



That Sinking Sinking Feeling

SHOULD OUTDOOR POOLS
BE AS EXTINCT AS DRIVE-INS?

BY RITA FEUTL

WE LIVE ON a latitude that breeds 40-below Januaries — Fahrenheit or Celsius, take your pick. But when the Earth tilts on its axis sufficiently to allow the sun to explore the north as well as the south sides of our buildings, Edmontonians know how to revel in its long, warm rays. Our summers may be short, but the days are long, and a favourite place to pass those lazy days is at one of our outdoor pools.

Penny-pinchers claim indoor pools are more practical and economical than outdoor ones. After all, you can enjoy them year-round, including days when storm clouds gather or a mercury drop makes a dip in *al fresco* waters more bracing than refreshing. Besides, Edmonton's five outdoor pools—well, three, this summer, but more on that later — are so decrepit (one of the newest, Mill Creek, built in 1955, can audition as a bona fide period set for a Funicello-and-Avalon remake) that they're hardly worth having. Or are they?

Ask the families who sign up for early-morning swim lessons, or teens turned away on sizzling days when Mill Creek fills to capacity. Talk to school kids who flop home properly wrung out after a jam-packed day of splashing, diving, hollering and soaking up Vitamin D. Speak with homeowners and merchants who prefer city youth to exercise >>



The south side's Mill Creek Pool is one of our youngest — and it was built in 1955.

— Photo by 3TEN Photo

and socialize rather than idly hang out. Or with singles who live in apartments without backyards.

What's not to like? To plunge into an open-air pool under our high prairie sky is a dip into the senses. For only there can you experience the scent of sun-warmed chlorine that simmers gently on the water's surface. It blends effortlessly with the aroma of sunscreen or — for invincible teens who think skin cancer as impossible as unplanned pregnancy and breathalyzer tests — the heady, coconut perfume of suntan lotion.

The deck snacks make it a party, with frozen treats, potato chips and the inevitable orange slices that some nutrition-conscious mother manages to bring or send along. Youngsters swarm like swallows, blue-lipped and shivering, and by the time they've hoovered it all down, they're ready to fling off their towels and dive in again. Fortunately, the rule about waiting an hour

“WE NEED ABOUT 100 OUTDOOR POOLS IN THIS CITY, SO KIDS CAN SAY, ‘CAN I JUMP ON MY BIKE AND GO DOWN THE STREET TO THE POOL?’ THEN WE WOULDN'T HAVE OBESE CHILDREN.” — HERB FLEWWELLING

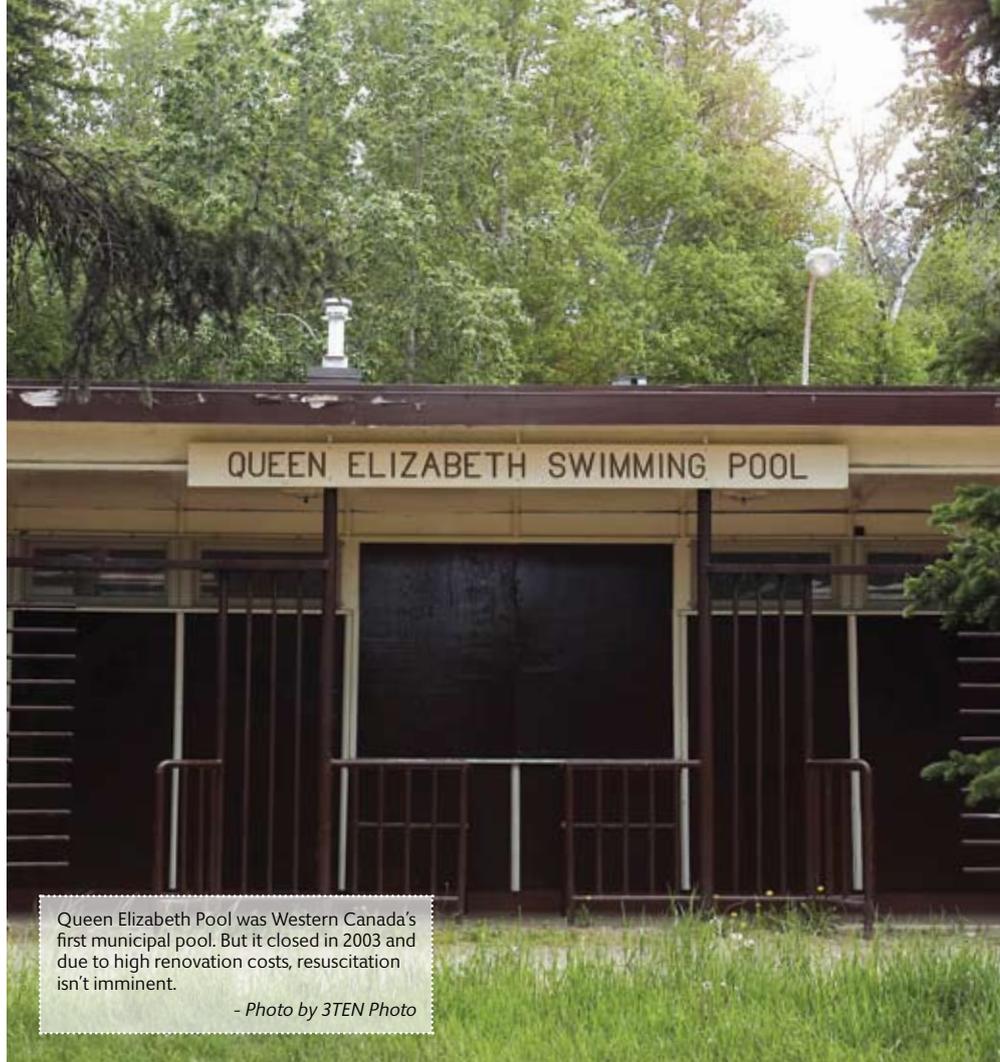
after eating has been exposed as myth; but the unrelenting rumour of a dye in the water that's activated if you pee in the pool should be encouraged whenever possible.

