

Hot Trends Head West



Irresistible high-end hotel pools, tantalizing movie star and celebrity pools, and cutting-edge contemporary pools come to mind when speaking of west coast pool design. But what happens when we avert our eyes from these lavish creations and look at their wet cousins – the public pools? Satisfying community desire quickly tumbles over the vanishing edge when traditional rectangular pools of the 50s and 60s “get the job done.”

*By Patricia Soto
and
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Looking east of the divide, interactive recreation-driven aquatic centers have become the norm since the 80s and 90s. Even with a shorter outdoor swimming season, many of these municipal pools are bundled with indoor aquatic centers for year-round fitness and amusement. Facility designs are innovative, morphing into water wonderlands, taking their cues from indoor European public pools and outdoor Caribbean resort pools. Large free form bodies of water sweep across the American landscape, and most without a spectacular view, creating art forms in themselves.

East and west alike have passionate aquatic enthusiasts from the pump pit operator to the Diving Gold Medalist, but why did it take so long for municipal aquatic trends to head west? When you “dive” into the detail, various intricacies play a major role.

Taxes

Many western municipalities are reluctant to look towards constructing a new pool facility as the old one costs “sooooo much to operate.” With a high tax base, many residents feel that \$1.50 for a day at the old pool is fair. But these older pools, and there are many of them, no longer are bringing in the swimmers. They’re often empty while families drive an hour or more to the regional new water park to find recreation value; and they don’t mind paying for it when they find it. The empty, old, leaking pools do cost a lot to operate with their outdated pumps, cracked pool shells and lack of amenities. Repair is often a band aid fix, resulting in the return of a handful of

swimmers with their buck fifty.

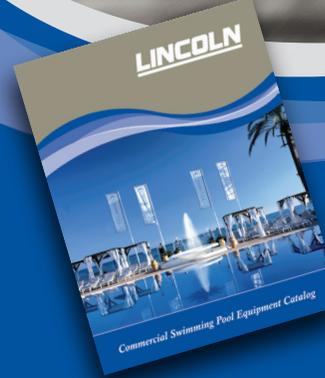
Many park and recreation departments east of the divide create community pride by merging the best features of public pools and commercial water parks to offset escalating taxes coupled with a reduction in tax bases. They succeed in creating an adventurous ambience while segregating creative water play areas for various age groups. The safe and friendly municipal pools with plentiful shade areas invite residents to partake in zero-beach entry pools, waterslides and lazy rivers with island-style comfort and hospitality on a daily basis. Residents eagerly return year after year to slide down the thrilling new waterslide, climb the mammoth new water play structure or try the challenge of “inland surfing” on the exciting new Flow Rider, right in their community. The recreation value is huge and the revenue income (\$3-\$6 per person) equally as large. These facilities are designed to accommodate today’s family desire of “staying together and playing together” ideal.

Swimmers

In many areas in the west, newer facilities tend to be driven by competitive user groups. No shame in that, the west prides itself in large numbers of competitive swimmers, water polo players, master swimmers and even synchronized swimmers and divers. It only stands to reason that these organizations are the voice identifying the need for more and/or improved pools. However, 50 meter water typically costs far more than many organizations are able to contribute, thus creating a challenge to adhere to the operating budget with a solely competitive base. With the maximum density for deep water at approximately 100 square feet per person, this equals plenty of water space per user—120 swimmers per 50 meter pool for a workout session (and even less for water polo). This same 12,000 square foot body of water could easily handle four times that amount of paying recreational users, as they need 25 square feet per person. This is why recreation is complementary to com-



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petitive needs. One supports the other, not only in revenue opportunity but in developing the educational aspect for early competitive interest.

In the east and west alike, operations have been impacted by rising costs of staffing, utilities, chemicals, and maintenance. Not to be compromised, the industry is adjusting with “green” building methods that promote water conservation and energy efficiency while progressive managers are looking to regain the share of burdened operating spending with recreational value through multi-generational environments.

Many multi-generational facilities with recreation and competitive bodies of water provide educational lessons, fitness lap lanes (popular with adults and seniors), competitive needs and leisure amenities. An aquatic center with only a competitive pool is limited, just as an aquatic center with only recreational water is limited. One without the other lacks a large component of the community. With issues of obesity

and other health problems associated with sedentary lifestyles, municipal aquatic centers have evolved to include programming for various age groups. Water exercise provides numerous low impact opportunities that need not be strenuous to be beneficial. The elderly also benefit from regular swimming activity to maintain joint strength, consequently postponing the loss of mobility. These are the municipal facilities where demand from the funding source is to get closer to operating costs through revenue of all users. These are Multi Generational Facilities.

Codes & Construction

Since codes were written to protect public health and safety prior to the evolving industry, they can be obstacles to innovative design of public pools. Codes in the east have embraced recreation components more readily. In many cases, western codes do not address many areas of change that the aquatic industry has experienced such as zero-beach entries and play

structures. When pools are properly designed, they address water quality issues, hazards, and risk management training programs. Thus, many municipal facilities east of the divide have been operating large areas of recreation waters for many years with equally high health and safety standards seen in the more conservative facilities in the west.

Major pool equipment suppliers for the west coast supply the vast majority of all new commercial facilities with fully automated equipment rooms from the controller to the filtration system. Because each pool is unique in design and materials, geographical construction methods are somewhat different regarding the structure’s skeletal design and strength. Out west (where the earth is known to quake), commercial pool contractors’ method of choice is shotcrete; pools are designed for this construction method by structural engineers. Shotcrete is a wet mix concrete pneumatically applied by professional nozzle operators, creating a strong

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and durable monolithic pool shell. In contrast, this is not as prevalent east of the divide where many pools are constructed with poured-in-place concrete floors and formed and poured concrete walls. Shotcrete has less formwork; however, costs are impacted by labor and equipment. Neither is more right, just different.

Hot Trends

Before embarking on replacing the old rectangular, leaking pool, most eastern (and now western) municipalities acquire a detailed feasibility study that supports programming for more than one pool to be inclusive of the entire community of swimmers. When planning such an endeavor, it is necessary to analyze demographics, expenses and revenue pro forma. Feasibility studies not only develop preliminary concepts and programs in concert with the community's assessed needs but also evaluate how recreational water supports the high operating costs of traditional competitive aquatics. Larger

cities acquire an aquatic master plan, which provides aquatic planning and sometimes phasing of future amenities for several locations throughout a metropolitan area. Participation levels of children, adults, families and senior citizens are important to a community as it plans a future aquatic center to meet the needs of its residents.

Wanting to support competitive, recreational and fitness needs, the City of La Mirada, California, obtained a feasibility study for the operation of an outdoor aquatic center for approximately 50,000 residents. Pleased by the results of the study, Splash, the soon to be completed municipal aquatic center, has received more than \$3.6 million in donations, pledges and grants from La Mirada residents and local businesses. The multi-generational destination located on 18 acres in La Mirada Regional Park will feature a Spanish seafaring theme with a marooned ship, wharf plank benches, skull rock and sailing canopy shade structures amidst a zero-beach entry

pool, waterslides, spray features, play structures and lazy river. Year-round competitive waters will include a 50 meter pool, a 25 yard pool and the prospect of a second 50-meter pool already in the planning process. These waters are complemented with a large family sized warm-water spa.

As the west begins redefining the aquatic experience for the next 50 years, they can build on the success of their eastern neighbors to create the irresistible aquatic experience for tomorrow in their communities.

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