

Sussex Research

Designing the seaside: architecture, society and nature

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Chapter Two

Nature and Seaside Architecture

At the dawn of the seaside resort, pioneer visitors began to venture to the English coast in search of health, leisure and pleasure. Two of the first adventurers were the Reverend William Clarke and his wife. In the summer of 1736 they stayed for a month in Brighthelmstone, a small and declining town on the south coast of England. On 22 July the Reverend Clarke wrote to his friend, a Mr Bowyer:

We are now sunning ourselves upon the beach at Brighthelmstone ... The place is really pleasant; I have seen nothing in its way that outdoes it. Such a tract of sea; such regions of corn; and such an extent of fine carpet, that gives your eye the command of it all. But then the mischief is, that we have little conversation besides the *clamor nauticus*, which is here a sort of treble to the plashing of the waves against the cliffs. My morning business is bathing in the sea, and then buying fish; the evening is riding out for air, viewing the remains of old Saxon camps, and counting the ships in the road, and the boats that are trawling.¹

One of the first accounts of seaside leisure and pleasure, the Reverend Clarke's activities – we know little of Mrs Clarke's holiday - are all the more remarkable in suggesting there is little new under the sun. His experiences of seaside nature included bathing in the sea, soaking up the sun on the beach, taking in the air and extended to the sights, sounds and tastes of the sea. These sensory experiences reverberate through the subsequent history of the seaside resort and its architecture, and echo into the twenty-first century.

As an intrepid pioneer, William Clarke was free to do as he pleased. 'Society' and fashion had little interest in the coast or what people did there, and while the established inland spas

provided some guidance to taking the waters they also imposed severe social constraints. Clarke perhaps drew on a more popular sea bathing tradition enjoyed by local working people: seaside historians have struggled to make sense of the teasing fragments of evidence from Britain, France and Germany suggesting sea bathing had long been used by 'common folk' for a combination of therapeutic, prophylactic, educational, festive and hedonistic purposes.² But for elite groups, the consumption of seaside nature had to be invented, learnt and accepted, and in one view it was Clarke who 'invented the seaside holiday'.³ It was then codified, guided and constrained. Using seaside nature subsequently embraced ever-larger sections of the population, changing from an elite and aristocratic activity to one with popular mass appeal. It evolved in ways that privileged specific forms of consumption – and particular forms of architecture - at particular periods.⁴

The Brighthelmstone experienced by the Clarke's was a long established coastal town, functioning as a trading, transportation and fishing centre. But until their arrival it was not a place visited for seaside health, leisure or pleasure, and it lacked any architecture designed or intended for such purposes. Within three decades, however, Brighthelmstone had been transformed into a place for society to learn about and consume seaside nature and had become the nation's most fashionable and successful resort. It subsequently became better known as Brighton and, as one of England's most emblematic resorts, the place name was reused around the English-speaking world to conjure up the fashionable seaside.

Society's new found and evolving desires and pleasures of the sea, beach and shore led to an innovative and revolutionary architecture designed to facilitate the consumption of seaside nature. At first slowly, then with gathering pace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an inventive and novel architecture of the seaside was created.

Changes in how seaside nature has been used have been partly the consequence of the evolution of popularly held definitions and understandings of health and pleasure, sometimes conflated together, sometimes stringently separated. This underlying sweep of shifting popular social movements and fashions shaping the seaside has worked alongside and sometimes

collided with the persistent attempt of seaside authorities - including central and local government and varied experts and official bodies - to guide and regulate the consumption of seaside nature. Although it is difficult to untangle cause and effect and the initial and underlying impulses leading to a particular change in how the seaside has been used, the power of authorities to impose a particular design on the seaside has been uneven, and most likely to be successful when it is in sympathy with what people want to do.

This engagement between popular demands and the forces of regulation had architectural consequences. A prime example is the role of the medical profession in codifying the use of the seaside and its resultant built form. Doctors frequently had a promiscuous attitude to seaside nature, happy to proclaim its varied benefits. By the end of the eighteenth century, for example, they had variously asserted the attractions of seawater, sea air, the coastal climate, and seaside sunshine. Dr Lettsom's Royal Sea-bathing infirmary opening in Margate in 1796, for instance, included a solarium designed to use sea air and sunlight in the treatment of consumption.⁵ Yet it was not until the 1920s and '30s when sunshine seized the popular imagination and dominated what people wanted of the seaside, that the open floodgates released a torrent of new architectural responses to the seaside sun.

Holidaymakers at times resisted the architecture of the commodified and regulated seaside and instead created their own architectural responses, some temporary, some more permanent, to being by the sea. Marginal locations away from the dominant resorts were sought out and used to build a peoples' architecture for staying and playing by the sea and to consume nature in alternative ways. One of the most revealing – literally – themes in the resistance to seaside authority is the still unfinished story of how people have fought against prescriptions on how they should use the sea and beach – when, where, how, with whom, in what dress and using what architecture.

