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At its tenth anniversary, Crown Fountain remains a wellspring of questions

The only certainty in the future of artist Jaume Plensa's iconic Millennium Park fountain is change.

By Jake Malooley [@jakemalooley](#) June 11, 2014

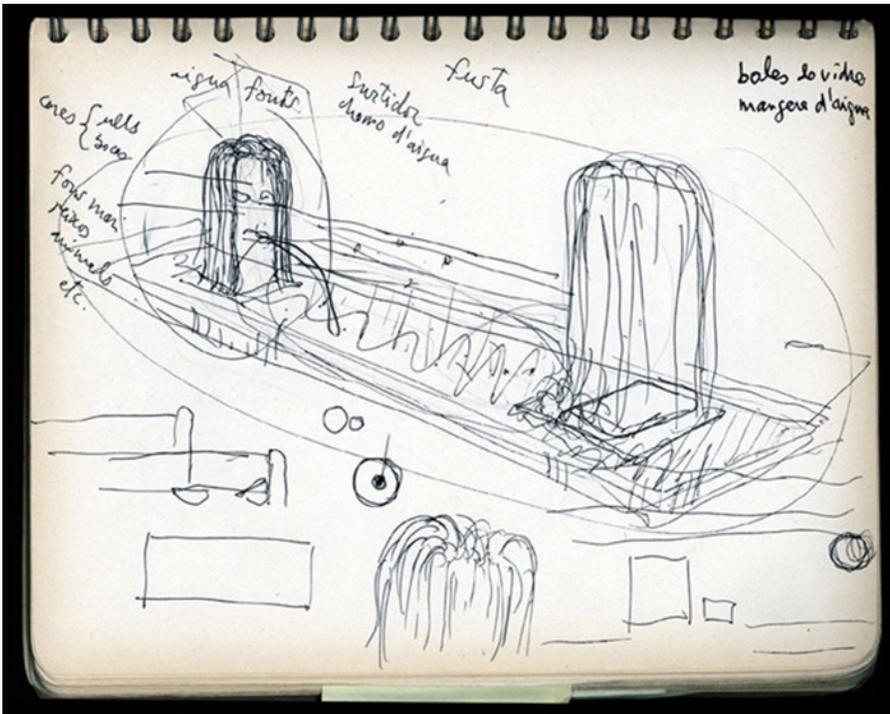


Will the Crown Fountain of the future be the spitting image of the one we know today?
PATRICK PYSZKA, COURTESY CITY OF CHICAGO

Whenever the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa is in Chicago, the first place he stops is the northeast corner of Michigan and Monroe. When he arrives there this week, it will be to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Millennium Park and his famed Crown Fountain—and

to attend the openings of a pair of exhibits of his head sculptures in the park and at Richard Gray Gallery. Over the phone from Germany, where two solo shows of his work are being held this summer, Plensa describes the urge to visit Crown Fountain as a sort of impulsive pilgrimage of reassurance. "I feel every time I have to go check to see if it's still there," he says, "to make sure that it wasn't just a dream."

Plensa's lingering insecurity a decade after the debut of a piece of public art that has since been cemented, along with Anish Kapoor's adjacent Cloud Gate, as a neo Chicago icon stems from the fact that his vision easily could've gone unrealized. At the dawn of the planning for Millennium Park, years before hordes of children began cooling themselves in the spit of the twin 50-foot towers of glass brick and LEDs, it seemed the only person who completely believed in Jaume Plensa's concept for Crown Fountain was Jaume Plensa.



Early sketchbook drawing of Crown Fountain by Jaume Plensa - COURTESY CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Almost as soon as the artist submitted his first sketches, the work became a source of uncertainty for the project's stakeholders.

