978 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Summary diagram of the three episodes, Alba Balmaseda



The selected events are presented chronologically, and they meet the following criteria. First, they all took place in the heartland of the North American context (Oregon and Texas), at a pivotal time in thinking about public spaces in the aftermath of the post-war boom. Indeed,

[1] The case studies presented here are part of an ongoing PhD study on collective bathing in urban waters at the University of Roma Tre, Department of Architecture, Italy. The research is supervised by Professors Michel Beccu and Giovanni Longobardi. This essay was edited by Quintin Lau. Thanks to Piet Tutenel from KU Leuven, Research[x]Design for his valuable feedback on the essay. Further gratitude to Karen J. Kocher of the Living Springs Platform for her generous help.

after this period of massive urban development, driven and managed mainly by economic interests, various researchers and practitioners from North America claimed the right to an urban space that considered the needs of its inhabitants.[2] The second criterion is that they illustrate in different ways "how certain spatial qualities or certain architectural mechanisms act as generators of spatial performativity" (Berzal, 2023, p.91). In this essay, spatial qualities refer, for example, to light, texture, form, smell, sounds, and what relates to the 'experience' of a place, whereas architectural mechanisms refer to the elements projected, their function, their arrangement in space and ultimately what is 'speculative'.

Thus, the case studies in this paper serve to explore how the performativity of space was involved in the transformation of urban waters into bathing waters, or in the creation of an intimate relationship between the bathers and their surroundings. Following a social and spatial analysis of the three selected episodes of public bathing, a number of conclusions are discussed. On the one hand, the spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that favour collective bathing in the three study situations are grouped and compared. On the other hand, after the analysis of the physical context, several aspects bounded with collective bathing are reflected in each individual case.

Methodology

The social and spatial context of the three episodes presented was explored using a 'desk research' method. The method was chosen because, even if the spaces exist still today, the focus of the study is on punctual events that took place decades ago. The work was carried out in two phases, as outlined below. In the first phase, the urban and architectural context was studied by consulting various sources: master plans, plans, elevations, sections and, in general, urban and architectural documents on the work of Lawrence Halprin, Dan J. Driscoll and Ieoh Ming Pei, as well as sitographies useful for understanding the context. Of particular importance have been the Halprin Landscape Conservancy sitography (https://www.halprinconservancy.org/), which provides an online archive of the Portland case, and the interactive digital scrapbook Barton Creek Time Stream (https://bartoncreektimestream.org/about/), which contains a collection of information on the Austin case. Writings by the designers themselves and by other contemporary and historical scholars about the spaces studied were also reviewed. In the second phase, the surviving narratives of the three episodes were investigated. For this purpose, videos taken at the time, photographs, interviews and press available online were examined. This was

[2] These productive years saw the publication of influential books in the field of urban studies, such as the works of activist Jane Jacobs (1961), anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1966), landscape architect Ian L. McHarg (1969), architects and urban planners Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour (1972), and sociologist William H. Whyte (1980).

essential in order to observe the interaction between the users and the space at that moment and to describe the atmosphere, the materiality, the dynamics of the participants or the use of architectural elements. It is noted that initially, the study wanted to include the testimonies of some of the participants in Portland, Austin, and Dallas in order to have first-hand narratives different from those of designers, photographers or journalists. To this end, the Halprin Foundation, the Living Springs platform, and the Dallas Museum of Art were contacted but it was not possible to obtain the material needed in the time available.

Three North American Cases (1970-1984)

Opening of the Ira Keller Forecourt Fountain, Portland

In the 1960s, the Municipality of Portland commissioned Lawrence Halprin & Associates to design four interconnected public spaces in the southern part of the city centre. The sequence included, from south to north, The Source (1968), the Lovejoy Fountain Plaza (1966), the Pettygrove Park (1966) and the Ira Keller Forecourt Fountain (1970), popularly known as the Keller Fountain (Figure 2). The latter, which culminates the choreographed series[3] toward the downtown and precedes the Civic Auditorium, is an exuberant, rough concrete landscape with a twenty-four-metre-wide body of water, waterfalls up to five metres high, grained cliffs, soft platforms, green areas, and a large grandstand. This was undoubtedly a very welcoming and playful environment, in contrast to the speculative and passive urban spaces of the time. Thus, the Keller Fountain quickly became a popular place, inspiring a wide range of behaviours and uses. At its inauguration, the New York Times proclaimed it “one of the most important urban spaces since the Renaissance” (Huxtable,1970, p.53).