Seawater, Sea Air and Sea Views

The emergence of seaside resorts in the eighteenth century allowed the sea, newly discovered by the leisured classes as a site of pleasure and health, to be consumed. Central to this new form of consumption were the assumed therapeutic and health enhancing qualities of seawater. Alain Corbin's path-breaking history of the discovery of the Western seaside between 1750 and 1840 roots the emergence of seaside resorts in the Enlightenment and profound changes in people's attitudes to and perceptions of the sea.⁶ He details the 'revolution' that occurred in how people understood and appreciated nature and their own bodily consciousness. Gradually the seaside became an attractive, 'sublime', place that was perceived to offer therapeutic remedies for the excesses and ailments of the ruling classes. In contrast to the malevolence of the cities and the overcrowded, dissolute inland spas, the seashore resorts offered a new closeness to nature, because, as Corbin argues:

The ocean represented indisputable nature which was more than just scenery, and which remained unaffected by falsehood ... the sea became a refuge and a source of hope because it inspired fear. The new strategy for seaside holidays was to enjoy the sea and experience the terror it inspired, while overcoming one's personal perils. ... The sea was expected to cure the evil of urban civilization and correct the ill effects of easy living, while respecting the demands of privacy.⁷

As the untamed, natural sea came to be seen as a source of society's salvation, medical opinion galloped to aid and abet the discovery of the seaside, doctors proclaiming the extraordinary additional virtues of seawater over ordinary cold water medicinal bathing and drinking. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century and developing the work of other physicians, the Brighton-based Dr Richard Russell was the most important publicist for the therapeutic benefits of consuming seawater. Published in Latin in 1750 (14 years after the Clarke's visit to the town) and

English in 1752, his *Dissertation on the Uses of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands*, appeared in various editions, some pirated, and the last published in 1769. A century after publication it continued to be quoted throughout the Western world as a standard reference.

For Russell and many other physicians, the sea had mystical qualities: 'which the omnificent Creator of all Things, seems to have designed to be a kind of common Defence against the Corruption and Putrefaction of Bodies.'⁸ Russell's starting point was that 'Nature is the Healer of diseases'. Believing seawater was superior than the cures provided by the inland spas, he argued its impact could be miraculous, promising cures for everything from gonorrhea to glandular consumption 'of which none ever did recover'. His casebook approach, a popular and long-lasting genre for doctors and other experts writing about the medicinal benefits of seaside nature,⁹ offered different seawater prescriptions according to the disease being treated. In one treatment, for example, 'the Cure is to be finished by cold bathing in the Sea, drinking every Morning enough Sea Water to procure two or three Stools a Day, immediately upon coming out of the Sea.'¹⁰

Although working in Brighton, Russell's ideas were both adopted and adapted nationally and internationally. Despite arguments between physicians about how best to use seawater, few disputed its value. For example, Margate's Dr John Anderson in the mid-1790s enthused about the practice of sea bathing in 'nature's richly saturated compound'.¹¹

The sea as saviour was realized and mediated by the development of a small piece of architecture, the bathing machine that was intricately entwined with the therapeutic consumption of the sea and for many decades enabled the medical profession and other powerful groups to control the sea bathing process and the use of the seaside. Despite its seeming insignificance, the bathing machine became the first purpose-designed form of seaside architecture, performing the extraordinary function of taking society to nature, allowing the private individual to consume nature and a profit to be made in the process. Two other pieces of distinctive seaside architecture developed at the same time: bathing rooms, where people waited for machines and drunk

seawater, and seawater artificial baths providing an alternative to the bathing machine experience.

Doctors detailed the features of the ideal seaside resort. For Russell the model resort should be 'neat and tidy', distant from any river mouth to ensure high waves and a sufficiently salty sea, the beach should be sandy and flat – making for the easy use of bathing machines - and the shore surrounded by cliffs and dunes suitable for exercise on foot or horse. These characteristics were, perhaps unsurprisingly, reminiscent of the coast where Russell practiced, although other resorts were quick to claim that they perfectly fitted Russell's preferred topography. Other physicians subsequently defined other necessary qualities, including the ideal character of the climate and air, landscape and relief, and soil and vegetation.

The bathing machine, the associated bathing rooms and seawater artificial baths became the chief distinctive architectural manifestations of the eighteenth century seaside resort. Apart from a very few innovative original purpose-built resort buildings where a front of the sea location and sea view was prioritized, in the initial phase of resort development there was no great clamor to build as close to the sea as possible.¹² The concern appears more to have been to be in sight of polite society than with views of watery nature and with the provision of all the attractions of an inland spa from the spa building themselves to promenades and parades, assembly rooms and libraries.

From the late eighteenth century, however, and at a critical turning point in elite society's perceptions of the sea and shore, the seaside began to be valued for other than the assumed medicinal benefits. Crucially, there was a growing acceptance that the seaside should be appreciated for its beauty, for the visual delights it offered, for the nature it revealed, for the exercise and relaxation it could provide, and for the quality and purity of its air. These new ways of experiencing the seaside produced a remarkable new array of architecture and open spaces.¹³ Promenades, parades and piers, for example, functioned as platforms from which to take in sea views and breath sea air, and the winter garden, floral hall and aquaria demonstrated the subjection of nature by society.

