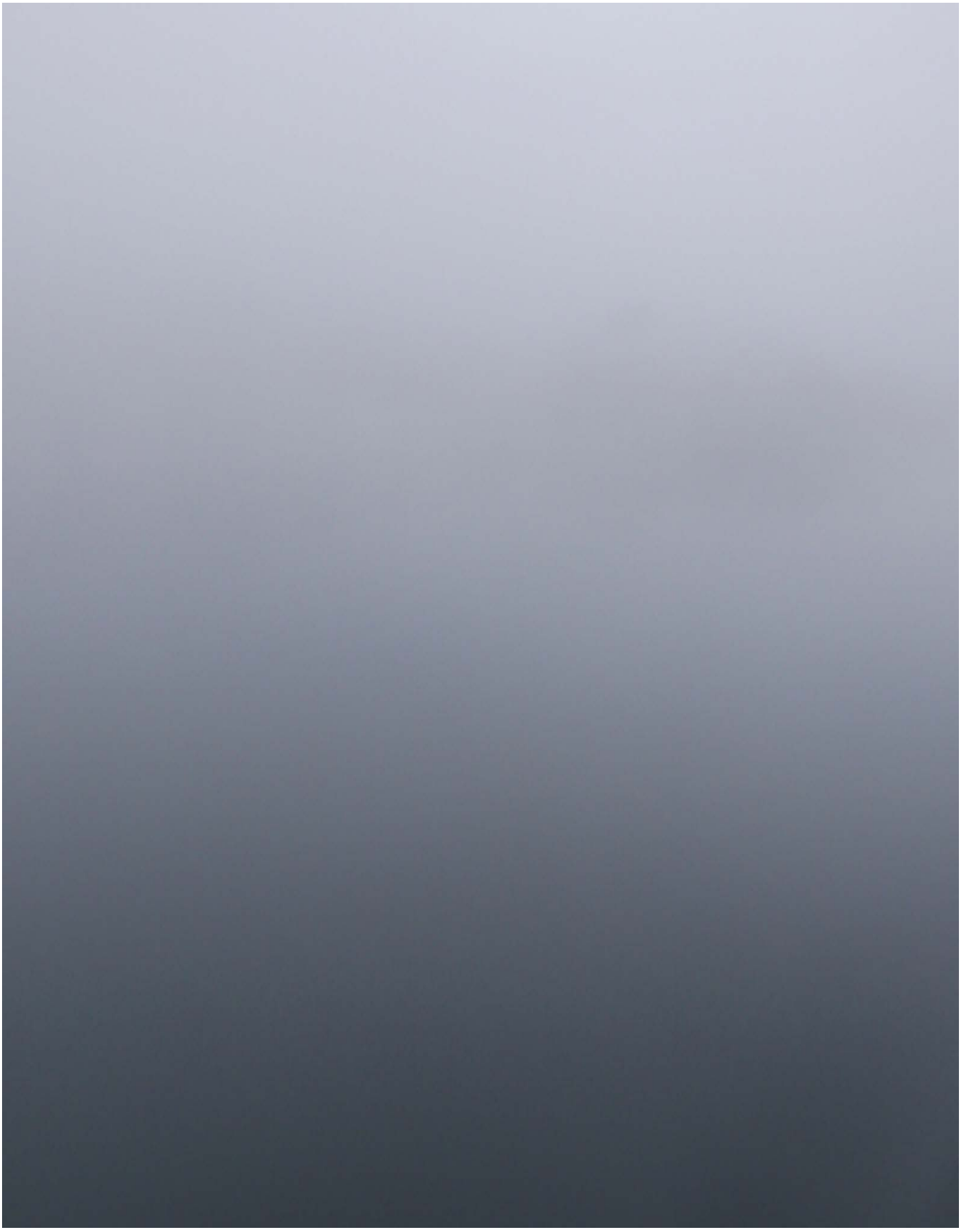

Baltic Sea (image by author, 2024).

