Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Nature and Society


Theme Park


The February 2010 edition of the National Magazine Company’s Coast magazine—with a circulation of 41,724—saw the launch of a ‘Coast’ campaign to rescue ‘the once glorious seaside buildings that now sit empty and abandoned’ in the UK. The first such building is Margate’s iconic Dreamland, named after the famous Coney Island amusement park in the USA and discussed by Fred Gray in Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Nature and Society (p. 267).

Gray, Professor of Continuing Education at the University of Sussex, has produced a fascinating, well-written and lavishly illustrated history of seaside architecture—taking on board the influence of society and nature—from the origins of the seaside holiday in the eighteenth century, to the present day; and in many
ways, his book is extremely timely. The campaign in *Coast* magazine reflects the current resurgent interest in Britain’s seaside heritage—boosted by the British seaside holiday presently experiencing a level of popularity not seen since the early 1970s. This is largely thanks to the weakness of sterling at a time of economic difficulty, deterring many UK holidaymakers from taking their holidays abroad, and for once, positive media-generated interest in the subject. Nowhere has the seaside holiday presently experiencing a level of popular interest been better illustrated than on primetime television, where BBC 2’s popular television programme—also called *Coast*—uncovers stories that, in the words of the BBC: ‘have made us the island nation we are today’ (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mvlc).

Gray’s book is an invaluable addition to the historiography of the seaside, as he covers the formal and informal design process involved in major seaside buildings, as well as ephemeral structures, ranging from piers and pavilions to resort parks and open spaces, to shops selling candy floss. I only wish this book had been available to support my PhD thesis on the decline of ‘English and Welsh Seaside Resorts 1950 to 1974’ (Lancaster University, 1996). I totally agree with the views of Gray; the much missed leisure historian, the late John Lowerson, and leading seaside historian John Walton (pp. 14–15) that the study of British tourism and leisure history is generally seen as not being a serious subject by the academic community—a fact that amazes me given, for example, the cultural, social and economic importance of the seaside resort and its architecture to this country and the world at large.

In the 1990s, the historiography on the development of domestic seaside resorts was more plentiful for the period from its origins in the mid-eighteenth century to 1914, than for the ensuing years to the present day. Since then, the situation has been rectified with excellent works such as John Walton’s *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2000) and now this book by Gray, which not only takes an in-depth look at the history of British seaside architecture but also provides the added bonus of looking further afield, with examples of seaside developments beyond these shores, mainly in the USA—such as Coney Island and Atlantic City—and Europe, such as Nice and Prora on Germany’s Baltic coast, where in the late 1930s the architect, Clemens Klotz, designed a complete resort development to support National Socialism and make a reality of the National Socialist concept of ‘strength through joy’ (pp.295–6).

The ten logically thought-out chapters cover everything from the image and marketing of the seaside resorts and their architecture in ‘Representing The Edge’ (chapter 3); examining the ‘exotic’ influences of the orient (starting in Brighton with John Nash’s Royal Pavilion redesign, created for the Prince Regent) and of Venice on seaside architecture in Britain and overseas in ‘The Seaside as Another Place’ (chapter 4); to looking at the creation of promenade parks and gardens, boardwalks and beaches in ‘Designing Resort Open Spaces’ (chapter 5); discussing the development of piers in ‘Walking on Water’ (chapter 8) and considering everything from bungalows and plotlands, to holiday camps and iconic seaside grand hotels—such as the art deco Midland Hotel at Morecambe; the Hôtel Beauvoirage, Cannes; and the Excelsior Hôtel, Venice Lido—in ‘Sleeping by the Sea’ (chapter 10).

There are so many enthralling nuggets in this book, such as the examination of the origins of the deckchair (p.123), and the use of exotic vegetation in seaside architecture—particularly palms both real and artificial, depending on climate (p.106)—to help create the feeling of ‘another place’ at the seaside in locations such as the iconic winter garden structures (p.107). The book is also not short on memorable anecdotes. Gray discusses, for example, a new breed of professional marine entertainers at Brighton’s West Pier, which included two noted divers—Professor Reddish and Professor Cyril. Apparently, the latter made ‘the ultimate spectacular sacrifice’ during his ‘sensational bicycle dive’ in May 1912. He was killed when, attempting his frequently accomplished exploit, he ‘had a side-slip and was thrown heavily on to the deck of the pier, fracturing his skull’ (p.216). Altogether, Gray’s book is a most thoughtful provoking, informative and enjoyable read.

