

Sussex Research

Designing the seaside: architecture, society and nature

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Chapter One

Introduction

The invention of the Western seaside as a site of leisure and pleasure almost three centuries ago went hand-in-hand with the development of a novel urban form – the seaside resort – and the emergence of a new pleasure architecture beside the sea. Architecture, in varied innovative forms, became an essential ingredient fashioning the seaside. As an artificial confection designed to entice people seeking leisure and pleasure – and usually intended to generate income and a profit – architecture became the glue of individual resorts and a defining characteristic distinguishing one seaside place from another.

The most influential seaside architecture makes the most of being ‘on the front’ and beside the seaside. Its form and function, and how it is used, helps expose the fascinating relationships between society and nature found in places literally on the edge. Western seaside resorts are multi-layered places, redolent with meaning for the present and memory of the past. Whether the most fashionable and exotic sunny southern playground of the rich or a run-down and forgotten colder northern coastal pleasure town, resort architecture has become bound up with the seaside’s intense sense of place and being.

The architecture of the seaside, too, has been caught up in the drift of holiday-makers swept along in the surging tides of social, economic and technological change and the ebb and flow of fashion, taste and evolving personal and social relationships. Seaside architecture has helped create, structure and define holidays by the sea and the consumption and very meaning of the seaside.

At some time in their lives most people in Western societies have, in search of leisure and pleasure, holidayed in resorts by the sea. These experiences, together with a multitude of seaside images from postcards to films, and from novels to advertisements, leave people with

complex memories and feelings about the seaside. Cut through and sequenced by time and place, these might include sun burnt childhood holidays on a beach littered, depending on the place, with deckchairs and windbreaks or sun loungers and parasols, teenagers having fun in the sea or open-air lido, fumbled first sexual encounters under a pier, a family stroll along a promenade or boardwalk or through a cliff-top park, visits to seaside entertainment complexes from funfairs to casinos, or old people sitting in a seafront shelter watching the world go by. These examples, of course, are deliberately chosen to make the point that the resort experience is frequently framed and conditioned by seaside architecture: the buildings and built form, the open spaces and design detail, that go to make up resorts. But less intentionally, although not unexpectedly, the nature of the seaside – the sea itself, the marginal edge that is the beach, the weather – also emerges as a key part of the spending time by the sea.

This book is about the architecture of the Western seaside resort, how it has been created and changed over time, used by holidaymakers, and represented in writing and pictures. A central argument is that a distinctive architecture helps define the seaside resort as an arena of leisure and is a significant element in the consumption of the seaside and the seaside holiday.

Seaside architecture is broadly and liberally defined to include not only obvious buildings such as piers and pavilions but also the minutiae of beach huts and promenade railings and shelters to the larger scale of holiday camps, seaside parks and open spaces and complete resorts designed as a single entity. That said, at times it is impossible to separate out particular types or forms of seaside architecture since in most resorts different architectural strands merge into each other. For example, piers might carry funfairs or bathing stations or even swimming pools; beaches are the launch pad for getting into the sea; holiday camps are usually self-contained resorts, complete in themselves, with funfairs, pools and entertainment complexes.

The timescale covered in the book stretches over almost three centuries, from the appearance of the first embryonic resorts round the shores of England in the early decades of the eighteenth century to the present day, although the emphasis is on the last two centuries and the emergence of radical new forms of architecture by the sea that continue to help define the

seaside today. Even though the geographical focus is on what is now the modern and developed Western world, at times the argument also draws on motifs and images from other 'exotic' and less developed places that have frequently been used as elements in designing the Western seaside.

Uniting the themes of building and making, using and representing seaside architecture are the notions of seaside architecture as a cultural artifact, evolving over time and space through a process of cultural design. Seaside architecture is a principal artifact of the Western coastal resort and seaside holiday and, borrowing David Cannadine's phrase, it is an artifact that has been 'culturally created and imaginatively constructed'.¹ The architecture of the seaside is the product of a complex and layered cultural design process – the manner in which a series of meanings attached to resorts and their buildings and the seaside more generally are produced and reproduced, perhaps in a drastically altered form, and have a formative and determining influence both on how people use the seaside and what they understand and envisage by it. The cultural meanings attached to architecture, the seaside and seaside resorts have evolved over time and vary over space. In particular, changing attitudes to nature and to other (often 'foreign') places, questions of taste and fashion, and divides around class, gender and other social distinctions are all important elements in explaining the production and changing use of seaside architecture.