A growing interest in marine aesthetics and developing importance of the sea in the visual imagination, both prioritizing views, panoramas and perspectives of the sea and coast, were to radically change the design of the seaside. By the middle of the nineteenth century esteem for the glories of the sea view was deeply embedded in wider society's consciousness, leading to varied artistic and literary representations. The horizon, for example, became a particularly important part of the Victorian visual imagination, suggesting, 'futurity, the space into which the imagination and inner vision may travel: it connotes expansiveness'.¹⁴

Seaside architecture increasingly sought to capitalize on the sea view and panorama. The sea view became an enduring attraction of the seaside, sustained to the present day, and with major consequences for resort architecture. The grand Regency terraces of the Brighton and Hove seafront gloried in the sight of the sea.¹⁵ On south coast rolling heath land, Bournemouth's first purpose-built resort house, constructed in 1812, was designed to have 'magnificent seaward prospects',¹⁶ while by 1830 in northwest England across the Mersey from Liverpool, in the new development of New Brighton 'every house should have an uninterrupted view of the sea'.¹⁷ Over the following decades and into the subsequent century promenades and piers, towers and pavilions, seafront shelters and beach huts, all offered the attraction of views of the sea. In Britain, 'Sea View' became the archetypal name for a seaside guesthouse or bungalow. For holidaymakers there was and still is an additional price to be paid for the hotel room with the finest view. The fixation with the view continues unabated today and is evidenced, for example, in the positioning and design of balconied hotels around the Mediterranean and many other coastlines.

Philip Gosse, a famous mid-century popularizer seaside nature, was passionate about the delights of the sea view and gazing on both nature and society. Writing of a seaside holiday to Tenby in Wales, he describes 'taking a satiating look at the noble promontory' of Tenby Head and evening walks around it as a favourite promenade 'thronged with gay visitors'. There were other visual pleasures to be enjoyed including cliff top walks that allowed 'the gaze to go out freely upon the sparkling sea',¹⁸ and a carriage drive along the coast that with its 'constant panoramic

change of scene, as the various points of the landscape altered their relative positions – afforded us endless occasions of admiration, and sources of delight'.¹⁹ For Gosse, writing or talking about a view was 'a poor substitute for the gratification of which the visual organ is the seat, when we look upon that which is grand or beautiful, and, as it were, drink in its grandeur or beauty without an effort.'²⁰ To consume an outstanding view was an 'exhilarating to the spirits' mystical experience.²¹

Apart from gazing at nature from a distance, Victorian holidaymakers also peered at nature close-up. By the mid-century, and reflecting middle-class interest in new scientific theories about evolution and the natural world, many seaside holidaymakers became amateur naturalists, classifying shells and pebbles and hunting marine life in tidal rock pools. This consumption of nature was supported by the publication of many guides to seashore natural history, often written by clergymen, and cut through by revealing tensions between, on one hand, notions of scientific observation, classification and understanding and, on the other hand, the role of the 'Creatorial Power' and the 'Deity Himself' in producing a mysterious nature.²² Many of these guides also expressed Victorian sentiments about self-improvement and the strengthening of 'our corporeal and mental faculties'.²³ Gosse himself was the author of a string of books on seaside natural history including the popular *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast*.²⁴ His Tenby work, designed as lessons in the 'important art of "How and What to Observe"',²⁵ included directions to the remotest and inaccessible of shoreline locations. When not collecting nature on the inter-tidal zone, Victorian holidaymakers were able to observe it either alive - in purpose-built aquaria – or dead – in natural history museums.

The vast and evolving literature about the medicinal value of the seaside became an international trade. Medical opinion and advice was not only exported from Britain but American and French guides to using the seaside were republished for the English market. Increasingly during the nineteenth century rather than just proclaim the virtues of bathing, the medical profession and the published guides and manuals also emphasized the value of sea air, coastal climate and the benefits of swimming.

One such early transitional guidebook was John Bigsby's *Sea-side Manual for Invalids and Bathers*, published in 1841 and a reworking of an 'elegant treatise' from France.²⁶ Respecting Russell's legacy from nine decades earlier, the author argued the important choice of a sea-bathing place should be 'left to the discernment of the professional adviser, who will be guided by the end he has in view.' Unlike Russell, however, Bigsby was clear that sea bathing was not a universal remedy and instead recognized the alternative advantages of sea air: 'There are many complaints which may be benefited by sea air alone, but in which sea bathing is manifestly injurious.'²⁷

Doctors took to pronouncing on the advantages of one region or resort compared to another and even on the best location within a resort for invalids suffering particular complaints. Writing in the early 1880s George Moseley, for example, extolled the medicinal virtues of the 'empress of resorts', Eastbourne: 'In the matter of softness of climate Eastbourne is almost unapproachable, certainly within the British Isles. Its nearest competitor, Bournemouth ... enjoys a reputation that in time must give way before the immense superiority of Eastbourne'²⁸

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the cult of sea air became dominant. In the USA one formative guide, *Sea-Air and Sea-Bathing*, subsequently republished in Britain without the American place-specific references, emphasized at 'the sea-shore we have not merely a pure atmosphere, but one saturated with sea-salts.'²⁹ The combination of pure air 'containing oxygen in the form of ozone, besides finely divided sea-salts' and the same salts in seawater made for the miraculous transformation of people:

Upon most persons the effect of breathing this air is tonic and invigorating, producing an immediate sense of exhilaration, improving the appetite, and promoting digestion, In like manner, the bathing in salt-water stimulates the skin, and renders the circulation more active. Compare the pale, bleached, puny children, who are taken down to the sea-shore in the nearly summer, with the same children returning to town in September, - tanned, ruddy, and hearty.³⁰

It was sea air and sea bathing – not spending time in the sun - that was thought to restore and transform. Ozone as an element of sea air became a powerful recommendation of the coast, repeatedly analyzed by doctors, vigorously promoted by the seaside authorities and endlessly debated in respectable society. Ultimately, though, its use and value was imagined rather than real and it was vainly hunted for invalids in search of health.³¹ The restorative value of sea air and its role in blowing away the malaise of work and the city continued to be acclaimed for much of the twentieth century, although it was to be rivaled and ultimately vanquished by the cult of the sun.

