



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Resilience: The Resurgence of Public Things

Gay Hawkins

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 2013, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/565563>

# Resilience

The Resurgence of Public Things

GAY HAWKINS

What would it mean to think of resilience as an eruption of public devices that framed precious environmental resources as *things in common* rather than things we destroy or exploit for private gain? Let me explain using the example of bottled water. Over the last twenty years markets in single serve PET bottles of water have grown phenomenally. In many places in the world this is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the beverage industry. The reasons for this growth are complex, and also particular to the context in which these markets operate. However, what links them is the framing of drinking water as a branded market thing, as something provided by corporations. For many people this mode of delivering water troubles sacrosanct principles about water as an essential and shared resource; as something that is fundamental to the biopolitical support of populations and the realization of social bonds. In response to these concerns a huge variety of activist campaigns have emerged contesting bottled water markets and exposing their damaging effects on the ongoing struggle for water security and safe public supply. These campaigns deploy an enormous variety of strategies and are a testament to the inventive and experimental nature of much environmental politics. One, in particular, captures what resilience means to me.

In October 2007 Manly Council in Australia did a presentation to the Local Government Association on the increasing problem of bottled water consumption and its waste impacts. Growing numbers of pedestrians were purchasing bottled water on the move and rapidly dis-

carding the empty containers. The emergence of this new drinking and disposal practice was identified as the major cause of rapid growth in PET waste in public spaces. Although fast food packaging had always been a major litter problem, escalating bottled water use was making it far worse and far harder to manage.

This research also showed that many pedestrians disliked using water fountains because they were often dirty or vandalized, or the water sometimes tasted unpleasant. In response to this research the council partnered with Do Something, an environmental activist group, to install a new style of water fountain that was appealing to pedestrians and offered a real alternative to single-use purchases of bottles of water. In 2008 the first water fountains were installed along the heavily used pedestrian beachfront, the Corso. These water fountains were state of the art designs that were vandal proof, wheelchair friendly, and delivered cool filtered water. They were also designed to facilitate easy refilling of pedestrians' own bottles. In launching the new water fountains the council installed extensive signage inviting pedestrians to taste the cool filtered water, reduce plastic waste, and do something for climate change. Drinking from these new public things was framed as a virtuous act, a personal gesture that made a difference to the environment.

The Manly Council water fountain project was enormously successful and has been copied in many Australian cities. By reinventing the water fountain, a public device contested the marketization of water and a growing urban waste burden. This example shows how markets are contingent on complex sociotechnical networks and relations that can be challenged. Manly Council recognized pedestrians' need for safe clean water and it offered improved public supply as a way to address this need and as an alternative to the vending machine or convenience store. By providing a substitute device to the plastic bottle and another choice than the market, the water fountain helped make public space *a space in common*, not just a space of commercial interests and private consumption. It also reasserted the fact that public space is made real through material things that are durable and shared, things that are accessed by many other strangers. Through good design the fear of drinking from a shared supply, of making contagious contact with strangers, was eliminated. Instead the water flowed freely into the mouths of strangers and this common flow implicitly linked all who drank it into a public.

Carrying a plastic bottle does not just make water into a private possession; it also makes it into an individual responsibility. This is how markets create cultures of privatization that undermine other water realities. The water fountain project showed how the provision of a new public device changed relations between pedestrians, water, and drinking habits. Just as bottles have helped to format new drinking practices, so too have water fountains. In the Manly case they exposed the bottle as an unnecessary, expensive, and weighty accessory and offered, instead, access to water that was outside of commercial culture: water that was free, public, and shared. In stooping to take a drink at the water fountain pedestrians enacted a public rather than a consumer disposition and were reminded of the fundamental role of water in being in common. This is an enactment of the resilience of water as something that must be shared, as a biophysical resource central to an inclusive and life-affirming sociality.