LANDSCAPE REVIEW

Oceanscape as landscape

David Irwin

'Landscapes are part of who we are. They are natural systems on which we depend, how we live with our land, and the meaning and pleasure we take from them and our surroundings. They are part of our identity. Landscapes are important to us all.' These words open the book, *Te Tangi a te Manu: Aotearoa New Zealand Landscape Assessment Guidelines*, and I agree with them fully. But, I wonder, can we not say the same about the ocean? What follows is a personal narration of my immersion in oceanscape. The reflection forms the beginnings of my understanding of what oceanscape is and how it is organised. My approach here is not to provide a structured assessment of oceanscapes in accord with *Te Tangi a te Manu*, but instead to open up an accord between landscape and oceanscapes, and possibly new ways of seeing and feeling the vast water bodies of the moana of the Pacific – the Pacific Ocean.

David Irwin is a landscape architect and founding director of Isthmus. PO Box 90 366, Auckland 1010, New Zealand
Email: david.irwin@isthmus.co.nz

Introduction

Te Tangi a te Manu – authored by Gavin Lister, Rachael de Lambert and Alan Titchener (2022) – has recently become the go-to text for landscape assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition to being a professional practice guideline, it is a highly informed text offering a broad context within which to critique landscape. The authors outline the three overlapping dimensions that create 'a bridge between Te Ao Pākehā and Te Ao Māori interpretations of landscape'. These dimensions are: first, the physical environment; second, associative as in the meanings we attach to places; and third, perceptual as in how we experience places (figure 1).

Te Tangi a te Manu goes on to describe a bicultural, inclusive landscape concept in which these three overlapping dimensions have an overlay that integrates mātauranga (knowledge). This mātauranga comprises: whakapapa – the genealogy and layers of landscape and people (reflecting an overlap between biophysical and associative dimensions); hikoi – walking and talking with landscape and people, experiencing and perceiving the land in all its entirety; and kōrero tuku iho – ancestral knowledge passed down through generations interconnected through time, place and people, or pūrākau (ibid, p 73).

Te Tangi a te Manu prompts us to think again about the dimensions of landscape that we know but might take for granted or forget. Reflecting on the conceptualisation of *Te Tangi a te Manu*, I believe that the description of landscape it outlines allows us to consider the ocean as landscape. Ocean can be described more precisely as the overlapping intersection of the physical, perceptual and associated meanings of this world. The ocean is a natural system, it directly affects how we live with our land, and we gain meaning and pleasure from it and its surroundings. No one could deny it has perceptual and associative meanings. Every culture holds stories of the sea. Seafaring folk are a superstitious lot. And then, of course, there are the gods and atua of the sea – for example, Neptune and Tangaroa.

KEY WORDS
oceanscape; landscape assessment

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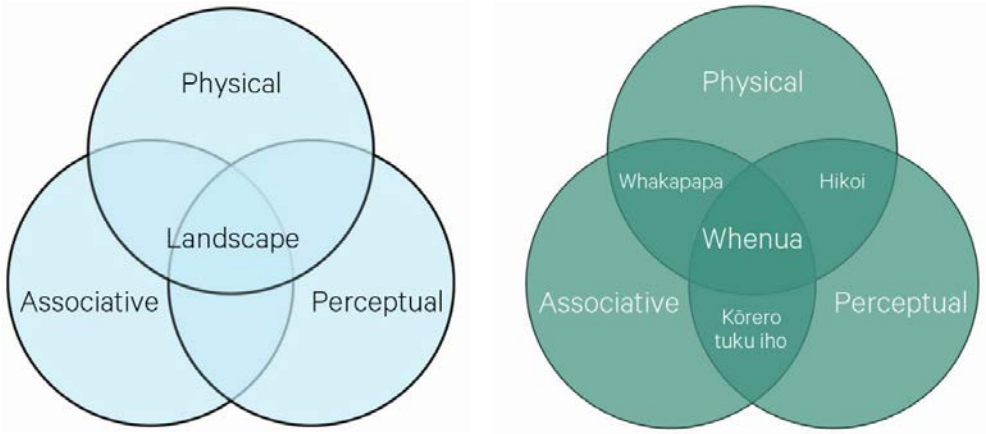


