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## Eau Yeah!

**Aqua-structures and spraygrounds just keep getting bigger, better and as Dan McEwen reports, ever more popular with the cool-down crowd – in and out of waterparks**

LIFE is good for the “Dynamic Duo” of the waterplay industry, a.k.a. the aqua-structure and the sprayground. First they became de rigueur in all the best waterparks – and still are. Now they’re making themselves comfortable in vacation resorts and hotels, campgrounds, golf clubs, municipal parks and playgrounds, even zoo’s and malls. So what is it these two have been doing so right for so long to make themselves so popular?

Right from the start aqua-structures have been the “Oh Wow!” showpieces of the waterplay business. Indeed, so much so today that Julie Zakus at slide manufacturer WhiteWater West Industries thinks waterplay structures have actually evolved into fully themed waterparks in their own right. And she has a point. Up to four stories high, themed like big-budget movie sets, bristling with tubes, tunnels, nets, slides and countless interactive water toys, all ingeniously arrayed within the splash radius of the inevitable tipping bucket, these fantastic Rube Goldberg contraptions can make even the prettiest sand beach seem dull.

Hardly surprising then that some do double duty as the central icon at many waterparks. Case in point: every Great Wolf Lodge has a water play structure as one of its signature elements. Why? Because as Franceen Gonzales, vice-president of risk management for Great Wolf Resorts explains: “When people think of a Great Wolf Lodge, they think of the huge tipping bucket and kids screaming in delight as it splashes them!”

Although aqua structures come in a galaxy of sizes, features and configurations, manufacturers, operators and customers all agree - bigger is better - especially the tipping bucket. Splashers bucket at the Atlantis Resort dumps 320 gallons on squealing guests. Not to be outdone, Cedar Point’s Castaway Bay in Sandusky, Ohio, dumps 1,000 gallons a tip. One state over in Pennsylvania, HersheyPark’s East Coast Waterworks boasts nearly 600 interactive water toys alone with seven slides and two tunnels.

For Sohret Pakis, whose company Polin Waterparks & Pool Systems of Istanbul, Turkey, has been building water play structures for over 30 years, there are three, very basic reasons why aqua-structures are enjoying such a boom.





Image courtesy of Rain Drop Products

“First, the demand for more interactive play features in waterparks is growing. Patrons do not always want to take what is offered but rather, want to create their own fun. Second, with water play structures, you can offer combinations of features - slides, play features, tipping buckets, water cannons, net climbs that are distributed everywhere throughout the structure. Third, people want to share the experience ... to be on the structure all together as a family or as a group of friends, having fun together, sharing and actually creating their own way of fun.”

Pakis insists the increasing demand for interactivity is the most significant design trend she’s observed over the last 10 years. “Today, the structures are multi-level and include interactive play elements throughout.”

Corry Forrest, at WaterPlay Solutions of Kelowna, British Columbia, is also big on interactivity. He defines it as “...giving users the ability to control, adjust and alter their particular experience.” Ultimately that will include incorporating electronics such as lights, sounds and multi-spray displays within water play structures to expand their range of experiences. This pursuit of interactivity has proven to be child’s play compared to what Forrest says is the most difficult design goal to achieve in waterplay design - safety.

“Regardless of what safety standards you strive for, children will try to climb anything.”

Aqua-structures, like teenage boys, are destined to be show-offs, natural born attention seekers. Spraygrounds on the other hand, are attention getters.

Like aqua-structures, spraygrounds got their start in waterparks. Back then, waterparks were primarily targeting the five years and over set. Then enterprising operators began courting the toddler market as a means of coaxing more families through their turnstiles. spraygrounds popped up like mushrooms and were an immediate hit with kids and parents alike.

Not content to be confined to waterparks, the sprayground branched out, making a name for itself with penny-pinching municipalities looking for a cheaper alternative to the community swimming pool. The city of Omaha, Nebraska, for example, opened its first sprayground in 1999 and today operates nine of them. Residents can’t get enough.

“They like the fact that they can take even the smallest toddlers, who enjoy interacting with the sprays more than they would a wading pool,” comments Melinda Pearson, Omaha’s director, parks, recreation and public property. “Likewise, older children enjoy the overhead elements such as the dumping buckets. At this point, the only drawback is that some of them are too popular and almost over-used,” admits Pearson. “We need more of them.”