Although present-day histories of the seaside usually conflate the two, bathing was not the same as swimming. Few people visiting eighteenth and early nineteenth century resorts could swim and it was strongly believed that swimming or floating in the sea was an unnatural if not impossible human activity.³² Set against the persistent fear of death by drowning, this unusual and extraordinary activity had to be learnt.³³ Initially those that did swim – usually men - engaged in a very different practice from what became commonplace in the twentieth century.' The resulting strenuous almost desperate frog-like swimming style was designed to keep the body on the surface of the water and the head above it. Almost as an addendum, Bigsby's 1841 manual provided a series of instructions on how to swim:

The common way of swimming is with the face toward the water. In this situation the body lies extended, prone, upon the fluid, - with the mass of muscles on the back in a state of powerful and permanent contraction, so as to fix the hips and spine, and keep back the head. The muscles of the limbs are in somewhat rapid action, propelling the body through the water. The first mentioned set of muscles are most called upon, because their state of contraction has no respite, and therefore these are the muscles most benefited ... In the graceful kind of natation, called walking in the water, the muscles of the chest are principally called into exercise; and the organs which it contains thereby acquire volume and force; but requiring considerable effort, it cannot be kept up long.³⁴

Unsurprisingly swimming did not become a popular seaside activity until other user-friendly strokes were invented and accepted. One version of the development of swimming, includes a heady brew of the heroic feats of the Romantics, the impact of the British public schools, and growing awareness of practices elsewhere in the world: one impulse was a visit of Native Americans to England, using innovative although for them traditional strokes to race against and beat English swimming champions.³⁵ An alternative history stresses that the flowering of swimming at the British seaside, away from the early to mid nineteenth century swimming baths designed for the affluent and into the sea itself, where it was increasingly enjoyed by a broad range of holidaymakers, owed much to amateur swimming clubs and professional seaside entertainers. In Brighton, for example, the amateur club had a membership of local working people who, as part of a voyage of self-discovery and heightened consciousness, were eager to push at the boundaries of how nature might be enjoyed. From the 1860s the club provided what for the times were remarkable swimming displays and competitions in the sea for holidaymakers to view from the pier. Professional entertainers also seized upon swimming, and associated skills such as diving into the sea and staying underwater for seemingly superhuman lengths of time, as a spectacular attraction for seaside holidaymakers to wonder at.³⁶

Although it took decades to achieve, eventually holidaymakers were able to swim away from the clutches of the medical profession and the restrictions of bathing machines and instead enjoy the sea as independent individuals and family members. The bather as a passive recipient of a medical prescription was transformed into the swimmer as an active participant enjoying nature. Gradually swimming became a popular and widespread seaside activity, architecturally expressed with new buildings on the beach and pier, and indoor and outdoor pools of fresh or salt water designed for swimming rather than bathing.³⁷ From the late-nineteenth century and in response to changing attitudes to nature, there were also significant changes in how holidaymakers dressed and behaved on the beach. Although there were local and national, and indeed international, differences in the speed of change, over the following decades costumes became ever briefer and the use of the beach ever more liberated.³⁸

The Sunny Seaside

Such maneuverings were a prelude to other significant developments. From the late-nineteenth century the sun emerged first as an accompaniment to sea air and then, by the 1930s, as the dominant natural force shaping what people searched for, did and built at the seaside. As with other uses of seaside nature, it is difficult to untangle popular movement from expert prescription in the developing interest in the sun. The Russell's sunning themselves on Brighton beach in the 1730s and Margate's 1790s solarium suggest the seeds of interest in the sun, although laying mostly dormant during Victorian society's preference for other aspects of nature, had been sown many decades before.³⁹ But as the nineteenth century drew to a close the latent potential at last began to be realized. In Germany, for example, in the context of an increasing interest in a return to nature, the 'air- and sun-bath cult' established by Adolf Just in 1896 subsequently developed into a nation-wide movement.⁴⁰

In the early part of the twentieth century the medical profession, too, promoted the therapeutic use of the sun, particularly in combating tuberculosis – consumption - then still a scourge of many parts of the Western world (despite earlier beliefs that it was preventable or curable through the use of seawater or sea air). Heliotherapy, the direct exposure to sunlight combined with fresh air and relaxation out-of-doors, became an accepted medical treatment for tuberculosis and other illnesses. By the 1930s the medical benefits of the sun were widely acknowledged: on one side of the Atlantic, for example, New York's health commissioner announced 'The sun is the greatest bottle of medicine in the world'⁴¹ while on the other side of the ocean, a British commentator described the 'profundity and prodigality' of the sun's ultra-violet radiation.⁴²