Figure 1. Diagrams of three overlapping dimensions of landscape from *Te Tangi a te Manu* (Lister et al, 2022, p 72)

I have come to understand that oceans are in fact landscapes, even when out of sight of land. We can consider oceans as an expanded type of landscape – as oceanscape. However, the ocean is often at the edges of statutory considerations and even of international environmental laws. Unlike land, its boundaries are fluid and hard to mark and control. The political lines drawn by conventions are invisible and conceived, on the whole, virtually without substantive place markers.

What follows are reflections on my immersion in oceanscape. This reflection forms the beginnings of my understanding of what oceanscape is and how it is organised. My approach here is personal, and not intended to be a structured assessment of oceanscapes in accord with *Te Tangi a te Manu*. I offer my account through thoughts, notes and photographs collected en route as I journeyed through the ever-changing liquid landscape. It is interesting to note that, while doing this, I remained responsible for the safety of the vessel at sea and all the people on board. I thank them for indulging me as I discussed with them many of these thoughts while we shared our time together on the 'high seas'.

Figure 2. Chasing the Southern Cross across the equator (image by author).

Notes from the crossing

'Southern Cross' is a song by Crosby, Stills and Nash from the early 1980s. I loved it then as I do today. Recently I chased the constellation of the Southern Cross across the southern sky aboard a boat '80 feet at the water line' (namely, the length of the boat where it touches the water), en route from San Diego to Papeete via the Marquesas – just as the first verse of the song describes. The second verse starts:

> When you see the Southern Cross for the first time
>
> You understand now why you came this way
>
> 'Cause the truth you might be running from is so small
>
> But it's as big as the promise
>
> The promise of a coming day

While under the light of the moon, on a night when you could whisper and still be heard, the three of us on board sang along to the stereo at the top of our lungs. I had spent my off-watch time studying the horizon, and making odd notes, drawings and photographs in trying to come to grips with our voyage, the journey and purpose, the scale of things All the while, I couldn't help but think of those who had journeyed this way before.

Travelling the moana of the Pacific – the Pacific Ocean – is not new to me. I consider many of the more abstract thoughts presented here are part of my day job as a landscape architect of more than 35 years. In the last 12 months, I have clocked more than 5,000 nautical miles or 9,000 kilometres on the Pacific Ocean. I have thought about this landscape, the oceanscape, before. A landscape where there are no apparent boundaries. Where the edge is being constantly renegotiated.