But the current style of outdoor pool is on the way out in Edmonton. “Stand-alone pools, from the research that we did and from the community consultation we did, are not a feature that is going to meet the community's needs,” says Rob Smyth, branch manager of recreation facilities services for the city. “It's really about the other kinds of features.”

The city's *Outdoor Aquatic Strategy, 2008-*

2017, offers small spray decks with single water features, larger spray parks with multiple water features, water curtains, water walls, decorative fountains and swimming lakes with beaches as possibilities. The city hopes to develop public/private or public/non-profit partnerships to create two swimming lakes or water parks in the rapidly expanding north and south ends of Edmonton. “The challenge is servicing the growth areas of the city,” says Smyth.

Many of the city's 33 wading pools are evaporating also, victims of new health



Queen Elizabeth Pool was Western Canada's first municipal pool. But it closed in 2003 and due to high renovation costs, resuscitation isn't imminent.

- Photo by 3TEN Photo

regulations that prohibit standing water without a regular dose of chlorine. As such, many communities are choosing to retrofit their wading pools to create spray decks instead.

Tougher safety regulations have also stripped high diving boards from the city's outdoor pools. The city's lone open-air diving tower at Fred Broadstock Pool is being eliminated this summer as part of the facility's \$5.4-million redevelopment, though plans call for a one- and three-metre diving board for a deeper swimming pool.

While the Fred Broadstock Pool undergoes resuscitation, it looks as if Edmonton's oldest outdoor municipal pool is destined to remain a concrete corpse on the river valley's south side. Queen Elizabeth Pool closed in 2003 after its tank cracked and leaked. Advocates worked hard to revive the pool; city council finally tossed it a life preserver in the form of a \$4.1-million renovation budget. But bids came in for almost twice that amount. The latest proposal would see the money spent on an outdoor venue at the nearby Kinsmen Sports Centre, where costs can be reduced by sharing amenities such as change rooms and cashiers.

As for the only other three pools available this summer — Oliver, Borden Park and Mill Creek — if you like them as they are, enjoy them while you can. The city is consulting with the local communities to see what other water features might prove more desirable. "It's not the city saying, 'do this'. It's very much community-driven," says Smyth.

For some citizens, however, there's too much emphasis on bells and whistles, and not enough on the promotion of swimming and the calculated risks of diving. "You know, a deep end, a shallow end, some diving boards and some change rooms take care of almost 90 per cent of what happens at a pool," says Herb Flewwelling, an Olympic diving coach and the technical chair for the Aquatic Council of Edmonton. "A spray deck is just water pistols."

Spray decks and fountains are great for younger kids, but older kids want more, says Friends of the Queen E Pool Society president John Stobbe. "A 12-year-old who can swim is going to have a lot more fun diving for pucks and rings and those kinds of things."