"We saw a rendering of this totally audacious idea, two towers spouting water, and the question many people had was, Is this the greatest thing, or could it be tacky?" recalls Tom Jacobs, a principal at Krueck and Sexton Architects, the Chicago-based firm that accepted the Crown Fountain contract after two companies turned down the job. "This sculpture was something that had never

been done, using a combination of materials that had never been used in a climate like Chicago's. We initially said we didn't want to do it because we were very afraid that the risk was significant, and if it was going to work, Jaume would take all the credit and be the hero; if the thing was going to fail big-time and liability issues came up, they would call us."

Mayor Daley, in a rare moment of aesthetic moderation, expressed concern that the fountain's brightly lit LEDs might be too Times Square for Millennium Park. The Art

Institute's director at the time, James Wood, worried the columns were too tall. And the city's ill-tempered public art director, Michael Lash—who was fired in 2004 after a temper tantrum during which he threw a cell phone at a coworker—sent a memo listing his objections to what he called "an exercise in pomposity." "This proposal obviously seeks to compete in scale and importance with other elements of the park, namely the Colonnade on the northwest corner and the Anish Kapoor sculpture, conceived as the central artwork of Millennium Park," Lash wrote. "Public sculpture is not a forum for a pissing contest."

Even Lester Crown, the patriarch of the billionaire family that shelled out \$10 million of the \$17 million cost of the fountain, balked at the final estimate for Plensa's piece after initially opting not to bog down his chosen artist with budgetary concerns. Plensa remembers the meeting "around the big table" in which Crown asked if the artist could reduce the scale of the fountain for financial reasons. "If you can reduce Chicago," the Spaniard recalls saying in his defense, "then I can reduce my piece." Crown allowed the project to continue in line with Plensa's original vision.

As Plensa returns to Chicago this time, his piece is still spouting questions. "There's a challenge that's a bit unknown about how this work will live on in the future," says Daniel Schulman, director of visual arts for the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. "It's hard to know. It's certainly an issue with technology's rapid pace of change."

Over the last several months, Crown Fountain's proprietary, difficult-to-update computer hardware and software—which control all functions, including cycling through the 1,000 faces of Chicagoans that appear on the towers—were swapped with more intuitive systems, according to Edward Uhler, executive director of Millennium Park Inc., the private nonprofit that has handled day-to-day maintenance issues with the fountain, everything from kids digging out the gummy adhesive between the towers' bricks to a burst pipe. Millennium Park is also looking into switching the lighting from LEDs to incandescent bulbs on the surfaces of Crown Fountain that don't display faces, and in "two or three years" all of the fountain's LED fixtures will need to be replaced, says Uhler, formerly Millennium Park's design director. "The challenge is trying to fit the new LEDs in the same module"—not a simple task for a project that was almost entirely a custom job.

Along with the future technological challenges of Crown Fountain come conceptual questions. Plensa maintained control of the images on the towers only for the fountain's first two years; he wants future generations to decide which images to display on the screens. "What I like about Crown Fountain is that it's of monumental scale but it's not a monument," says Jon Pounds, director of the Chicago Public Art Group. "Some of our monuments are quite literally carved in stone, but this one will require us to reflect on change—the changing qualities of our values. For instance, 50 or 100 years from now our idea of race will be different than what it is now because people are marrying across races.

In a century, the faces of Crown Fountain are going to carry our sense of race in the early 21st century, and so they will look dated as the rest of humanity unfolds. Should the images change under those circumstances? These are aesthetic questions and they're social questions simultaneously, and how we respond to them will be a blend of the sociological and the aesthetic."



Digital rendering of Jaume Plensa's Look Into My Dreams, Awilda, part of "1004 Portraits" at Millennium Park. - COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

Plensa doesn't offer thoughts for how his fountain should evolve, not even after he passes on. He's not sure whether his piece won the so-called pissing match among Millennium Park artists, or whether there ever was such a competition. The one thing Plensa says he is certain about? "That the corner of Michigan and Monroe without Crown Fountain seems impossible." The artist's conviction won't stop him from ambling over to the intersection just to be sure.