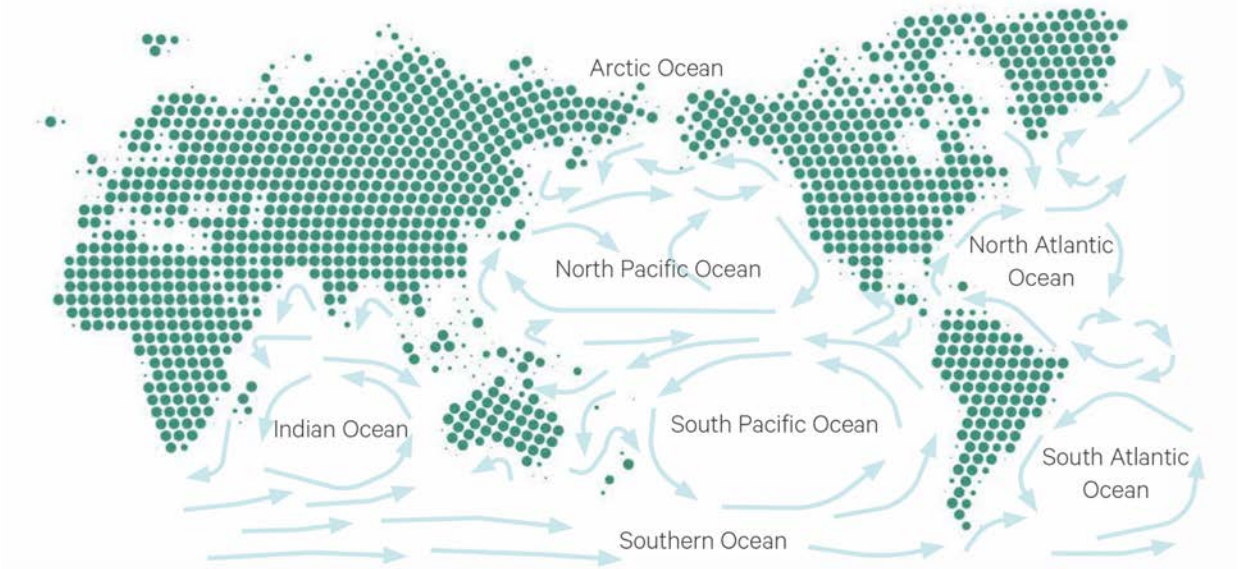


Figure 3. The oceans of the world (image by author).

It is a landscape where scale is hard to comprehend as it breaks with convention. Where the surface is fluid and the form infinitely variable all the time. Where everything is the same but different all the time. Where, as a human travelling through it, day, night and time in general get renegotiated. Where there are no lines, no visible pathways, tracks or footprints. The marks you do leave are washed away before your eyes. It is a place where I have learnt to accept that I am alien. The forces at play are substantial beyond my comprehension. When we spend time here, we do so at the discretion of the weather and the sea gods. This is why we did not waste the rum toasting Neptune while crossing the equator. We invested in his good fortune so he would treat us well as we moved across his domain, not ours.

I speak to my experiences in this landscape while I acknowledge all of those who travelled these routes before me. I feel closer to their histories. Time in this landscape is distorted. You can imagine a waka hourua sailing on a great migration. Those voyagers may be just over the horizon in front of you. At the same time, looking behind, you can feel a little concerned that a US warship could take you out for target practice.

One text I read that became an important part of my personal history as a landscape architect is *Land Alone Endures* by L F Molloy (1980). The content of the paper is as far from the sea as one might get, given it covers the plight of poor-quality soils in the high country of the South Island. The soils there are as dry as the book is. But it is the title that captured me. It implies an everlasting landscape. Not a whenua alive with a life force or a combination of ecologies abundant in a multitude of ways. It implies some stoic place fighting the physics of nature. Whereas I suggest the landscape that endures is in fact the sea. Water cuts through stone. It exists in all its forms, all of the time. It can easily shape-shift and invade all earthly things. All the while, it eats at the coast – at times with hunger, at others just nibbling.

Oceans cover more than 70 per cent of the world's surface. The Pacific Ocean accounts for nearly half of that share. It covers 32 per cent of the surface of the planet, holds 60 times more carbon than the atmosphere and absorbs 30 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions from human activities. It holds more life and sequests more carbon than all of the world's forests combined. It is our life force.

Air rises from the sea as it heats near the equator to form the clouds that rise even further. Where those clouds meet land, their rain sustains life, including our own The water runs over the land to form the rivers and the valleys. If water was added to a game of 'paper, scissors, rock, lizard, Spock', in which every form can defeat at least one other, it would beat even the mighty Spock.

Our world spins at 1,600 kilometres an hour while hurtling through space at 107,000 kph. As it does so, the oceans respond – they too move. This, along with the gravitational pull of the moon, creates a complex inter-relationship of weather and tides and with it the dynamic of the ocean. With the sun's heating and night's cooling added to the mix, the effects of land masses, the polar ice caps and even the Coriolis effect result from Earth spinning. The movement affects not only the direction in which water flows down the plughole of the galley sink as we crossed the equator, but also the direction of the weather as it circles the Pacific Ocean – anti-clockwise in the southern hemisphere and clockwise in the north. The result is the complex inter-related systems that we call weather. The scientists have modelled all of this, but as my weather guru explains on his website, weather is a mix of pattern and chaos. The best way we can understand this as designers is through our patterned biased minds.

