Haptic Experiences of the Perth Foreshore  
Case studies in sensory history

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Urban waterfronts are liminal zones of heightened sensory experience, particularly haptic experiences: the immediate bodily experiences of touch, proprioception and kinaesthesia (body position and movement). Such experiences are generated through direct contact with natural and built environments, strongly mediated by cultural and historical meanings, and they are crucial to forming physical and emotional understandings of the body and the environment. Research on haptic experiences is part of broader interests in ‘sensory history’ as 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). The potential value of ‘sensory history’ to studies of the built environment lies in drawing attention away from the overweening and potentially generalizing dominance of ‘the visual’ as a critical category in humanities research. This paper aims to highlight the latent value of the senses of touch, balance and movement, sensations so strongly a part of everyday experience as to often remain largely unnoticed. The heightened sensory environment of cities at the water’s edge makes them ideal locations to explore the history of such ephemeral experiences. Case studies focus on the Perth City Baths and the Water Chute, two early 20th century features of the Perth foreshore, exploring how technological and cultural change shaped haptic experiences of the river and the foreshore at the turn of the century. The case studies focus on the themes of novelty, pleasure, thrill and risk and consider how changing forms of recreation allowed for broadly sensuous rather than primarily visual experiences of the foreshore.

Keywords: sensory history, haptic sense, Perth foreshore, Perth City Baths, Water Chute
Introduction

On the Perth foreshore at the turn of the 20th century key sites along the Swan River became places of novel sensory engagement with the river and the foreshore. A number of distinctive structures provided decidedly haptic experiences of place, focused on bodily touch, movement and position. The Perth City Baths (1898-1914) and the Water Chute (1905-unknown) facilitated activities that offered modern, inventive sensory experiences centred on the body and its immediate surroundings. The sensory history of the City Baths and the Water Chute explores how technological developments and cultural change facilitated the rise of new aquatic leisure practices which, rather than being primarily visual or observer-based, were bodily, participatory experiences. These new experiences engaged both spectators and participants, and were appealing specifically because they were novel, pleasurable, thrilling and potentially risky. 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.

Haptic experiences are generally subtly infused in daily life, while the visual is often dominant, consciously noticed, and purposefully enhanced. In these case studies the haptic sense is actively engaged, along with other senses that are often overpowered by the visual. The haptic system encompasses touch along with proprioception and kinaesthesia in a perceptual system that provides information about the surrounding environment and the position, movement and tactile encounters of the body (Gibson, 1966). For designers such as Malnar and Vodvarka (2004), Moore (1977), and Pallasmaa (2005) the haptic sense is crucial (if not central) to the experience of the built environment. The haptic sense provides detailed information about both the condition of the body and its immediate surrounds, including dimension, climate, material, movement and a range of other bodily and environmental knowledge.

Sensory History

The burgeoning field of ‘sensory history’ seeks to reveal through historical inquiry the informative, exploratory and expressive nature of the senses, many of which, despite being an enduring and pervasive component of everyday experience, remain largely unnoticed. 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. In Empire of the Senses Howes writes that “the sensual revolution in cultural studies has precipitated an intense new focus on the senses as mediators of experience, eclipsing the role formerly played by ‘discourse’, ‘text’ and ‘picture’” (2005:399). Additional recent publications on the subject include The Sensory Formation Series of monographs (Berg), the journal Senses & Society (since 2006), and a wide range of books and articles focused on specific aspects of sensory history.

Sensory history, according to Smith,

“tends towards the ecumenical, considering not only the history of a given sense but its social and cultural construction and its role in texturing the past. At its most powerful, sensory history is also explanatory, allowing historians to elucidate by reference to both visual and non-visual senses something that makes little or less sense if understood simply as a scopic phenomenon” (2007:842).
The history of the dominance of the visual in Western culture is a subject beyond the scope of this paper, however this research aims to look beyond the dominant and overweening nature of the visual sense and consider the complex and inter-related nature of sensory experiences. The senses do not operate in isolation and every experience is an amalgamation of a variety of sensory inputs. Closer scrutiny of the non-visual components of sensory experiences can enhance understanding of places, bodies and environments.