The sun, though, seized more than the medical imagination. It had class and gender dimensions. Previously the social and economic elite privileged white skins for the indication of both status and health whereas the suntan was distasteful because of its connotations with degrading physical activity.⁴³ Similarly, until the 1920s, the feminine ideal of wealthy women stressed pallor, fragility and whiteness. The coming of the sun, however, inverted these existing values: a suntan became a 'distinguishing trait' for the elite and 'a new symbol of modern times, an external manifestation of prosperity.'⁴⁴ But the value placed on the sun extended to other parts of society. For social reformers, architects and town planners of the period, a 'dream of health, sunlight and the body reformed'⁴⁵ was bound up with a quest to transform existing society into a new and modern social order. But the upper class and social reformers apart, there was also a more broadly based popular appreciation of health, physical activity and pleasure in the sun and open air. All these impulses led to new ways of holidaymakers to use the seaside, and new responses to these demands from the seaside builders.

At the leading edge of the cult of the sun in Britain and other Western countries was the nudist or naturist movement. Sunbathing was the heart of the naturism, although it almost invariably also involved bathing, swimming and playing in water. In Britain, *Health and Efficiency* – using the strapline, 'the national sunbathing and health magazine' - became an influential publicity vehicle for the movement. The magazine proudly proclaimed itself the pioneer of 'Sane Nudism', and subscribed to a manifesto including the beliefs that 'sunlight is the greatest factor in promoting and retaining Radiant Health', 'complete exposure of the body to the sun under particular circumstances, and with respect to propriety, is essential for the full benefits to be gained', and that 'many persons to-day are ashamed of their bodies, and we desire to inculcate in them a will to improve and perfect the human body by the life-giving rays of the sun...'⁴⁶ Although separated by almost two centuries, there are remarkable similarities in the claims being made for the life-giving sunrays when set alongside those made by Dr Russell for the sea.

Naturism was a minority but influential activity. Its attraction could be argued in contrasting ways. For Scott, writing in the late-1930s, nudism's rise was partly due to 'increasing penchant for

notoriety' and 'sex curiosity'.⁴⁷ Many naturists, however, argued it did away with the prudery and shame previously associated with being naked, with the body viewed, at least for most of the time, as an asexual object, 'yet another machine for living in'.⁴⁸ Scott, though, was correct in arguing that as practiced in the late-1930s 'by the majority of its devotees', sunbathing did 'not represent nudity in any complete sense. Usually it refers to the practice ... of sprawling about on the beaches with the main portion of the skin exposed to the sun and air.'⁴⁹

The cult for the sun had concrete results for the design of the seaside in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. A new seaside architecture developed that included sun terraces, communal beach bathing stations, solariums, holiday camps and beach huts. Seafronts were remade with new parks and gardens designed for pleasure, sport and children in mind. Most iconic of all, the inter-war open-air lido reflected both the coming of the sun and the flowering of swimming. The relationship between the architecture and clothing of the seaside moved into close alignment: the stripped-down, clean-lined, modernist lidos of the 1930s went hand-in-hand in the development of minimal, figure-hugging costumes for swimming and sunbathing. The tumultuous wave of lido and swimming pool building dissipated with the beginning of the Second World War.

Naturism stripped away the remaining architectural and clothing interventions between people and nature with, by the 1990s, high factor protective sun lotion, Ray Ban shades and perhaps a hat being the only products – a minimal personal architecture - separating one from the other. Most beach users, though, continued to use costumes however brief. In France and Spain by the early twenty-first century naturism was a major summer seaside movement, dedicated to the 'totale communion avec la nature'⁵⁰ and architecturally expressed in pine forest located specialist campsites in the southwest of France and in naturist resorts such as Costa Natura in Spain and the Cap d'Agde in France.

The contemporary holidaymaker's continuing love of the sun provides the key to understanding the fate, over the last four decades, of resorts and seaside architecture in different parts of the Western world. Facilitated by cheap, fast and relatively comfortable air travel,

northern holidaymakers headed south in the search for the sun, leading to the decline of many colder and older resorts and the increasing dereliction and often the destruction of earlier forms of seaside architecture. In contrast, the development of new and more distant seaside places on warmer and sunnier coasts, has been bound up with a seaside architecture of balconied tower hotels, holiday villages and villas reflecting the contemporary consumption of seaside nature.

But apart from the sun, twentieth century Western seaside holidaymakers found an increasing diversity of other ways to use nature. Sailing and surfing – the latter a long established indigenous Hawaiian pastime almost destroyed by the coming of the West to the Pacific and then reborn in the twentieth century⁵¹ - the two seaside sports to become firmly established during the century each contributed new original dimensions to the architecture of the seaside, including the marina, sailing club, surf shop and surfing school. The intriguing question is whether and how contemporary new ways of experiencing seaside nature, including extreme coastal sports such as wind surfing, kite surfing and coasteering, will produce new forms of seaside architecture or, alternatively, new uses for existing coastal buildings.

Gazing at the Seaside

This discussion of the use of seaside nature and its architectural consequences nestles amid the contemporary conceptual debates about nature and society and the schisms and relationships between what are variously termed the natural and the artificial or human environment, the non-human and human world, and the natural world and humanity.⁵² There are arguments about what nature is, with one persistent theme from the eighteenth century to the present being that nature is mysterious and unknowable; whether or not people are part of nature; whether nature can be consumed and, if not consumed, how it is used, experienced, perceived and represented; and, how nature has been commodified, replicated and themed.