Most immediate and obvious, cultural design is the realization in built form of architectural, artistic and engineering possibilities and visions. In this physical design process a group of key actors – the builders - creates and manipulates resort architecture and the associated built environment. The builders include professional architects and designers and engineers, surveyors and constructors, but also extend to the individual, communal, government and corporate owners, developers and authorities making a direct contribution to building and re-building seaside resorts. Apart from making a physical artifact, the builders of seaside architecture also envisage and promulgate a particular view of their work and its purpose and future use. Both buildings and visions are located in the culture and society of the times and

places where builders are at work and will respect and respond to broader societal processes and the available technologies.

The book, however, is not simply about the design and construction of the seaside's built form. A second layer of cultural design involves the representation of the seaside and its architecture, most obviously in visual images and written texts. Such representations range through marketing and promotional materials such as guidebooks and publicity posters, visual media from postcards and photographs to paintings, fictional accounts in novels and film, official reports, 'expert' comment – say from architectural critics and historians – and media reports and stories. These varied cultural representations and imaginings may be hugely influential in determining how seaside architecture, specific resorts and the seaside more generally is viewed and used, sometimes running counter to the intentions and wishes of, say, architects or developers.

The flowing together of representations of seaside architecture, coastal resorts and the seaside holiday helps explain how resort architecture may assume an iconic cultural status. It may be used to define specific resorts, as with Blackpool's Tower, Brighton's Royal Pavilion, the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, the Queen Mary in Long Beach, and Santa Monica's pier. Particular forms of architecture may capture the nature and condition of the seaside resort and seaside holiday and even culture and society in a more general way. The Edwardian pier and the 1950s holiday camp are representative (albeit partial) symbols of how the British middle classes and working classes, respectively, consumed the seaside during particular eras. Similarly, the Riviera hotel and villa and the Hamptons beach house are rich with resonance about holidays, class and elitist culture in European and North American societies. Over many decades varied images of the beach, revealing a changing use and architecture, encapsulate much about the West's fascination with the seaside.

But a third cultural design process is also at work. As the phrase *holiday-makers* implies, people taking holidays are not passive recipients of what they consume but instead make a direct contribution to designing the seaside, both in their practices while on holiday and in helping

determine popular images and responses to the seaside resort and its architecture.

Holidaymakers and other people living and working in resorts have a key role in the cultural design of the seaside and its architecture, making and creating it as much if not more so than the original builders.² At the seaside holidaymakers most obviously compose designs of their own, albeit informal and transitory, in choosing how to use the beach, including, for instance, where to sit or lie, what to do and what beach furniture, from wind breaks to sun loungers, to bring with them. *Designing the Seaside* also provides some insights into how holidaymakers, the major consumers of the seaside, have left their marks, helping both to mold the seaside and perceptions of its architecture.

A difficulty here is that the voices of holidaymakers are often silent, drowned out by the declarations of the builders or by what those dominating in the making of cultural representations have to say. The holidaymakers' voice rather than being heard clearly and directly may come across as a confusing Chinese whisper. The deficiency, however, is being remedied through oral history research exploring what people did and thought on holiday and their responses to seaside buildings and places.³ Holidaymakers are also active participants in the production of other cultural artifacts recording the seaside and their sense of it. So, for example, twentieth century holidaymakers actively engaged in representing their seashores through the choice of postcards (typically dominated by visual images of the resorts and their architecture) to send to relatives and friends and their messages written on the reverse side. Similarly, the invention of the cheap camera allowed holidaymakers to make visual statements about their seaside experiences they considered to be worth keeping for the future. Memories of a late loved one and their favourite seaside view could also be captured on the plaques on seaside benches and seats, recording for posterity, or at least the life of the bench, a family name and words of remembrance.

Explorations need to begin somewhere and by way of method and illustration this book moves out from Brighton and other English south coast resorts I know best, to seaside towns elsewhere in Britain and other parts of Europe and so to resorts in other Western countries. The Brighton emphasis, when it occurs, is not just a matter of convenient knowledge. At times it

allows drilling deeper into the life history of a specific piece of architecture, as with the resort's West Pier. Brighton is also a useful keystone because it has been the home of much innovative seaside architecture with a formative influence on styles and buildings in other resorts. As to the English emphasis, sea-bathing and the seaside resort were both English inventions,⁴ associated with an array of ways of using and building for the seaside that spread to other Western countries. But apart from looking at how seaside places elsewhere have copied and taken from the English experience, the book also traces how other places, societies and ideas have influenced English resort architecture. Despite these justifications I am aware that a better understanding of other seaside places, particularly those in the non-English speaking Western world, would have enhanced the arguments made in the book.

The intention is to provide illustrative accounts of the cultural design of the most significant seaside architectural forms. The approach is therefore selective and fragmentary: this is neither a compendium of seaside architecture nor complete cultural geography or history and some readers will be disappointed that their own favourite places and buildings, or those they consider especially important, are ignored. The use of material and case studies also varies: sometimes the emphasis is on the story of a particular iconic structure, elsewhere on many examples of a particular type of seaside architecture; sometimes the stress is on a written history, on other occasions visual representations come to the fore.