At the core of the study of sensory history is the fact that the senses are culturally constructed, a notion that clashes with more conventional understandings of the senses as biological features which are perceived as universal and pre-cultural (Classen, 1997:402). The cultural construction of the senses results in what Corbin refers to as the ‘transience of the evidence’, a central concern when undertaking sensory history (2005:131). Many sensory experiences of past environments, including some odours, tastes, sounds and tactile sensations can be reproduced or still exist today. Corbin believes the ‘transient’ evidence is not such features per se, but the manner in which the senses were used to experience them, how their significance was perceived and how they were divided, ordered and valued (2005:131). Despite the ephemeral nature of this ‘evidence’, it can be derived from sources such as newspapers, journals, treatises on hygienic practices and other written or visual records which reveal the practices and understandings of the senses at work in a particular social milieu at a specific point in time (Corbin, 2005:131). For the purposes of this research, a range of sources, particularly newspapers and visual materials (plans and photographs), have been used to explore the haptic experiences of the City Baths and the Water Chute. This research proceeds by adopting a perspective on the haptic focused on, like the work of Classen, the ‘social life and personal experience’ of the senses (2005:5). While awareness of the scientific, philosophical and historical aspects of the senses is integral, the overall focus remains grounded on collective cultural and individual haptic experiences and their role in broader perceptions of the Perth foreshore.

**The Perth Foreshore**

In Perth the edge of the Swan River between East Perth and Crawley is a place of not only iconic and defining visual appeal; moreover it is a liminal zone that at the turn of the 20th century became a site for bodily encounters with the river. Physical alterations to the foreshore at this time enlarged the open grassy space between the city and the river (‘Public Recreation’ in Figure 1) to meet functional and aesthetic objectives and facilitate foreshore activities including walking, sports, parades and exhibitions. This wide, flat expanse of grass opened up views out across Perth Water, as well as back towards the city itself. The construction of riverside walls at the turn of the century along large portions of the foreshore created a boundary between the river’s edge, roads and the recreation grounds, limiting opportunities for physical contact with the river to designated locations.

The Perth City Baths (1898-1914) and the Water Chute (1905-unknown) were facilities that provided physical access to the river and offered modern, inventive bodily experiences of the water and the foreshore environment. It can be argued that these structures arose as part of technological developments and cultural shifts in understandings of bodily and behavioural propriety, which resulted in the gradual transformation of some aquatic leisure practices from primarily visual experiences to bodily experiences. These facilities highlighted novel, pleasurable, thrilling and potentially risky ways of experiencing the river brought about by technology and cultural change.
The Perth City Baths

The Perth City Baths, designed by Mr. G.E. Johnson, opened in March 1898 after decades of calls for public bathing facilities to address issues of hygiene, public propriety and leisure. The baths were perched at the end of a wide jetty extending 91 metres into the river, attempting to avoid the shallow mudflats edging the foreshore. Constructed of Jarrah timber and described as ‘Moorish’ in architectural style, the building had four cupola-topped towers framing a promenade facing the foreshore. The jetty led to two entry vestibules where bathers were segregated by gender, and featured walking platforms that extended the full length of the building on either side. There were 62 change rooms that catered to two spatially and visually separated bathing facilities, each providing river bathing, private hot water bath chambers, and showers.
The baths were situated between the terminus of Barrack St. and William St., a site intended to be convenient and visually appealing. The site allowed the somewhat exotic building to be viewed from the city across the wide expanse of the foreshore recreation grounds, and it was said to form a “pretty backdrop to the Esplanade” (1898). The baths proved popular and were well patronized soon after opening; however, there were early hints that its 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 and riverbed. The preferencing of aesthetics and convenience over haptic and olfactory concerns when selecting the site proved problematic shortly after the opening of the baths.

The Perth foreshore at the turn of the 20th century had its own particular ‘smellscape’ (Classen et al., 1994:97). Natural river smells (including brine, tannin, and decaying riverine flora and fauna) were significantly altered by human waste generated over seven decades of settlement and a rapidly expanding urban population. Sources causing the odours were manifold, including sewerage, runoff, refuse, animal waste and fertilizers. The waste was malodorous in its own right and over time had altered the biological and chemical balances of the river. While the natural odours of the mudflats may never have been aromatic by the local standards of the time, human habitation increased their pungency and repugnance. The site on the northern side of Perth water also tended to accumulate
windblown waste, and overall conditions were strongly dependent on the season, tide, and climatic conditions.