This evolving debate, however, has rarely turned attention to nature and society at the seaside or provided any purchase on the significance of seaside architecture. An influential exception is Urry's account of the tourist gaze.⁵³ From the mid-nineteenth century, Urry argues, the visual sense was increasingly hegemonic in the sensing of the natural world and nature, including the sea, was transformed into an overridingly visual spectacle.⁵⁴ In turn, the fundamental process of tourist consumption became capturing the gaze, each one of which could 'literally take a split second'.⁵⁵ Everything else in the tourist experience and tourist services was relegated as subsidiary.

The sea, during the nineteenth century, was tamed and domesticated, and seaside architecture including piers and promenades, the use of the beach and development of swimming all 'exerted the mastery of nature on the margins of society'.⁵⁶ Seaside resorts, particularly through their architecture, provided concentrations of services 'designed to provide novel, and what were at the time utterly amazing, objects of the tourist gaze'.⁵⁷

Then, in the mid-twentieth century, a fundamental refocusing of the tourist gaze occurred away from resorts. A critical role is given to those social groups 'structuring taste communities' - whose values and practices exert a significant impact on those of other social classes.⁵⁸ On one hand, according to Urry, British resorts and their architecture were deemed tasteless and unfashionable; on the other hand, there was a new search for 'real holidays', and distinctive and out-of-the-ordinary leisure locations in places where nature appears to dominate over culture. As tourists went elsewhere, many older and established seaside towns and their architecture spiraled into decline and decay.

Although appealing and influential,⁵⁹ the approach may be criticized. There is an inevitability of consequences with the tourist gaze is so piercing that there is little or no room for exceptions, counter processes or conflicting outcomes. Resorts, their builders, users and architecture are powerless and passive, swept along (and sometimes away) by overwhelming processes of change determined by the gaze. Tourism and travel are also conflated with holidays and vacations. Not all holidaymakers and vacationers are tourists in the sense of structuring a

holiday around a tour of visual sights, and the coach tour, identified by Urry as the archetypal vehicle of the collective tourist gaze, is not a dominant seaside holiday form. At least as far as British holidaymakers are concerned, and the point seems also to apply to many other Western vacationers, most seaside visits are relatively sedentary affairs, involving a stay in just one or two resorts or coastal locations.⁶⁰

The visual sense is fetishized. An alternative perspective proposes the experience and consumption of nature relies on 'multiple sensing', with the natural world 'apprehended through its sounds, its smells, its tastes, its textures and its colours and shapes.'⁶¹ This, indeed, was the experience of seaside nature recorded by William Clarke in 1736. People today continue to take seaside holidays in the anticipation and expectation of varied experiences and activities, with the pleasures of the sun – not the search for objects to gaze at - often dominant. Nature is not simply watched or observed, but experienced in a variety of complex ways. Laying on a beach sunbathing, building sandcastles or rock pooling, playing in breakers and swimming, surfing and other sporting activities involving the sea and seashore all involve alternative ways of consuming and sensing nature. And the contemporary resort experience includes other synthetic attractions, from funfairs to clubs assailing the senses. Indeed, most of the architecture of the seaside past and present has been designed not simply with the visual sense in mind – although at best it also provides a spectacular visual feast – but to generate heightened and often extreme sensory experiences across all the senses.

An Uneasy Balance

A common pretense is that society and nature are in harmony at the seaside. There is, though, an alternative story in which seaside nature is repeatedly exploited and destroyed by

society and, in turn, society and its individuals are harmed through misunderstanding or mistreating nature.

Even the mid-nineteenth century amateur naturalists, for instance, according to Gosse's son Edmund, had a profoundly damaging impact:

These rock-basins, fringed by corallines, filled with still water almost as pellucid as the upper air itself, thronged with beautiful sensitive form of life, - they exist no longer, they are all profaned, and emptied, and vulgarized. Any army of "collectors" has passed over them, and ravaged every corner of them. The fairy paradise has been violated, the exquisite product of centuries of natural selection has been crushed under the rough paw of well-meaning, idle-minded curiosity.⁶²

The junior Gosse also bewailed the taming and artificial remodeling of the natural environment of the coast. Reflecting on his first childhood experience of the 'uncouth majesty' of the Devonshire sea and coast at Oddicombe, Torquay, in 1857, he commented how:

In these twentieth-century days, a careful municipality has studded the down with rustic seats and has shut out its dangers with railings, has cut a winding carriage-drive round the curves of the cove down to the shore, and has planted sausage-laurels at intervals in clearings made for that aesthetic purpose. When I last saw the place, thus smartened and secured ... I turned from it in anger and disgust, and could almost have wept.⁶³

A similar outrage was expressed a few decades later over the rash of suburban expansion covering the previously undeveloped coastline. R. M. Lockley, writing in the propagandizing *Britain and the Beast* published in 1937 argued the need for radical solutions:

Nothing but a dictatorship will save the English coast in our time ... When the millennium arrives, when the battleships are turned into floating world-cruise universities, perhaps their guns, as a last act before being spiked, will be allowed

to blow to dust the hideous, continuous, and disfiguring chain of hotels, houses and huts which by then will completely encircled these islands.⁶⁴