Ideas and material for the book have come from a range of sources. As an academic I have of course mined the professional literature. This has proved both empowering and infuriating. Empowering because it includes, for example, some brilliant studies of particular forms of seaside architecture such as holiday camps⁵ and the seaside bungalow,⁶ wonderful accounts of the early development of the seaside as a place of leisure,⁷ some excellent social and cultural histories of coastal resorts and holidays by the sea,⁸ and some fruitful case studies from varied localities.⁹ Infuriating, however, because much other academic engagement with seaside architecture is at a tangent. Where architecture is treated explicitly it is often viewed as a product of other more significant processes or as illustrations of some historical, conceptual or theoretical

point. The danger is that seaside architecture becomes a cipher, with its geography and history, meaning and purpose, being abstracted and misinterpreted.

Seaside architecture rarely features as a significant object of academic study. Although there are accounts of individual iconic buildings and their architects, and particular architectural styles or periods, there has been little attempt to treat seaside architecture as a whole. The difficulty of definition and drawing of boundaries and the broad-ranging eclecticism of style and diversity of architectural form and purpose is part of the problem. Another issue is that in studying seaside architecture the empirical evidence is often fragmentary and disparate.

Although increasingly rectified in the cultural studies literature, large areas of the academy remain suspicious about studying popular culture, and this includes popular architecture by the sea. King's accusation made in the mid-1990s about the 'middle-class intellectual marginalisation'¹⁰ of the bungalow (in its Western form a building first developed for the English seaside) may equally be applied to other classic forms of seaside architecture from piers to beach huts. Seaside architecture is principally an architecture of leisure, and as Lowerson says of the study of leisure history, 'generally, the topic is seen as not quite serious'¹¹ by the academy. Walton also bemoans 'the continuing marginal status in the eyes of the historical establishment'¹² of British tourism history. Such arguments also relate to John Urry's account of how the cultural practices of the 'service class' – groups dominating in formation of opinions and cultural representations - have increasingly rendered English seaside resorts and their attractions and entertainments as 'relatively tasteless and unfashionable'.¹³ It is a small step to apply this thesis to academics as a group within the service class to account for the lack of academic study, although the problem then is to explain why a few academics deviate from the dominant class practice, to engage in the tasteless and unfashionable study of (English) seaside resorts and their architecture. There is a perverse pleasure to be gained from studying what others have decried as unfashionable, and a sense that lack of popularity does not mean unimportant. The quandary is also partly resolved because, as in this book, academics can free themselves from the constraints of seaside Britain to look at coastal places and buildings on other shores

Even so, the relative academic neglect of the seaside and its architecture remains surprising given the flow – at times an engulfing stream – of popular literature in Britain and abroad ranging through local histories of particular resorts¹⁴ or resort regions¹⁵ and accounts of specific iconic buildings¹⁶ through to studies of particular types of seaside building (including piers and pavilions),¹⁷ general social histories of seaside holidays¹⁸ and cultural histories on contextual topics, often with an international focus, including of the beach,¹⁹ swimming pools²⁰ and swimming²¹. This material has informed the writing of the book.

In addition, over the last decade I have gathered together a host of textual and visual representations of the seaside, ranging through postcards, posters and advertisements to fictional accounts, newspaper articles and official reports. Film and television, radio and music have also played a part in this research process. Last but not least, material has come from visits to various seaside places and buildings.

Chapter two provides a context for arguments developed later in the book. It examines how perceptions of nature at the seaside have evolved over time, played a dominant role in determining holidays and vacations by the sea, and in turn influenced the production and use of seaside architecture. The focus of chapter three is the role of the builders creating and manipulating the built environment of resorts set against broader processes – from shifting technologies to changing class structures - that help determine the shape of seaside architecture. Chapter four turns to cultural representations of the seaside and its architecture. In examining visual and textual representations ranging through postcards and guidebooks to novels and film, positive promotional place images in media such as guidebooks are set against alternative and contradictory images and portrayals.

The role of architecture and design in helping turn the seaside from the ordinary into other exotic or extraordinary places is the theme of chapter five. Using Brighton's Royal Pavilion as a starting point, it examines the use of 'Oriental' architecture to transform the seaside and the palm tree as a design motif and emblem of other locations and environments. Chapter six turns to the design and architecture of the seaside open spaces including the beach and seafront, including

promenades and boardwalks, and seaside parks and gardens. It explores how the use of the beach has evolved, and contrasts grand designs for the making of the front and seaside parks with the minutiae of seafront shelters and railings, floral beds and bandstands. Developing the theme of how changing perceptions of both nature and society at the seaside have interplayed with architecture, chapter seven turns to other beach buildings – structures often ignored or denigrated by architectural commentators, despite their immense popular significance - particularly those providing access to the sea itself. It includes a case study of the bathing machine, a unique piece of eighteenth century vernacular architecture for the consumption of seawater, its subsequent history and its demise two centuries later, and a discussion of twentieth century beach buildings including bathing pavilions and the beach hut, an iconic structure resonating with the meaning of the contemporary seaside.