On the opening day of the Keller Fountain, a hot June 20, 1970, the participants jumped into the water themselves in a great ritual of collective bathing, even though the possibility of bathing was not explicitly shown in the design.[4] In an interview conducted by Charles A. Birnbaum, in March 2003, Halprin recalled the enthusiasm of the opening day, when everyone present felt invited to bathe in the fountain, no matter if it was allowed or not, and despite the mayor's attempts to discourage people from doing so.[5] In the conversation, Halprin admits that

[3] This is how Lawrence Halprin himself defined it on his sketches.

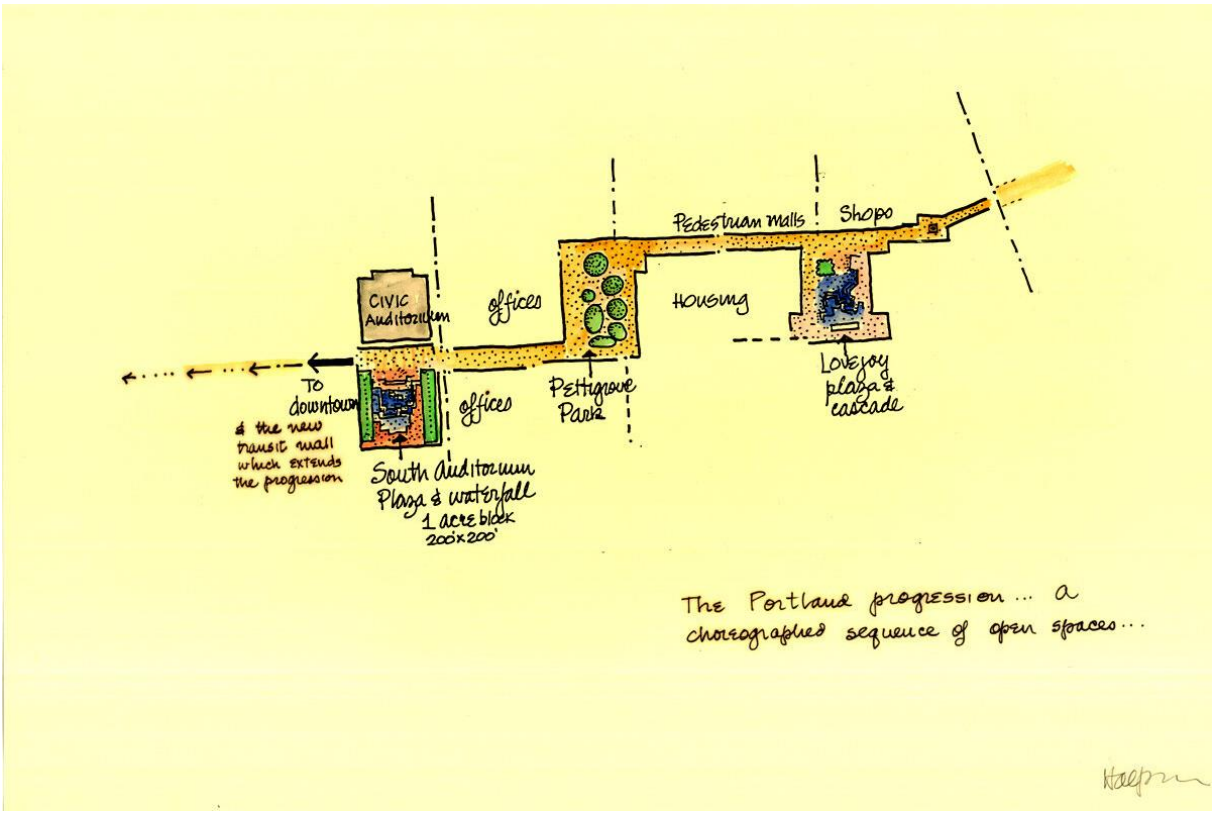
[4] The design lacks any explicit reference to the practice of bathing (i.e. no specific infrastructure associated with bathing, such as signage, lifeguard towers, changing rooms, toilet/shower areas or stairs for access). However, it is unclear whether the designers anticipated such an eventuality, as the space was designed for participation.