There were many who found the pleasures of a bath sufficient to disregard the foul-smelling conditions of the site, but there were some who believed that the foreshore was not merely malodorous, but emanated a vaporous threat to human health, an idea consistent with long standing beliefs associated with the miasmic theory of disease (see Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 1986). It was only after the baths were constructed and well patronized that the physical experiences of the muddy water were combined with concerns about odours and vapours to generate widespread concerns about health, leading to debates about the baths’ location and environment. An article from the Sunday Times in 1903 declared that “when one emerges from the sewer (mistakenly called a bath) a shower is absolutely essential in the interests of cleanliness” (1903b). At a 1904 City Council meeting Cr. Haynes described the baths as “a duck pond, and they provided work enough for two or three doctors in the city. If they were removed, it would be better for the people and worse for the doctors” (1904a). Many perceived the baths to be operating in opposition to one of its original intentions and detracting from the overall health of the population. Notwithstanding, the need for enclosed bathing spaces to maintain propriety and prevent open bathing in the river (a prohibited and contested practice), and the necessity of a venue to facilitate an increasing number of swimmers and competitions, kept the baths in operation.

Swimming, as both a competitive sport and recreational pastime, was an active, decidedly haptic form of engagement with the river that was garnering increasing interest and participation at the turn of the century. West Australian enthusiasts promoted swimming as an activity that was “manly and delightful” (1905f), and a form of exercise “which improves the health, physique, and cleanliness of the community and the individual” (1905f). The physical lifesaving skills frequently learned 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” (1905f).

Swimming as a hobby and a sport was legitimized in part by association with an appropriate venue (as opposed to taking place in the often restricted or contested river), and increasing participation resulted in demands for larger, cleaner facilities. The 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” (1905j). 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” (1905f). The strongly haptic nature of swimming meant that the bodily condition of being clean, and encounters with clean water, surfaces and materials, was a central concern for the swimming clubs.

The increasing popularity of swimming resulted in more people actively encountering the river, and a partial refashioning of the manner in which they engaged with it. Local swimming clubs (part of a hierarchy of regional and national clubs) organized regular competitive carnivals and exhibitions during hot summer months which featured contests, music, water plays, and displays which exhibited and inspired the evolution of new swimming, diving and lifesaving techniques. Displays aimed to be both entertaining and informative, and 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” (1899).

Displays exhibited aquatic practices that were diverse and evolving, exploring new relationships between the body and water. 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. Techniques such as ‘Swimming Like a Porpoise’ drew on nature to formulate new ways of moving through water, and actively engaged participant’s bodies with the characteristics of the water and the immediate environment. New diving techniques allowing participants to experiment with height, distance and the moment of aerial suspense before the sudden plunge into the water. Diving would have provided vivid contrasts; the weightlessness and relative lack of haptic sensations in air, followed by the powerful moment of impact and immersion. Escape acts such as ‘the Monte Cristo’ feat aimed to provide spectators with excitement and suspense, playing on the ‘risk’ associated with water. In opposition to such risky feats, lifesaving displays demonstrated the potential to mediate the risks and dangers of water.

![Figure 3: First Lifesaving class at Barrack Street Jetty, c.1907. (Battye Library, State Library of WA [3045B/334]).](image-url)

Exhibitions were both visually and haptically stimulating, with spectators able to see and imagine the haptic experiences of participants, and participants physically interacting with the water whilst both watching and being watched by the crowd. The novelty of the physical feats being exhibited as dramatic spectacle placed a visual emphasis on haptic activity, and drew some spectators to engage in such aquatic activities themselves through participation is swimming, diving and lifesaving.

Swimming at the City Baths provided a participatory, kinaesthetic experience of the river, and swimmers both touched and were touched by the water. They were subject to the conditions of the
river inside the baths and conscious of its impact on their sensory experiences and physical performance:

“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” (1905i).

Repeated visual and haptic experiences of the river generated stronger individual awareness of its daily and seasonal patterns and characteristics. Haptic experiences provided information such as temperature and current that could not be attained through visual experience alone. Swimming at the baths generated place specific environmental knowledge that could only be acquired through direct physical contact with the river.