The weather is, in part, ocean. It shapes our terrestrial landscapes, over millions of years. While these processes are described as dynamic, on land they are in reality often glacially slow. The weather makes our oceanscapes as well. Again the processes are dynamic although in this case the change occurs not by millennia but constantly: an ocean-going vessel logs the oceanscape hourly. The logbook is a formal written record that includes a description of the oceanscape at the time.

While for the fish, marine mammals and ocean-going birds, the ocean is their home, those of us travelling through are not adapted to living in this environment. To remain safe, at times we tether ourselves to the bunk and the boat. Figure 4 presents a simple movement study that I completed each day while sailing from Fiji to Auckland in September 2023. Standing unaided in the companionway of the yacht, I held a pen on a small page for a minute. The lines are the result of the movement between my body and the boat. Note the still dot on the last day, recorded while waiting on board for quarantine inspection, having made landfall at Westhaven marina.

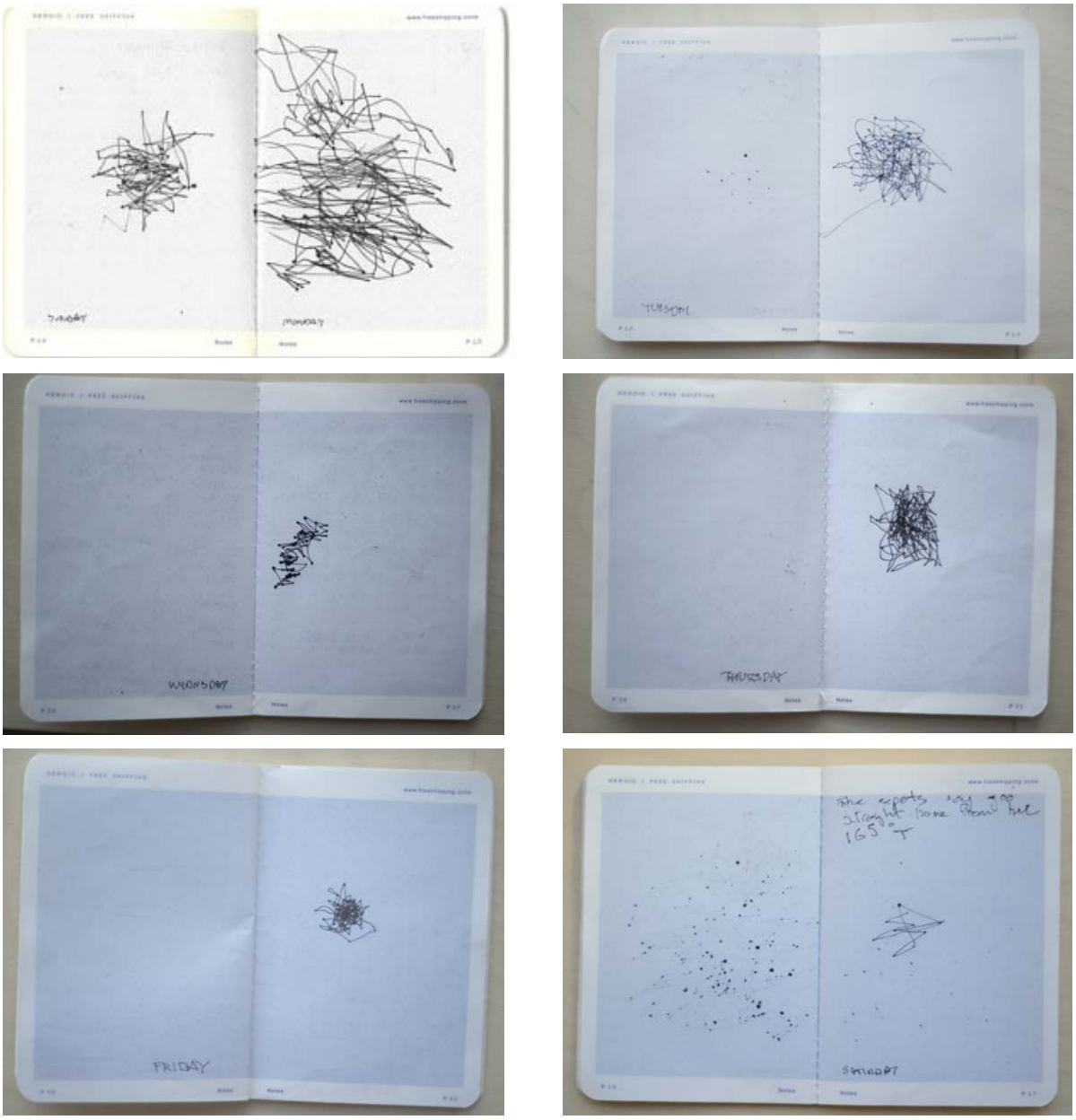


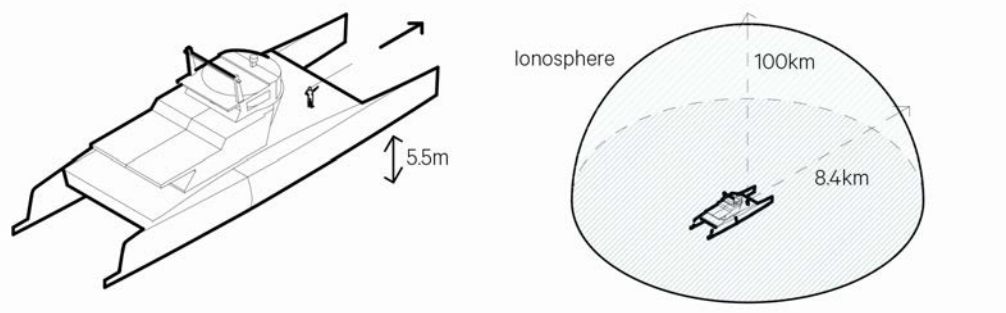
Figure 4. Above is a sample of movement studies conducted daily on my journey from Fiji to New Zealand (images by author).

The invisible force of the wind shapes not only the landscape of waves but also the movement of the entire ocean. The whole oceanscape is moving, with its invisible currents constantly in motion. The oceanscape is one of relativities. Driven by current and tide, the ocean is moving up and down with swell, wind and waves always shifting.

We humans create constants to allow us to understand this constantly moving place. We draw lines. We break up the ocean onto a distorted imaginary grid that extends from the top to the bottom of the world. We then orientate ourselves based on the compass (which in turn is based on a magnetic mass that is not even at the ends of Earth). We measure the angle of the sun to the horizon to understand our distance from the equator and we fix our horizontal position with some complex maths and accurate time. The point of all these efforts is to understand where we are in a place with no visual references. Today we also have GPS, bouncing radio waves off satellites in space. Knowing where we are helps us feel secure in the seemingly endless place of the ocean.

Travelling through the oceanscape, scale becomes difficult to comprehend without a reference to help us. Scale is relative. Oceanscape removes almost all ways of gauging