The city's own aquatic strategy reports that in a 2007 survey of kids aged 6 to 12, >>



Cooling off periods

EDMONTON RESIDENTS HAVE been cooling off in outdoor swimming pools since the last century still sported one-piece bathing costumes. The beleaguered (and now closed) Queen Elizabeth Pool opened in 1922, as Western Canada's first municipal pool. As part of the kick-off fun and frivolity, women swam in nightcaps carrying candles, while the men needed to swim a pool length in their street clothes.

Edmonton quickly added Oliver (10315 119 St., 780-944-7415) in 1923 and Borden Park (11200 74 St., 780-944-7521) in 1924. Borden Park patrons could do their laps as summer revellers shrieked on the Green Rattler roller coaster in the background, or floated through the local "tunnel of love" in an inhibiting six-seat boat.

Though the city's fourth pool, Mill Creek (9555 82 Ave., 780-944-7415), didn't appear until 1955, kids had been swimming in an upstream watering hole for decades. Every summer, according to historian Tony Cashman in *More Edmonton Stories*, they'd dam up the creek where 76th Avenue now dips into the ravine. As trains rumbled along the track (now a bicycle trail) above them, youngsters paddled and splashed in their impromptu pool.

The last pool, built in the then-town of Jasper Place in 1961 (with a dive tank added in 1968), is the Fred Broadstock Pool (10515 158 St., 780-496-1486), named after the town's secretary treasurer.

only “larger water playgrounds” came out ahead of “outdoor pools and water parks” in terms of popularity, with a rating of 35 and 31 per cent, respectively.

Flewwelling would like to see more basic swimming pools, not fewer, for many reasons. “We need to have about 100 outdoor pools in this city. Move them closer so the kids can say, ‘Can I jump on my bike and go down the street and jump into the pool?’ Then we wouldn’t have obese children and all these gangs.”

As for the old chestnut about our summers being too short to support outdoor pools, “the reality is that they’re used four months of the year everywhere, even in Dallas, because they’re intended to be a summer activity while kids are out of school,” says Stobbe.

And really, that’s why outdoor pools are so important. Though they’re wonderful for all ages — from the big-bellied toddler burbling in her mother’s arms to the senior scooting down for early morning laps or singles taking a breather from the roomies — they’re a superb gathering place for young people; the ones too old to hang out at playgrounds, but too young or broke or smart to explore adult pleasures and vices.

Teens need to know what it feels like to get in over their heads, and an old-fashioned swimming pool lets them go off the deep end safely. Kids can test their mettle with diving competitions, spectacular belly flops and that rite of passage, the leap off the high diving board. (First-timers tend to jump; not only do they feel more secure going in feet first, but it ensures that swim trunks and bikini bottoms remain on the swimmer). As each new summer begins, spectators are routinely treated to the drama of some gangly youngster carefully weighing the fear of jumping against the humiliation of crawling back down the ladder.

At an outdoor pool, you can be a kid with the best of them — bellyflops, cannonballs and “accidentally” splashing the crabby adults on the deep-end deck who shoot you dirty looks every time a drop of water hits their newspapers. But it’s also an ideal place to try on the grown-up stuff. Which is why, ultimately, an outdoor pool is one of the best places for a first kiss (and I’m talking *first* kiss here, not a steamy, get-a-room, make-out session). It’s the site of fun and joyous mischief, and if you can corral all your friends into it, so much the better. 



Spray decks are great for younger kids, but older ones want more, say outdoor pool advocates.

Spray parks vs. spray decks

SPRAY PARKS HAVE a wider variety of water-spewing equipment and more of it than spray decks do. They are also located in larger, district parks. Spray decks contain six-to-eight spray heads and are more common in neighbourhood parks. They’ll be even more common soon, as wading pools are being converted to spray decks to comply with new provincial rules. The regulations forbid the operation of wading pools without filtration systems. Conversions are far less expensive to install.

Currently, there are three spray parks in the city: Castledowns Park, Mill Woods

Park and G. Edmund Kelly Park. Plans call for adding another pair in Jackie Parker Park in Mill Woods and in West Edmonton’s Callingwood District Park by the end of the summer.

There are 22 spray decks at locations spread across the city: Alberta Avenue, Aspen Gardens, Athlone, Dovecourt, Eastwood, McCauley, Glengarry, High Park, Kenilworth, Kensington, King Edward Park, Lansdowne, Lendrum Place, North Glenora, Ottewell, Prince Charles, Queen Mary Park, Riverdale, Royal Gardens, Sherbrooke, Rosslyn and Wellington.