Increasing participation in aquatic activities at the baths occurred alongside continuing complaints about odours and mud, and within a few years of opening demands for larger, cleaner facilities resulted in a proposal for the bath’s relocation to a site west of the Narrows below Kings Park (on the shoreline south-west of Mt. Eliza in Figure 1). There was concern about the visual and auditory experiences of park visitors, and the Kings Park Board “desired that there should be no chance of persons on the high grounds of the Park, the terraces, for example, looking into the baths” (1905d). They insisted that the baths be located “out of ear shot of the frequented parts of the Park. For some reason or other when boys and youths were in the swimming baths not alone shouts, but bad language as well, were heard” (1905d). The objections addressed the already inflammatory issues of the bodily and linguistic propriety of public bathing and bathhouses. The President of the Western Australian Amateur Swimming Association responded that “one of the rules of the Association most stringently enforced is that relating to the use of obscene language, and that it is the exception to at any time hear bad language in any of our public swimming baths” (Mitchell, 1905). The swimming clubs tried to promote their sport as physically and morally principled, while others viewed the physical and moral activities at the baths as questionable, and placed concerns about sensory experiences of those external to the baths over the sensory experiences of those using the baths.

The potential visual and auditory objections of park users caused the proposed site to be shifted further west towards the local breweries, a site which was objectionable to swimmers from a haptic and olfactory perspective: “bad enough in all conscience to have to swim in practically mud, without having the refuse from two breweries as well” (1905e). The focus on physical and olfactory experiences of mud and brewery wastes (rather than views, built form or distance from the city) suggests that the haptic sensations were central to the pleasurable aspects of swimming. For patrons of the baths there was a prevailing concern to insure that the new baths did not provide the same negative sensory experiences as the City Baths, and that haptic, olfactory and health concerns were preferred over visual appeal and convenience, the issues that had determined the site of the original City 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 new baths were less conveniently located (nearly 2 km from city), but were favourably received for the haptic and visual experiences they provided: “the site of the baths is an exceptionally good one, the water being
beautifully clean, and the sand bottom hard and white. The situation is picturesque, and the handsome buildings are an improvement to the foreshore” (1914). The perception of ‘clean’ water may have come through a combination of visual, olfactory and haptic experiences; the absence of commentary on odour in descriptions of the new baths may indicate that the odours present were inoffensive or expected. The specific mention of the material and texture of the riverbed indicates that haptic aspects of the new baths received significant scrutiny.

A marked difference between the City Baths and the Crawley Baths was the use of 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” (1914). 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.

The opening of the Crawley baths initiated a decline in the patronage and upkeep of the City Baths, which closed a number of years later when aesthetic appreciation for the building had dwindled and it was regarded as an “eyesore to be removed” (1918). Following the removal of the baths there were limited opportunities to haptically encounter the river on the immediate foreshore, which became a place of primarily visual and terrestrial sensory experiences.

The Perth Water Chute

At the turn of the 20th Century mechanical amusements including merry-go-rounds, swinging boats and water chutes were gaining considerable popularity as part of amusement parks, first in America and then globally. Amusement parks, such as Luna Park, Steeplechase and Dreamland on Coney Island, arose through developments in technology, transport and cultural changes. Studies of the sensorial experiences of amusement parks are particularly relevant to this discussion as water chutes were central features of most amusement parks. Referring to Coney Island at the turn of the century, Sally states that “the Island had become 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” (2006:300). This transformation of leisure from visual to haptic experience occurred on a grand scale in places such as Coney Island, but it also occurred gradually on a smaller scale in innumerable other locations globally. In the case of the Perth Water Chute, ‘shooting the chutes’ created strong sensory and bodily experiences of the river and the foreshore.

Water chutes were one of the first forms of mechanical amusement to arrive in Australia and the first chute opened in Manly in 1903. Others quickly followed, constructed on rivers, lakes and man-made lagoons in St. Kilda, Bendigo, Brisbane, Perth and elsewhere. Modern mechanical innovations were combined with natural and man-made aquatic features to provide novel and highly experimental entertainment based around haptic experiences of aquatic environments. The Perth Water Chute, like the City Baths, focused strongly on the haptic component of the experience, however, unlike the baths, modern technology was used to highlight and intensify the novel, pleasurable, thrilling and potentially risky experience of ‘shooting the chutes’.
In early 1905 the Perth Water Chute was erected at Point Lewis, modelled on the highly successful Bendigo chute (1905g). Stairs leading up a 3-story (11mt) 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 8-12 people were launched down one set of rails and pulled to the top on the other by an electric motor. The chute was a new form entertainment for Perth, and prior to its opening the newspapers described not only the structure and how it operated, but 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” (1905i).