[5] “The day it was opened was hysterically exciting because what happened was that […] all the young people from miles around appeared on the scene and started jumping into the fountains. As I said they were designed to be used in that way, [to be] participated in. If I remember correctly, it was the mayor who got very upset and tried to shoo them away and I therefore decided that the best thing to do was not argue with the mayor, so I jumped in also. It was very successful and very very jolly actually, and there was a lot of fun about it” (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2003/2012, 1:10-1:60).

he himself joined the crowd by plunging into the water and asserts that this episode “really did establish the notion that this was a different kind of a park than the usual” (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2003/2012, 1:56-2:04). Indeed, a video of the inauguration testifies to the festive atmosphere that was created in the space on the first day of its use. Crowds of people got wet in the various pools and waterfalls in what resembles a ‘baptism.’ There were children, teenagers and adults of all kinds. Some bathed fully clothed, while others bathed in swimsuits or underwear as if it were an ‘urban’ beach. Some of them climbed up the cliffs and others stood in the waterfalls or let themselves be carried by the water. On the platforms, some groups were sunbathing or hesitating whether to jump in or not, and a few were dressed in suits and ties (Portland Parks Foundation, 1970/2020).

Figure 2

Sketch of the Portland Sequence, *Lawrence Halprin. Image courtesy of The Cultural Landscape Foundation*



Let's now turn the attention to the built environment in which the event took place and try to give an overview of spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that might have stimulated the participants to use an urban water as if it were a bathing water. The first is that the Keller Fountain is an artificial landscape whose design takes nature as an “archetypal precedent” (Hirsch, 2014, Chapter 3). As a result, the space evokes a wild environment and probably suggests for people to behave as if they were in a lake, a river, or a beach, where it is common for humans to feel like bathing. The second is the multi-sensoriality of the park

(Pallasmaa, 2012): rough materials stimulate the sense of touch, inviting users to walk barefoot; the sound of the waterfalls awakens the ear, transporting users out of the city; the trees surrounding the space trick the psyche into a feeling of being in nature. The third is a great variety of situations on offer; for example, different sized spaces, nooks and crannies to hide in, horizontal surfaces to lie on or parapets to sit on. The fourth is the fact that the water is the main stage, visible from all points of view, preceded by a grandstand and surrounded by terraces. This means that when someone leaps into the water, everyone sharing the space is bound to see the act. Thus, some spectators may feel influenced and decide to come on stage. The Keller Fountain represents an environmental design that, in Halprin's words, "goes far beyond the visual" and "is about social relevance" (1989, p.62). Even half a century later after its construction, the fountain remains true to this description, with spatial performativity persisting today. Actually, the space is also the site of performances such as *The City Dance* (2008) by Lawrence and Anna Halprin, and more recently, *Body is Home* (2020) by Heidi Duckler Dance/Northwest and the Halprin Landscape Conservancy, a work created to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Keller Fountain and the 100th birthday of choreographer Anna Halprin.

Creation of the Save Barton Creek Association (SBCA), Austin

Barton Springs is a collective bathing area located within the large central green space of Zilker Park, southwest of downtown Austin, Texas. Given its proximity to the founding nucleus of Austin, it is likely that this natural area has been used by Austinites to bathe since the city was founded in 1840. In fact, as early as 1870, a private individual built a small dam and established a recreational pool and bathhouse that could be used for a small fee. The springs and surrounding land became public property in 1917 when the last private landowner deeded the site to the Municipality of Austin. By that time, cleaning up of the area and removing old structures that hindered bathing were among the first actions completed (McGilvray, 2012). Furthermore, in order to increase the size of the bathing area, the town undertook a project to dam the water in 1920.[6] For a few years, the site would neither be a swimming pool nor a bathhouse, but a large open space that was affordable,[7] almost natural and with little infrastructure. Finally, in 1931, a wooden bathhouse was built on the North bank of the creek. By this time, the area, called Barton Springs Park, had become very popular and beloved by locals (Koch & Fowler, 1928).