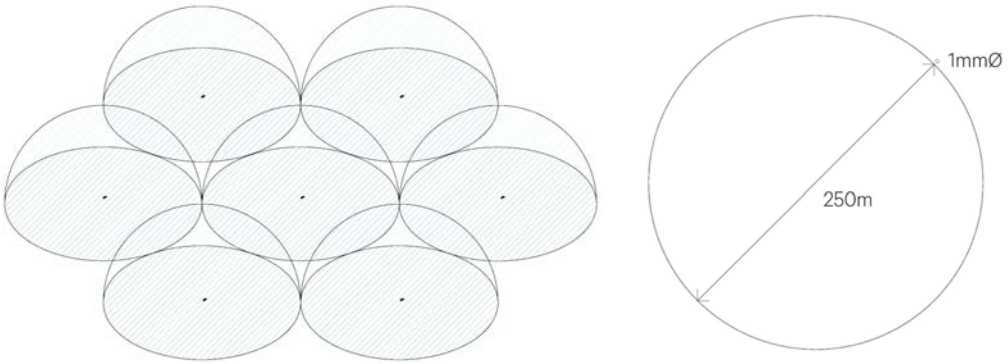
relativity. Unlike the desert, it features no mountains on the other side. No headland, no trees, rarely even other boats. Even the distance to the horizon, which is so much closer than you think, depends on the weather. On a crystal-clear day, the horizon could be only 4.4 nautical miles away (at eye height, 2 metres above sea level). In a fog it could be less than 100 metres. When we are standing in the middle of a hemisphere of nothing, even the sky has a visual limit.



(a) **(b)**

Figure 5. **(a)** On a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, an observer on the deck can see all the way to the ionosphere – Earth's upper atmosphere. The distance to the visible horizon is only a fraction of this distance due to the curvature of Earth. This unit of measurement is known as a 'nautical horizon'. **(b)** Measured from 5.5 metres above sea level, a human standing on deck can see approximately 8.4 kilometres to the nautical horizon (an area of approximately 222 square metres).

The oceanscape can be a considered as a field of imaginary, invisible hemispheres covering the surface. Or perhaps it could be just your own personal hemisphere in the middle of a vast landscape of ocean. To get a feeling for the sheer size of an oceanscape, consider the example of my journey San Diego to the Marquesas. Finding the island Nuku Hiva from San Diego is like trying to find a 1-millimetre dot on the edge of a piece of paper that is 250 metres in diameter.



(a) **(b)**

Figure 6. **(a)** In area, the Pacific Ocean is approximately 163,000,000 square kilometres; therefore it fits 603,703 circular horizons. **(b)** Diagram of locating a 1-millimetre dot on a circle of paper 250 metres in diameter.

On a clear day in 2020, as I rode my bike on Ninety Mile Beach at the start of a journey down the length of Aotearoa New Zealand, for a short time I could see neither where I had come from nor where I was going to – the beach disappeared into nothing at either end. The sea remained on my right and the sand dunes on my left. This is the only time except in fog that I have felt this sense of unfathomable scale on the terrestrial landscape. Within an oceanscape, this is the normality.

Figure 7. Horizon studies 02 (images by the author 2024).

At night, this unfathomable condition is exaggerated. With no moon, there is no light and no horizon. Then you are truly alone in an invisible, moving landscape, moving with your vessel through the night, relying on instruments and a keen eye for danger. It is similar, I would think, to flying a spaceship through space. An invisible landscape with no boundaries.

Oceanscape is a landscape of exposure. There is nowhere to shelter, nowhere to hide. Unlike a terrestrial landscape, where you can usually seek shelter from the wind and the rain, oceanscape has no respite. Your vessel is your home; you are a temporary visitor constantly in motion.

For thousands of years, we have created ways of travelling through the oceanscapes of this world. We have built boats specific to this challenge and created systems and language that try to make sense of the scale of the ocean. Today we have technological tools to help us navigate the oceans, which make us safer than we ever were before. And yet the oceans maintain a mystique. Their complexity and the impact of human endeavours on them mean the oceans are seriously in need of care.

To help protect the high seas, we need to understand and value *oceanscape* as we do landscape. If we consider their physical, associative and perceptual dimensions, we might more deeply engage with our oceans.

About the author

David Irwin is a founding Director of Isthmus and Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA) with over 30 years' experience in the field of landscape architecture and urban design. His experience encompasses a wide range of projects throughout New Zealand, including large-scale urban developments, town centres, coastal edges and residential framework planning. David specialises in providing design leadership in complex project teams. His work has received numerous NZILA awards for its quality, innovation and contribution to place-making for communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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