Yet municipal authorities offered alternative representations, especially in their guidebooks, stressing instead progress, modernity and the transformation of previously valueless places into new landscapes of leisure. The 1939 official guide to Poole a rapidly developing and modern resort and residential area in Dorset described the remodeling of the Sandbanks neighbourhood:

Surely nowhere else in this land is found such an idyllic pleasaunce as the Sandbanks Peninsula ... entirely surrounded by sea, and permeate with ozone. Fifty years ago a wilderness of sand-dune and tussock-grass, populated only by the gulls, it is now a modern Lido: its sun-trap residences, hotels and beautiful marine promenade giving it an exotic charm.⁶⁵

The transformation of Oddicombe and Sandbanks are local and historical examples of what by the twenty-first century was presented by the United Nations as an international issue. A 2001 UN report identified the building of new resorts as a particular cause for worldwide concern:

There are strong economic incentives to site hotels and other tourist facilities as near to attractive spots as possible, regardless of the aesthetic and environmental damage that may result. Building hotels, marinas and their supporting infrastructure ... often greatly changes natural coastlines and their habitats. In extreme cases, whole ecosystems – such as wetlands, estuaries, mangroves and coral reefs – are destroyed or reduced to insignificance and, as a result, the very survival of key economic or ecological species is thrown into doubt.⁶⁶

But once a resort is built the environmental impact continues with, for example, the tourist demand for local seafood and souvenirs leading to the overexploitation of indigenous species and the destruction of habitats by people walking on reefs, diving and snorkeling – there are echoes here of Gosse's description of the environmental impact of the Victorian amateur naturalists - and

by the anchors and propellers of boats. Within Britain, a peculiar recent example of environmental degradation was the plundering of shingle and pebble from beaches to create 'natural' domestic garden designs, with the danger that coastal defenses would be weakened and magnificent natural features such as long shingle beach of Chesil Bank in Dorset put at risk.⁶⁷

The exploitation of seaside nature had other unintended consequences for society itself. The poor quality of seawater around British resorts has remained an enduring issue for two centuries. Mostly due to sewerage effluents flowing into the sea, the pollution of seawater was partly the product of holidaymakers themselves: what they had evacuated in the morning they might be swimming in a few hours later. As Hassan argues, until the 1990s public authorities in Britain had a profound belief in 'the sea's infinity and unlimited capacity to purify'.⁶⁸ The pollution of beach waters, although perhaps glimpsed, touched or smelt by holidaymakers, was mostly out of sight and out of mind in the sense that dominant opinion held it was not a public health risk.

The unhealthy and unattractive seawaters could, though, have spectacular consequences, damming particular resorts and leading to sometimes half-hearted ameliorative measures. There were repeated problems, for example, in the small resort of Worthing in Sussex. In the 1840s the value of the houses on the resort's esplanade was greatly reduced because of the unpleasant smell of the sewerage languishing on the beach; five decades later a disastrous typhoid outbreak caused by a contaminated water supply killed 155 people and led visitors to flee the town.⁶⁹ Along the coast at Brighton, one commentator in 1841 described the sewers discharging onto the beach and 'the meandering streams of pollution issuing from those pipes, not far from where bathing takes place, and in hot weather not only smelling abominably, but penetrating into the cellars of some of the houses'.⁷⁰ The partial solution, three decades later, was the construction of a Intercepting Sewer, 'a masterpiece of later Victorian civil engineering, culminating in the great barrel-vaulted brick junction chambers'⁷¹ underneath the centre of seaside Brighton and today a popular public tour. The debate about how to handle Brighton's sewerage continued into the twenty-first century.

There was a long, slow struggle to improve British resort seawaters. Into the early postwar period children continued to play on a usually unnoticed architectural feature of the beach, the sewer pipe, sometimes with tragic and fatal results.⁷² More recently, in the 1980s and '90s, many British resorts failed to meet European Union bathing water quality directives. Negative comparisons were made with the seaside elsewhere in Europe and contributed to the erosion of the previously unassailable belief that the seaside was necessarily a place of health. Public repulsion, media interest, growing ecological awareness and concomitant political concern provided a context for environmental campaigning and pressure groups, some local and others national, to assert the need for radical improvement.⁷³ By the early years of the twenty-first century organizations such as the Marine Conservation Society and Surfers Against Sewerage painted an improving although still far from ideal picture of the English seaside.⁷⁴

Although Britain is often presented as a major culprit in the pollution of resort seawater, the 2001 United Nations report suggests the problem is worldwide. The UN study estimates tourists bathing in polluted seas causes 'some 250 million cases of gastroenteritis and upper respiratory disease every year',⁷⁵ in turn leading to the loss through disease, disability and death of an estimated 400,000 years of healthy life annually with a cost to worldwide society of \$1.6 billion. For all of Dr Russell's prescriptive guidance two and a half centuries before, contemporary bathing in the sea is a hazardous and sometimes fatal activity.

The sun as well as the sea put society at risk. Just as expert opinion had endlessly warned and advised about, and therefore been able to control, bathing in the sea, so there were growing cautions about how to sunbathe. Scott, writing in the late-1930s warned against the too rapid and intense use of the sun because 'in the case of anyone who is not robust and amazingly healthy it will almost inevitably have dangerous consequences', and recommended the use of olive oil or coconut oil as 'an effectual preventive of sunburn'.⁷⁶ Apart from sunburn and sunstroke, his detailing of the dangers connected with bathing – both in the sun and sea – have a contemporary ring, including the hazards of polluted water and the early degeneration of the skin caused by the sun.

