

Swings and Roundabouts

CATHERINE DE LORENZO & NANCY MARSHALL

Most stories about public art projects focus on the finished product, the artist who made it, and the context in which it is sited. This is a different story, about a permanent work that was made and installed but just as quickly dismantled. It speaks to the power of inspiration, the value of ingenuity and commitment within the design and fabrication team, and the importance of building up good relations to realize a major public art project. This particular story, which could be said to be about a “failed” art work, even has a silver lining, and that, too, is entirely due to the strength of the collaborations.



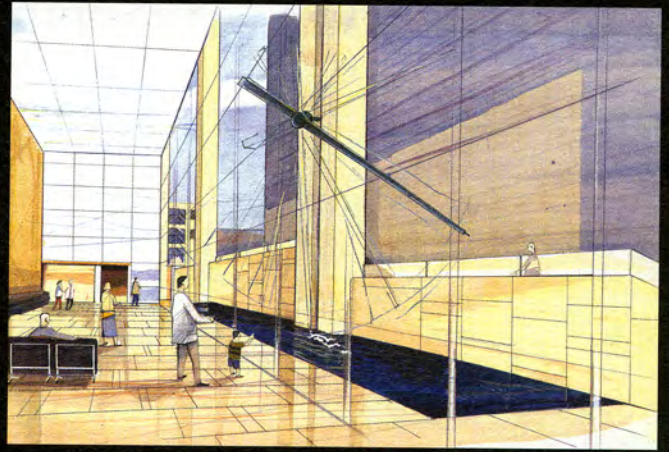
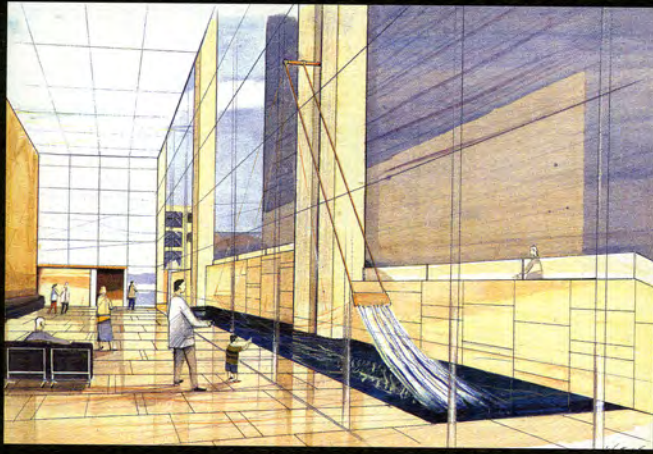
Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford designed *Water Swing* for the Landmark Centre at 363 George Street, Sydney. This commercial site, adjoining a heritage precinct, was designed by one of Sydney's leading architects, Richard Johnson, who years earlier had discovered the enjoyment of working with artists. In 1998, Johnson asked Turpin Crawford Studio to come up with a public art concept for a public linkage space—a narrow three meters wide by 20 meters high and 20 meters long—adjacent to the foyer of his building. The project then came under the purview of the City of Sydney's public art program.

The architect had already proposed to have a shallow pool at floor level, and fairly quickly the idea emerged to create a giant swing form that slowly brushed the surface of the pool with an arc of falling water. Turpin and Crawford's slender stainless steel “swing,” hinged 12 meters above the pool, was designed to release a gentle shower of water from the base of the swing's “seat” without splashing the glass walls only one meter away. The artists intended *Water Swing* to engage the public with this permanent work and to enliven the elegant lobby made of glass and marble.

To realize the project, they collaborated with Richard Green of Taylor Thompson Whitting (TTW), an engineer to many artists in Australia, as well as mechanical engineer Dirk Slotboom from Sydney Fountains (now Sydney Waterforms International), a fine water features consultant. Together they worked to develop a distinctive project where elegantly understated engineering could creatively harness water and light through the rhythm of the swing. In order to meet a very tight schedule from the project developers, the complex engineering and installation processes were rushed from the preferred 42 weeks to just 20. Nonetheless, they met the demands and moved into the building one night when the busy main street in Sydney's business district was sealed off from traffic to allow in cranes and other equipment. Recalling when it was first commissioned, Green thought the elegantly curved steel *Water Swing* “a beautiful thing.” Turpin says, “It was just magic.”