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 trialled (though this seems unlikely) added an element of potential danger, exacerbated by delays and ‘extra’ safety checks.

“The 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” (1905g).

The second launch, containing a group of dapper young men, overturned due to the boisterous
behaviour of the occupants, providing great amusement and some consternation from the crowd.
The day after its opening the sensation of the chute remained generally unfamiliar, and the West
Australian wrote that “to the uninitiated it is not easy to convey an adequate idea of the feelings
excited by a descent in a chute. Those who tried it at Point Lewis yesterday seemed to enjoy the
whole performance fully” (1905g).

A month after opening the chute was a great success, “the novelty has ‘taken on’” and “the
sensation of a ride...doubtless would not be appreciated by many: yet there are scores who enjoy
the fun” (1905h). It was promoted as an “exhilarating enjoyment “ (1905a), a “great novelty to
Perth in the way of amusements” (1905b), “the subject of much curious speculation” (1905b), and
“something very new and very amusing in water sports” (1905g). The appeal of the chute lay in the
combination of new technology and new ideas about leisure that came together to provide
surprising and thrilling bodily experiences. In Perth the sensory experiences of the water chute were
strongly linked to the river and the immediate surrounding environment. Unlike the Manly, Bendigo
or St. Kilda water chutes, which terminated in man made pools, the Perth Water Chute released into
the Swan River, providing a range of sensory experiences of the river itself.

**Sensational Chutes**

Unfamiliar bodily sensations were central to the appeal of the chutes, and at the opening of a new
chute many Australian newspapers attempted to describe the experience of ‘shooting the chutes’:
“The slide and plunge are attended by a sensation somewhat similar to that experienced on a
switchback railway, but the difference is that the final plunge into the water lends exhilaration and
incident to the ride” (1904d). 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. The repeated
descriptions of the function of the amusement, the sensory experience it provided, and its novelty is
strong testament to the innovative and unfamiliar bodily experiences created by the chutes. Sally
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”

Many descriptions of water chutes cite speed and trajectory as the physically appealing aspects of
the experience: “It is evident that the rapid and exhilarating descent possesses great attractions for
the public”(1904b). The emotional experience of the chute was generated through such powerful
sensory experiences: “The water-chute is one of the latest devices to minister to the needs of those
who enjoy physical emotions of the kind formerly found in the giddy flight of merry-go-rounds,
‘ocean-waves,’ and swinging boats” (1905h).
Figure 5: Shooting the Chute at Manly (Manly Library).

The boats would “rush with lightning speed” (1903a), and they 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” (1903a). The boat’s decent and trajectory and the body’s movement as part of the boat’s inertial frame of reference resulted in novel experiences of proprioception and kinaesthesia, potentially enhanced by momentary sensations of weightlessness. Newspapers wrote that that ‘shooting the shoots’ “affects passengers in various ways”, and for some it was “like the first symptoms of ‘mal de mer’” (1904c), but for many others it was novel and thrilling.

The visual, olfactory and auditory experiences of both spectators and participants were also crucial components of ‘shooting the chutes’. Water chutes were a site of spectacle, which was consumed physically by participants, and visually by spectators. The amusement parks of Coney Island during the same time 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, 2006:299). For spectators, the sight of the boats descending, shouts and screams of the riders, and smells of the river were the central features of the experience. For the riders, the sounds of the crowd and the machinery, the visual experience of the descent and the smells of the river as the boat splashed down augmented the powerful and thrilling bodily sensations they were experiencing. For the owners of the chute, the sensory spectacle of the chutes and accounts of the riders were the primary means of promoting and capitalizing on the experience, encouraging spectators to imagine the bodily sensation and then choose to experience it
themselves. Both spectators and riders experienced the sights, sounds and smells of the chute, but the haptic experience, central to the chutes, was only available to riders.