The same can also be said of Scott A. Lukas’ *Theme Park*. Written from an anthropological and sociological perspective, Lukas (Department Chair in Anthropology and Sociology at Lake Tahoe College, California) puts forward an intriguing and fresh view on the definition and relevance of theme parks to our everyday lives. Indeed, he believes that they have achieved a wider significance by becoming complex representations of the human mind itself:

As architectural objects theme parks are solidified forms, but as imaginative objects they are ephemeral, gaseous, rhizomatic, especially as they playfully move throughout our minds, hearts and relationships. And, throughout the world, the theme park has spread as a form. As it infiltrates more spaces—shopping malls, Las Vegas casinos, restaurants and other spaces—it expands beyond its earlier architectural, material and cultural form and becomes a form of life itself, ironically surpassing itself as an object and becoming indistinguishable from everyday life. As people move in the world they become part of...
an ideological theme park. Moving through theme parks in the 3D virtual world of Second Life (www.secondlife.com) and on the Internet, interacting with others in scripted and dramaturgical consumer spaces, and even in decorating their homes in thematic ways, people have come together in a new and ironic world that is, itself, a theme park (p. 9).

Central to his argument is his definition of a ‘theme park’, whose origins he believes metaphorically emerge in the prehistoric caves of Europe, such as Lascaux, where ‘two significant architectural forms emerge simultaneously, the utilitarian and the symbolic’ (p. 10). Present-day theme parks combine these two aspects. People can eat and socialize with family and friends, ‘all the while partaking in heart-pounding rides and wandering through symbolic landscapes of pirates, the Old West and lush tropical isles’ (p. 10).

Throughout this book, Lukas plays off the tension between utilitarian and symbolic space and addresses the ways in which the theme park is ‘the only consumer space that effectively manages this tension’ (p. 10).

The book is set out in six interconnected sections—covering the theme park as: Oasis, Land, Machine, Show, Brand (such as Legoland) and Text, and provides a compelling in-depth investigation into the major and lesser known theme parks of the world—including those in the USA, UK, Europe, Japan, China, South Africa and Australia—throughout the twentieth century and beyond, starting with the primitive amusements of nineteenth-century pleasure gardens. He points out that great care needs to be taken in defining parks as theme parks, when they were not. He believes it unlikely, for instance, that a contemporary theme park visitor would consider any of the famous pleasure gardens of Europe to be theme parks as they were actually ‘elaborate settings in which some future features of the theme park can be located’ (p. 27).

Lukas cites the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 as being in many ways the world’s first proto-type theme park (p. 30); and the most famous and influential has been Disneyland, first opened in 1955 in California. It created a standard for the theme park that would last beyond the twentieth century. With its effective theming, he believes ‘Disneyland subordinated the identities of individual rides, exhibits and other features to the larger thematically coordinated environment’ (p. 75).

What, in Lukas’ view, made Disneyland so significant was its use of place as its abstraction of it, whereas previous parks had traditionally referenced specific places in their recreations. Disneyland ‘established a generalized, metaphorical concept of place’ (p. 79). He argues that Disneyland’s Main Street theme, for instance, is a placeless place, ‘not of the material realm of architecture but of the cognitive one of architectural imagination. Disneyland, it could be argued, was less ‘an amusement park than a state of mind’ (p. 79).

Indeed, regardless of whether this beautifully illustrated and enthralling book convinces the reader to sympathize with Lukas’ view that the world is rapidly becoming a reflection of the theme park, or not, it certainly provides a fascinating new angle for consideration and further investigation.

Both Gray’s and Lukas’ exciting new works reinforce the cultural, social and economic importance of studying British and overseas tourism and leisure history. It is a subject area that demands to be taken much more seriously by a hitherto generally sceptical British academic community.

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