

Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea: Book Review

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Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea, Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone (eds), Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2015; ISBN 9781472424334.

Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone's *Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea* draws from an eclectic collection of ocean experiences, threaded together by the guiding principle that lived experiences with the sea shape who we are – they are 'transformative of who we are and how we think' (p xiii). As the authors correctly point out, the sea has been largely ignored in our terrestrial-centric world. With this overwhelmingly untapped academic field in front of them, they have placed 'the understanding of human relationships with the sea through experience' foremost in the list of things that must be understood, before we can successfully 'utilize and allocate resources, regulate its management, determine territorial authority and work to preserve or deplete non-human life' (Steinberg, 2013, cited p 6).

The book is written by scholars from a variety of fields – including human geography, sociology and education – whose brief was to write about their 'experiences of the sea and how they have contributed to [their] way of being in the world and how this might connect to broader issues in society' (p 2). While exploring the boundaries of this brief, the authors draw on frameworks for understanding, including work by Bourdieu, Deleuze, Foucault, Bateson and Thrift. To highlight the diverse perspectives of the sea, co-editor Mike Brown opens the book with a summary of the changing representations of the sea over time, beginning with Judeo-Christian narratives portraying the sea as a dangerous, chaotic and fearsome force, followed by the capitalist construct of the sea-space as a non-territorial domain or 'the sea as blank public space' (further reinforced by the cartographic traditions of representing the oceans as uniform, blue shapes between territories of jurisdiction), through to the sea as an exemplar of the sublime in the Romantic period, the 'wilderness that stood in contrast to the domesticated and despoiled landscape' (p 17). Just as the picturesque aesthetic has endured in the interpretation of landscape over the past 200-plus years, seascape is typically considered in a picturesque framework, and like landscape's continual defining and revealing of meaning, these narratives highlight the rich and layered interpretations and understandings yet to be explored in seascape.

Each chapter explores a personal experience with the sea through auto-ethnographic narratives in which the authors reflect on culture, identity and the human and more-than-human relationships with the sea. Although not taken into

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the design realm, these narratives enable designers and researchers in landscape architecture to explore beyond the physical or visual aspects of seascape – the watery complement of landscape. The narratives incorporate embodied or lived experiences as inspiration for, and understanding of, our experiences with the sea. Co-editor Barbara Humberstone expands on the value of embodied narratives, offering a greater appreciation of sensuous and embodied knowledge from scholars who are intimately engaged with the sea. These offer a personal and powerful way of knowing so that we may empathise with another person's experience, feelings and thoughts without having had the same experience ourselves.

Most of these experiences are focused physically on the coastline, the edge where land and sea interact. It is this threshold, or liminal space, that resonates with and provides opportunity for the landscape architect; the authors' trails of cultural association, personal attachment, physical and perceptual encounters, and their derived meanings offer inspiration and an understanding of the qualities of this space, described by Brian Wattchow in his chapter as 'physical and metaphorical, sensual and spiritual' qualities (p 125). While written for a multidisciplinary audience, the book offers the landscape architect who is researching or designing in these spaces a direction from which to navigate this ever-changing edge. The insights gathered from each author's experiences certainly fall within the brief of many a landscape architect. Wattchow considers the meaning of the coastal edge and the sea in deriving and enforcing national and personal identity, Barbour's narratives of ocean-crossings offer tangible images and feelings of departure and arrival, while Zink approaches the sea as a landscape of limits, or risks, and testing those limits to give different perspectives and truths. These are all essential drivers or elements of design at the land–water interface.

A thread tracing through the text, and highlighted by chapter authors Jon Anderson (p 58) and Peter Reason (p 107), is that an embodied human experience of the sea is often mediated through technology. As many authors illustrate from their own lives, we use boats, surfboards, bodyboards, kayaks and wetsuits between us and the sea to gain these experiences. It could also be argued that we need good landscape architecture as a vehicle to experiencing the sea, whether through the planning and management of the land–sea edge, or through the design of mediating technologies, such as wharf, slipway, seawall or waterfront plaza. As designers of public spaces, we work to understand a place; the experiences of it or offered by it, in turn, through a design intervention, offer the public a physical experience to highlight or heighten this experience. We create a landscape (or seascape) narrative or analogy where it is not possible to directly experience it for oneself. We may see the value of creating a greater empathy towards a place, person, thing or experience in the methods of design firm IDEO, which aims to increase the 'spectrum of stakeholders' to inspire innovative and responsive design solutions (Battarbee et al, p 5). While by their nature auto-ethnographic accounts are deeply personal, applying this thinking of increasing empathy to the effect of design in the public realm can be rich and meaningful, where the experience can reach more people and the effect may influence and endure.

Here, in New Zealand, where no one is more than 130 kilometres from the coast and the land–sea interface is often experienced in the public realm, we are led to question how these liminal spaces are traversed, occupied, looked from or

looked at, while also examining how these interventions affect and are affected by human and non-human agents. The book reminds us that embodied experience is both a means and an end result of understanding what constitutes seascape.

REFERENCES

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