Attention is then turned, in chapter eight, to another watery form of architecture, that of artificial structures for bathing and swimming at the seaside, including early indoor pools for seawater treatments through the modernist open-air lidos of between-the-wars to the 'inside seaside' and subtropical leisure pools of the present day. The unique and distinctive architecture and engineering of the seaside pier, and the transformation of mid-nineteenth century promenade piers into pleasure piers and, more recently funfair and heritage piers, is discussed in chapter nine which includes the story of Brighton's iconic West Pier. Chapter ten examines the architecture of seaside entertainment buildings, both exploring another out-of-this-world form of seaside architecture, the amusement park and 'people's palaces' of indoor entertainment. The final chapter considers a diversity of architecture for sleeping by the sea and makes a number of contrasts including grand hotels with boarding houses, and holiday camps and other planned and complete resorts and with self-build seaside holiday homes eschewing the professional architect and designer.

Chapter One Introduction

¹ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London, 2001), p. 3.

² The point is made by a number of commentators including Ken Worpole, *Here Come the Sun: Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture* (London, 2000), p. 11.

³ Miriam Akhtar and Steve Humphries, *Some Liked It Hot: The British on Holiday at Home and Abroad* (London, 2000).

⁴ John K. Walton, 'The seaside resorts of Western Europe. 1750-1939', in *Recreation and the Sea*, ed. Stephen Fisher (Exeter, 1997), pp. 36-56.

⁵ Colin Ward and Dennis Hardy, *Goodnight Campers! The History of the British Holiday Camp* (London, 1986).

⁶ Anthony D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (New York, 1995 edition).

⁷ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁸ John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914* (Leicester, 1983) and John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth century* (Manchester, 2000).

⁹ See, for example, the seaside-focused contributions to Susan C. Anderson and Bruce H. Tabb, eds, *Water, Leisure and Culture. European Historical Perspectives* (Oxford, 2002).

¹⁰ King, *The Bungalow*, p. xiv.

¹¹ John Lowerson, 'Review Article: Starting from your own Past? The serious Business of Leisure History', *Journal of Contemporary History*, xxxvi/3, pp. 517-29, pp. 517-8.

¹² John K. Walton, 'British Tourism Between Industrialization and Globalization', in *The Making of Modern Tourism: The Cultural History of the British Experience, 1600-2000*, ed. Hartmut Berghoff, Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Christopher Harvie (Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2002), pp. 109-31, p. 111.

¹³ John Urry, 'Cultural Change and the Seaside Resort' in *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts*, ed. Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams (London, 1997), pp. 102-13, p. 112.

¹⁴ Illustrative accounts of local histories of individual English resorts are the early Edmund M. Gilbert, *Brighton. Old Ocean's Bauble* (London, 1954) and the recent Ken Fines, *A History of Brighton and Hove* (Chichester, 2002). For the USA two examples are Fred E. Basten, *Santa Monica Bay* (Los Angeles, CA, 1997) and Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002).

¹⁵ Mary Blume, *Côte d'Azur: Inventing the French Riviera* (London, 1992).

¹⁶ For instance, Nick Evans, *Dreamland Remembered: 140 Years of Seaside Fun in Margate* (Whitstable, Kent, 2003), Bill Curtis, *Blackpool Tower* (Lavenham, Suffolk, 1988) and Peter Bennett, *Blackpool Pleasure Beach: A Century of Fun* (Blackpool, Lancashire, 1996).

¹⁷ Simon Adamson, *Seaside Piers* (London, 1977) and Lynn F. Pearson, *The People's Palaces: Britain's Seaside Pleasure Buildings of 1870-1914* (Buckingham, 1991).

¹⁸ A catalogue of English seaside social histories ranges from the early post-war H. G. Stokes, *The English Seaside* (London, 1947) and Ruth Manning-Sanders, *Seaside England* (London, 1951) through to, half a century later, Joseph Connolly, *Beside the Seaside* (London, 1999) and John Hannavy, *The English Seaside in Victorian and Edwardian Times* (Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, 2003).

¹⁹ Lena Lencek and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth* (London, 1998).

²⁰ Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond: An Intimate History of the Swimming Pool* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

²¹ Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur* (London, 1992).