Thrills and Risks

The bodily sensations of speed and trajectory, the potential for disaster, and the lack of personal control over the situation generated ‘thrills’ or a domesticated sense of terror, and technology played a central role in the provision of such experiences. Sally observes that “the kinaesthetic thrill of mechanical amusements was bound up in their recreation of dangerous situations” (2006:301). Rabinovitz 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” (Rabinovitz, 2001:89). Highly publicized 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 deaths were ultimately blamed on human ignorance, miscalculation, or poor decision-making rather than technological malfunction.

Less than a fortnight after the opening of Australia’s first water chute in Manly an accident on Christmas Eve 1903 claimed the life of an employee struck by a descending boat as he attempted to untangle a fouled chain. The accident received extensive coverage in national papers, which also published the coroner’s inquest into the incident, containing vivid and detailed description of the sequence of events: “the boat struck him on the right upper arm and he fell, and the boat struck him again. His head came in contact with the edge of the breakwater at the bottom of the track, and as he fell into the water the boat went over him” (1903c). The article also provided a comprehensive description of the deadly injuries incurred: “an injury to the brain, fractures of a number of ribs on the right side, fracture of the right upper arm, and contusions about the body” (1903c). Graphic descriptions of accidents in newspapers enhanced and promoted the aura of danger surrounding the chutes.

The potential for disaster added an emotional layer to the bodily thrill associated with the ride itself. Periodically boats capsized, and the primary cause was cited to be movements of the passengers that disturbed the balance of the vessel, rather than technological or design failure. After a capsize in the early days of the Perth chute modifications were made and The Daily News declared that “the chute is now in good working order, and that the improvements recently effected make the boats safe, so far as everything but the conduct of the passengers is concerned” (1905b).

Technological failure was another risk associated with the chutes. In Perth a winch hauling the boats broke and “large pieces of metal shot in all directions” and the young man operating the machinery “suffered several injuries of a more or less serious nature, and others had lucky escapes” (1905c). The blame was placed firmly on the young operator, who was unaccustomed to the technology and “the accident was caused by his ignorance” (1905c). The technology of water chute’s was considered to operate by “means of ingenious mechanism” (1903a), and it was not necessarily familiar or safe, but accidents and malfunctions were placed firmly in the realm of human error. This served to reinforce for the public the supposed safety of the technology, and mask the economic imperatives of the chutes.
Sensationalized accidents in newspapers, countered by assurances from proprietors that human error was to blame, facilitated perceptions of the chutes as a risk whose benefits, in the form of novel and pleasurable bodily sensation, were worthwhile. Rabinovitz refers to the role of imagination, and states that the “fantasy of seeing technology go out of control” (Rabinovitz, 2001:90) was a significant part of the experience. Imagining disaster was linked to the surrender of the body to the control of mechanical technology (Sally, 2006:301). Media coverage of accidents and visual observation of the expressions and sounds of participants may have created an exaggerated or imagined sense of risk that was significantly larger than the actual chance of bodily harm, but added to the overall thrill of the experience.

There were also 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, 2006:301). Shortly after the Perth chute opened a gossip column 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” (1905k). Sally 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 mechanized entertainment were beginning re-shape social expectations relating to behavioural propriety (Sally, 2006:301).

**Conclusion**

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 two features of the foreshore are distinctive as they are both activities that were primarily valued and actively sought as entertainments inducing 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. Mechanical amusements like the water chute used new technology to allow participants to experience thrills and terror in a domesticated form. Sally suggests that “the consumption of mass culture was bound up in corporeal experience that radically transformed pleasure seekers’ relationship to their bodies and to the bodies of others in the public sphere” (2006:296). While such swimming techniques and bodily thrills may seem pedestrian a century on, and it is impossible to understand fully an early 20th century thrill-seekers experience, accounts from the time suggest that such sensory experiences partially transformed peoples experiences of the environment and their own bodies.

Today the 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. It remains to be seen what sensory experiences the new development will offer, and what kinds of environmental and bodily knowledge those sensory encounters provide. Detailed sensory histories of specific time periods such as the turn of the 20th century can reveal the sensory norms at work in particular social milieu at a specific point in time. Such histories can then be compared with further studies of the same location at different points in time to reveal broader shifts in sensory experiences and
expectations and changing understandings of place. In such directions lies the future of this research and these case studies are a portion 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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1905i. Swimming. *Western Mail*, 7 Jan, p.38.