Post-war, the range of tanning and sun protection products multiplied, each associated with a particular image of the seaside. By the 1980s, however, protection from sunburn and the deterioration of the skin became more important than the tan itself.⁷⁷ Within just a few years the dread of skin cancer was an added fear. The potentially fatal dangers of the sun were first recognized in Australia in the 1980s and, despite an extensive public health campaign, by the early twenty-first century half the Australian population was predicted to develop melanoma at some point in their lives.⁷⁸ Despite increasingly dire warnings to young British people in 2004 seventy percent of young Britons still wanted to get a tan while on holiday.⁷⁹ The underlying problem was the difficulty in severing the deeply inculcated link between the sun and a tan on one hand and, on the other, health, leisure and pleasure by the sea.

The fear of the sun led to a variety of reactions. A minority of people eschewed the sun, breaking free of the belief in its positive benefits. For many beach goers, however, a bottle of sun lotion became both a container for a protective liquid and a fashion accessory. There were pharmaceutical responses including the development of the 'Barbie drug' that promised prevention of skin cancer and an artificial tan with the added benefits of increased libido and weight loss.⁸⁰ There was also a growing use of self-tanning products, one of the most popular – St Tropez - named after a fashionable French seaside resort and another – Fiji – after an exotic seaside island. The fake tan as an alternative to sunbathing was a remarkable statement of the continuing allure of the sun and the value many white Western people place on a bronzed body. There were also concerns that the potential flight from the sun would have devastating consequences for the Western seaside holiday industry in warm sunny climes and, perhaps, a new value placed on the traditional British cloudy and wet summers day.⁸¹ The tantalizing implication is that that declining resorts and their abandoned architecture will be rejuvenated because of the weather and that a new seaside architecture may emerge designed for the overcast beach and stormy seas. Such a development would be consistent with the previous transformations in the relationships between nature, society and seaside architecture.

The seaside as a place for holidaymakers to fear nature has other dimensions. The terror of the mysterious sea revealed in by eighteenth century aristocratic society subsequently developed and evolved, although remaining a consistent if subsidiary theme in how the seaside was perceived and experienced. Closeness to nature is a primary attraction of the seaside as a place of recreation but the natural world is also mysterious and unknowable, and therefore sometimes unreliable and frighteningly dangerous.

Today, many of the most popular literary and filmic representations of the seaside counterbalance people enjoying the beach, sea and resort architecture with sudden, unexpected and fearful natural interventions that destroy a society and nature in harmony. These fears of seaside nature's terrifying characteristics were wonderfully exploited in Peter Benchley's 1974 novel *Jaws* and transformed by Steven Spielberg into the 1975 film of the same name and the first modern movie blockbuster. Nature, in the form of a great white shark, threatens not merely to take a bite out of holidaymakers enjoying the beach pleasures of a small American seaside town, but also destroy the resort itself, dependent on the summer tourist season. The cinematic technique interposes the beach and resort at play with the natural menace from the deep. Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*, also translated into a film, and Chris Kentis's 2004 movie *Open Water*, mercilessly utilize the interplay between society and an unpredictable and destructive nature.

Similarly, one of the attractions of present-day extreme coastal sports, particularly in the context of mundane everyday lives, is meeting and beating the challenge of nature and the apprehension it induces. Even the pleasure of walk along a pier out over the sea may be enhanced because it is tinged with a sense, however slight, of unease and doubt.

Designing the seaside also involved considerable engineering feats intended to make safe the margin between land and sea. At the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, when for most of the time society appeared to dominated nature, people took great pleasure in watching storms battering piers and promenades. Ultimately, and one of the reasons why society is fascinated by the seaside, nature on the coast cannot be controlled or tamed. Nature has

frequently inundated the Western seaside resort or wrecked its architecture, including piers, promenades and seafront buildings, through storm, flood or erosion. Mostly these were local events of local significance. Occasionally, though, the tragic consequences of the natural destruction of the seaside, in terms of the loss of life, had a national or international impact. In southwest England the Lynmouth flood disaster of 1952 killed 34 people,⁸² a year later storm surges on the east coast of England led to the destruction of hundreds of holiday homes built on marginal land and the death of dozens of people.⁸³

At an altogether different and previously unimagined scale, the 2004 Asian tsunami wrecked havoc on the recently developed exotic coastal holiday industry ringing the shores of the Indian Ocean and patronized by many thousands of Western holidaymakers. This extreme and seemingly ‘freak’ – at least in terms of the human lifespan – event destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives and devastated much of the architecture of relatively new seaside resorts. A much longer-term process, global warming, also threatens to destroy the seaside, its beaches and architecture.⁸⁴ Whether such events and processes will lead to a fundamental reappraisal of the relationships between society and nature at the seaside, undermining the existing balance between the two, will be resolved over time.

Chapter Two Nature and Seaside Architecture

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⁵ Edmund M. Gilbert, *Brighton Old Ocean's Bauble* (London, 1954), p. 18.

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⁷ Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, p. 62.

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