That was in 1999. But within six months, the swing stopped working. In projects like this, it's desirable to have an iterative process between the artists and consultants that results in the development of a 1:1 model installed off-site that can fully test the resolution of the design. In this instance, although various plywood and other models were developed to test the suitability of the dimensions and water flow of the





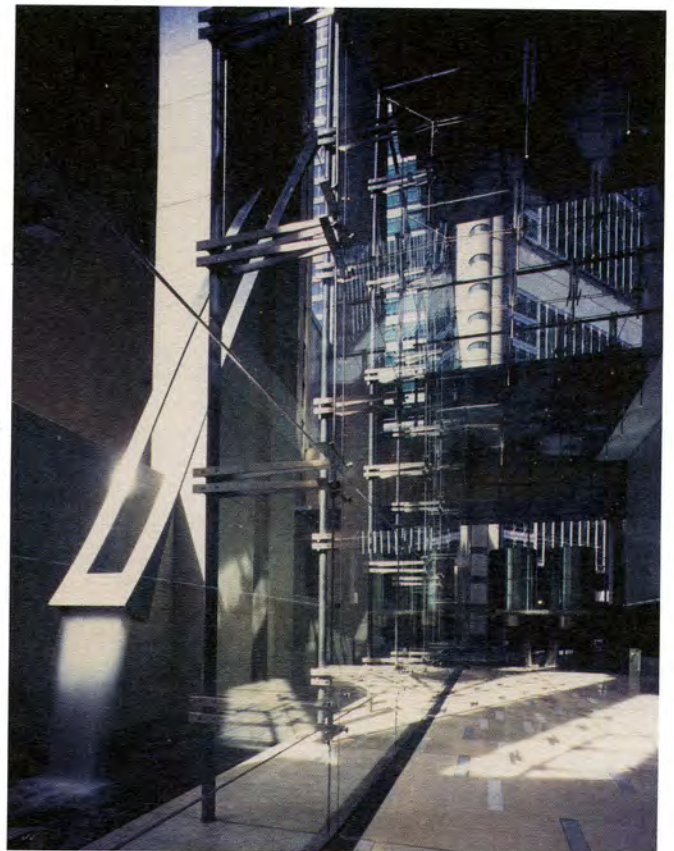
work, there was no time to make a 1:1 steel model to measure its resonance (vibrations) against the predicted movements of a tall building. Consequently, metal fatigue occurred in the pendulum structure and this unique artwork was dismantled. According to the engineers and the artists, had the project development process allowed adequate time for research and development of a technically ambitious though conceptually artistic work, such an unfortunate outcome would not have happened. The artists' team was then sidelined and the developers went to work creating what the artists believed was an unsightly alternative, until the artists were able to exercise their intellectual property rights and veto any work that appeared to echo their own.

For 10 years the space remained empty. But then magic happened again. In 2009, the artists, with exactly the same team of engineers and fabricators, put in a successful bid to the new owner of the site to develop a project that could build on the technical lessons of the past and deliver an even more liberating form. The new project, *Circumference*—a simple, elegant, chopstick-like form—is a swinging pendulum that kisses the water pool as it passes the center point in ever-increasing arcs. Unlike *Water Swing*, whose arc was a consistent length, *Circumference's* arc incrementally increases until a crescendo is reached and it finally goes all the way around, scribing a big circle in the air and capturing the imaginations of the passers-by as it does so.

What lessons can be learned from this experience, other than the need by all parties concerned to respect the time required by artists and their collaborators for adequate research and development? From the artists' points of view, there is little doubt: the value of good relationships. Over the years, Turpin and Crawford, who espouse collaboration, have worked at building up strong relationships with their engineers and fabricators so that there is a real synergy among their team. As a group of professionals, all the players get involved in the spirit of the work and pursue a collective goal of success. Such an investment in relationships has paid off for Turpin and Crawford because their team was able to handle the tensions that arose after the disappointment of the problems arising from *Water Swing* and enthusiastically regroup to develop *Circumference*.

The artists are hopeful that contracts to complete the work will soon be signed so *Circumference* can be installed in 2010.

ABOVE: Turpin and Crawford's renderings for *Water Swing* (left) and *Circumference* (right).
BELOW: Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, *Water Swing*, October 1999, Sydney.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Artists Jennifer Turpin (above) and Michaelie Crawford (below) with assistants testing out the controls for the mock-up of *Water Swing*, 1999.



DR. CATHERINE DE LORENZO is an art historian and has been researching public art and the public domain for at least two decades. **DR. NANCY MARSHALL's** key areas of research include place-making, considering creative cities and socio-cultural policy. Both are senior lecturers in the faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, and are currently researching creative partnerships and policies in the nurturing of public art projects.