[6] It is worth remembering that this was in the midst of an explosion in the culture of pleasure around water pools (Wiltse, 2007, p.12).

[7] People had to pay a modest fee to enter the recreation area.

The wooden bathhouse was replaced in 1946 by the masonry structure still in use today. Designed by local architect Dan J. Driscoll, it is a single-storey building with a central foyer flanked by two open-air dressing rooms, outdoor showers and enclosed toilets, one for women and one for men (*Architectural Record*, 1948). The construction of the new bathhouse was followed by further investment in the leisure area, which was gradually expanded, and its services and facilities improved. Little by little, what was originally a natural area on the edge of the city became, as Austin expanded, an urban recreational oasis.

Figure 3

Rally at Austin City Hall in 1990. Alan Pogue. Image courtesy of Barton Creek Time Stream.

However, because of urbanisation and development in Austin after the 1950s, the natural waters that fed the Barton Springs Park began to be threatened. As the city grew in the area, sewage was starting to be dumped into the waters. In response to community concerns about water pollution, the Save Barton Creek Association (SBCA), a non-profit citizens' group, was formed in 1979 to protect and preserve the six watersheds of the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer. At the same time, the Austin Parks & Recreation Board fought to protect the water, initiating the first draft of the Save Our Springs (SOS) watershed ordinance in 1986 and safeguarding the Barton Creek Greenbelt, a public park on both banks of Barton Creek. Amongst all of this, there were also demonstrations in the city centre (Figure 3) and performances at Barton Springs Park, such as the *Inside the Springs* dance to support the approval of SOS in 1991 and the election night vigil a year later, where citizens joined hands

and circled around the dammed bathing area (Figure 4). Finally, on 8 August 1992, the definitive SOS ordinance was officially approved because of a citizen initiative.[8] The document states that “The City of Austin recognizes that the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer is more vulnerable to pollution from urban development than any other major groundwater supply in Texas, and that the measures set out in this ordinance are necessary to protect this irreplaceable natural resource” (City of Austin, 1992, p.1). This resource was described at the time as the soul of Austin (Pipkin & Frech, 1993) and remains one of the most important social cores of the city today.

Figure 4

Citizens Holding Hands at Barton Springs Pool Before Election Night. *Marshall Frech. Image courtesy of Barton Creek Time Stream*

Looking back on this episode forty years later, it is important to note that while most of the attention has been focused on water pollution to the detriment of biodiversity, urban development as a threat to the natural environment and citizen participation to change legislation, there are some aspects related to collective bathing that require further discussion. On one hand, Barton Springs, like Keller Fountain, has spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that are conducive to generating spatial performativity, in addition to its environmental, economic, and social values. On the other hand, at the time of the protest, the site had already been used for more than a hundred years for bathing, water sharing and collective rituals.

Indeed, the 1992 musical tribute to the SOS ordinance by Austin musicians, artists and activists, *Barton Springs Eternal*, opens with a story about bathing: “Austin is a summer city in Barton Springs Eternal, the winters are short and the springs are pretty in Barton Springs Eternal, and when it's warm where do we go to take off most of our clothes, the clearest

[8] This is relevant because in this period it was unusual for regulations to emerge from booms.

cleanest swimming home is Barton Springs Eternal" (Save Our Springs Alliance, 1992/1998, 0:19-36). This shows that a collective memory associated with the site was created through the possibilities offered by the space, which facilitated communal use. So, in the case of Austin, what a place of shared enjoyment meant to the community was revealed when the possibility of bathing together was threatened. The symbolic value and closeness of the locals to 'their' bathing waters was significant in mobilising the citizens to save the waters. Moreover, it is not by chance that the local people chose the pool as a place for performances during the protest and as an emblem to involve the society in the cause.