Image courtesy of Polin Waterparks and Pool Systems

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and Doug Mulvaney, KOA's facilities development manager, is a true believer.

"A spray park is a great amenity to offer to families with small children that would opt out of using a swimming pool. Spray parks ... promote return visits to the campground. Families that are planning future vacation stays remember campgrounds that offer a variety of fun recreational activities and spray parks definitely add to the mix."

Mulvaney's colleague, Robyn Koromhas, operates one of those splashpads at a KOA campground near Myrtle Beach, Florida. For Koromhas, the single most important benefit of the splash pad is the competitive advantage it brings over the other campgrounds in the Myrtle Beach area.

"The splash pad... has been a positive addition to our recreational features at this campground for some time now," says Koromhas. "Families return year after year as their children remember the splash pad and all the fun they had during their stay!" And that, he says, has had a significant impact on the campground's bottom line.

If there's a downside to spraygrounds it's their cost, to buy and operate.

Downtown at City Hall, the budget department loves the fact that their spraygrounds a) have no standing water which makes them perfectly safe for even the smallest children, b) require no staffing which translates into savings for taxpayers, and best of all c) they're free to the public to be enjoyed by all. And they are and not just in Omaha.

"Some people criticise spraygrounds as just squirting playgrounds," laments Kirsten Kahl, of Rain Drop Products in Ashland Ohio. "In fact a typical sprayground quickly evolves into a community gathering place where children can play and their guardians come to enjoy the company of others in their neighbourhood. Often times the parents and guardians of the children enjoy equal if not more recreation value from a visit to a sprayground."

Kahl is equally enthusiastic about the eco-friendliness of spraygrounds. "The most common misconception is that a sprayground wastes a lot of water and is not an efficient use of a limited resource. In reality, a properly designed sprayground that utilises the latest in controller technology and water recirculation (systems) provides a much more sustainable recreation solution than even a small public pool. Drop for drop, a sprayground provides a greener alternative and more play value than a traditional public pool."

Apparently they're also good for making money.

Kampgrounds of America (KOA) currently operates 24 spray parks in their campgrounds



Image courtesy of Whitewater West Industries

"Commercial splash pads generally start at around US\$25,000 installed and it's not uncommon to see a \$250,000 to \$300,000 splash pad on the higher end," observes Ryan Vaughn of Rain Deck, an Arizona sprayground builder. "Still, I can't tell you how many times I've heard, 'I wish I'd built a larger splash pad.' Increasing the size of the splash pad does not necessarily mean adding additional pumps, features and other equipment - so the additional cost is generally minimal for concrete and surfacing material. Once installed, a splash pad requires

Image courtesy of Vortex



Image courtesy of Polin Waterparks and Pool Systems

quite a bit of attention in order to keep proper sanitation chemicals up to par. There are several systems available that automatically introduce chemicals into the water as needed which helps reduce the maintenance, but generally speaking, plan on spending more time on maintenance than with a pool."

Still, spraygrounds are proving they're worth all that time and money.

"Today's economy has pressed communities to explore more economical water recreation amenities," says Rain Drop's Kirsten Kahl. "Less costly than pools to build and operate and easier to maintain, spraygrounds still have a greater 'wow' factor. Communities have realised that this is a great way to provide a destination for families to have an outing on a local level, keeping within limited budgets. We're seeing country clubs competing with health clubs who are competing with YMCAs. This fierce competition has them discovering that a sprayground is an amenity that becomes the differentiator. With lower operating costs, more and more can afford to add a sprayground to their facility."

It's anyone's guess what the next big thing in water play will be; much easier to predict that Montreal's Vortex, which invented the splash pad, will have something to do with it. Ulrike Elizabeth Rechler, the company's director of business development in Europe, is confident the demand for all forms of water play structures will continue to grow.

"Customers are becoming familiarised with the aquatic industry and about what splash pads can offer. Countries with hot climates are investing in outdoor water play structures and the ones with colder climates are designing indoor amenities."

Ryan Vaughn at Rain Deck envisions affordable controllers with easily programmable light/music shows. "Who wouldn't want a mini Bellagio for a splash pad?"