Again, the spatial conditions and architectural mechanisms that allowed Barton Springs to be used and appropriated are important to consider. Firstly, in addition to its natural value, the fact that the natural space was made available for bathing by means of a dam and a small wooden structure shortly after the city was founded gave the natural site a social significance. Afterwards, it became a public space, protected against urban development, and the city council continued to provide leisure activities that were very popular and essential for the local people. This is reflected in the improvements made to the infrastructure. Secondly, we find architectural elements that allowed this space to be used for bathing: a dam to contain the water so that it can be used by more people; a bathhouse that makes a more comfortable use of the space; stairs and diving boards around the water that provide access; lifeguard towers for security; and platforms for sitting or lying in the sun. Thirdly, as in the case of Portland, the natural landscape has been preserved as much as possible to ensure a "fundamental connection or inescapable primal response" (Hirsch, 2014, p.21) to the environment. Thus, the source of the water and the original rocky bottom of the pool have been kept to this day, and are home to algae, fish and other creatures (Stewart, 2012).

Beach Party at the Dallas City Hall Fountain

"Downtown Dallas may be hundreds of miles from the nearest body of water, but for one sunny day it became the nearest beach" (Dallas AP, 1984, p.11B), reports a small newspaper item on 18 July 1984, near the billboard advertising *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. And indeed, on 14 July 1984, a collective bathing took place in a spot not intended for such a ritual: the public square in front of the Dallas City Hall, Texas. For a few hours, the 24,000 square metres of the wide plaza, designed by architect Ieoh Ming Pei and inaugurated in 1978, were transformed into a pop-up beach. The event, a fundraiser for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, was sponsored by a rock radio station (KZEW) and a beer company (Coors) and collected around $15,000. The bathing rites were performed by bathing in an existing circular fountain, approximately fifty-four metres in diameter. Forty-two tonnes of sand were poured

around the fountain, and there were lifeguards in place to ensure safety. The event, known as the Beach Party, was something out of the ordinary for a city 270 miles by car from the sea.

The Beach Party took place in a highly contested space for the city of Dallas at the time, a newly opened City Hall that was a subject of controversy and not quite accepted by the citizens. Evidence of this is the fact that the City of Dallas commissioned a report by the sociologist William H. Whyte “to study the use of the plaza and nearby spaces and recommend action that would make it a livelier and better used place” (Whyte, 1983, p.1). The report, published the summer before the Beach Party, notes several observations about the space and makes concrete suggestions for improving its shortcomings: installing kiosks, adding more seating, replacing existing trees with others that provide better shade, programming events, enclosing the space and improving access from the city and into the centre. Two aspects are particularly interesting for this study. The first aspect is programming, whereby the report recognised that the Town Hall esplanade was ideal for large, regular events[9] that have “pulling power” (p.9) to invite a wide range of people to experience the space, so that it can become a ‘place’ (Casey, 1996: Malpas 1999). In the same vein, Whyte pointed out that more should be done with the fountain, even to the point of taking a dip in it: “It is a fine feature and artfully designed to be safe wading. So why not have wading? And splashing about” (Whyte, 1983, p. 10). The second aspect is that there was a citizens' call for ideas about what could be done in the square, and making more use of the reflecting fountain was one of the most common requests. "Ducks, goldfish, porpoises, skating, mud wrestling, water slides” (p.11) were some of the suggestions.

In fact, the Beach Party confirms the ideas of Whyte's report. The possibility of being able to bathe in a body of water that was not initially envisioned for bathing purposes opened up a completely different urban scenario, from that of a representative space to that of a lived-in space (Sennet, 1996). Thus, the large reflecting pool in front of the modern City Hall was briefly transformed during the event into a bathing water, not intended to be compositional or decorative, but appropriated and ritualised by local people. The Dallas Museum of Art owns photographs by Lynn Lennon, who captured the celebration with great sharpness, allowing the atmosphere created to be appreciated today (Figure 5). In her photograph, a lifeguard watches over a large group of people gathered around a rounded pool of water. At the front row, there is a family, a pram, and several Coca Cola cups. People are bathing in the water, alone or in groups. On the left, a man is watching the scene. In the background, the mass of people and bodies stand under the imposing façade of the building, which is not the protagonist of the scene, as it usually is, but the background. The sense of multitude is multiplied by the windows

[9] Besides the size of the square, the area can rely on the Town Hall building to support these events with its own facilities, especially at weekends when empty.

reflecting the crowd. Curiously, the event was never repeated, despite its success and the large turnout, as can be seen in the photo. According to the media, this was due to the damage that had been done to the fountain (WFAA, 2019).

An analysis of the spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms used to give the existing space what is necessary for the bathing rituals reveals a number of findings. Primarily, the inclusion of a new surface, the sand, which spatially associates the experience with that of the beach, suggested to the user that entry into the water was permitted. As a result, the fountain was re-programmed as a bathing water when access was not lacking (Whyte, 1980). Sand also provided a flexible surface for sitting, lying down, playing volleyball, or building sandcastles. Then, the presence of removable furniture related to the bathing activity (e.g. the lifeguards' chairs, the stalls selling food and drink, the toilets, or the parasols) supplied more options for the space to be used and appropriated in different ways. Definitely, the Beach Party represented a major change in the way space was used, through a ‘soft' transformation that could easily restore the existing space to its original state.

Figure 5

Beach Party, Dallas City Hall, 1984. *Lynn Lennon. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art*

Conclusions

An initial observation is that, despite the differences between the three situations studied, the spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that favour collective bathing, and thus spatial performativity, can be grouped together and compared, since there is a certain resemblance between the cases. The most basic set of spatial qualities and architectural mechanisms that is required, although seemingly obvious, is to ensure the supply and containment of water. In the case of the two fountains, there was an artificial source of water contained in basins, and in the case of the stream, there was a natural source of water contained by a dam. Likewise, the shape of the water surface and the way elements are arranged around it were important to facilitate access and participation: in Portland, the water is the stage, surrounded by terraces and stands; in Austin, platforms are built around the water; in Dallas, the water surface is a circle, reachable and visible from all sides. Moreover, the ability of the 'naturalness' of the built environment to motivate people to undress and encourage collective bathing seems significant after analysing the case studies. This is evident in the trees around the Keller Fountain and its resemblance to a waterfall, in the natural bottom of the bathing area and the green space surrounding Barton Springs or in the inclusion of sand around the water in Dallas. Equally important are the elements that activate the bathing practice, which at the very least requires the possibility to get in and out of the water and to dry afterwards. Activation is facilitated by items like steps, trampolines, bollards, sunbathing platforms, etc. Eventually, comfort can be increased by nearby changing rooms, showers, public toilets, deckchairs and kiosks. In summary, the supply and containment of water, the shape of the water surface, the way the elements are arranged around it, the naturalness of the built environment and the activation elements are the enablers identified in the physical environment.

A further reflection is that, beyond the spatial and architectural aspects considered above, the three cases also provide an opportunity to reflect on several properties bounded with collective bathing. In particular, in the opening of Portland, the collective bathing ritual endowed the space with agency. In effect, users were invited by the space to create, try out and produce individual and communal practices of enjoyment (Koolhaas et al, 1973; Lefebvre, 1973/2014). The example in Austin, on the other hand, shows how collective bathing gave rise to a strong community and sense of belonging, gathering people around a water space. In this case, as citizens began 'sacralising' certain practices that were part of their ordinary life (e.g. bathing, swimming or walking by the water), they formed groups that assumed social responsibility for the preservation of the place (Gidieon, 1948). Finally, in the Dallas episode, collective bathing provided regeneration by transforming the function of an existing space with a 'soft' event (Sim & Gehl, 2019). The Beach Party represents an effective performance-based design tool (Marcus & Francis, 1976) for quick testing of unused urban waters. In light of the foregoing

observations and reflections, it seems clear that collective bathing in urban waters may have the potential to provide cities and citizens with performative places where agency, community, responsibility, regeneration and testing can flourish.

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