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The Floating Utopias of the Future

New city-states in international waters could eventually house as many as a billion people.

Shlomo Angel reviews “Seasteading: How Floating Nations Will Restore the Environment, Enrich the Poor, Cure the Sick, and Liberate Humanity from Politicians” by Joe Quirk and Patri Friedman.

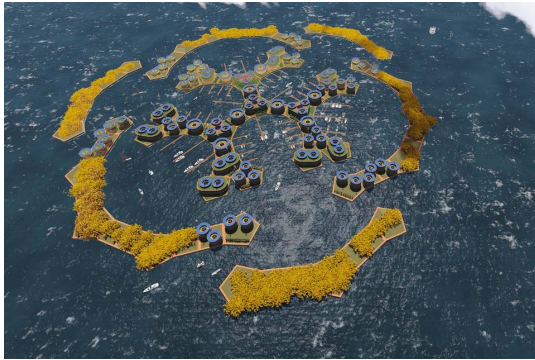


PHOTO: SIMON NUMMY

By **SHLOMO ANGEL**

Updated March 24, 2017 5:15 p.m. ET

The Principality of Sealand is located on a floating platform the size of a small oil rig seven nautical miles off the coast of England. It claims to be a microstate. It issues passports as well as royal titles for a modest price (£60 for a baroness title does seem eminently reasonable). Sealand was built by Britain during World War II in international waters, illegally, as part of its coastal defenses. It was abandoned in the early 1950s and then occupied by Roy Bates, a pirate radio broadcaster, in 1967. He declared the platform a principality (with the Bates family as its royal family), issued stamps and coins, drafted a constitution, flew a flag, and adopted a national anthem. The motto of Sealand is *E Mare Libertas* (“From the Sea, Freedom”).

In 1968, Bates was sued after British workers who ventured into Sealand’s waters were fired upon, but charges were dropped when a British court held that it had no jurisdiction over the case because, at the time, Sealand was outside British territorial waters. Sealand, for its part, claimed that this verdict constituted a *de facto* recognition of its independent status. Then, in 1978, one Alexander Achenbach, a German claiming to be the prime minister of Sealand, stormed the platform with German and Dutch mercenaries and took Bates’s son hostage. An international incident ensued. Britain said that it had no jurisdiction, citing its 1968 verdict. A German diplomat was sent to negotiate; Sealand claimed that, in allowing the diplomat to board the platform, Germany had *de facto* recognized Sealand as an independent state. To date, though, no country has recognized Sealand or the passports, as many as 150,000 in number, it has issued over the years.

There is, no doubt, something attractive about joining a new state uncorrupted by a past, especially now, when more and more of us seem willing to entertain radical critiques of our world as we have come to know it, wishing we could turn it on its head or, better yet,

By Joe Quirk & Patri Friedman
Free Press, 366 pages, \$27

get away from it all and sail into unimaginable adventures on the high seas. Joe Quirk, a senior staff member of the Seasteading Institute, and Patri Friedman, its chairman, present themselves as bearers of good news, a



WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK »

Floating city-states; the most secretive man in Washington; titans in tin cans; Camille Paglia is back; when Marilyn Monroe took Manhattan; the chip on China's shoulder; Mussolini's most notorious lover; and much more.

highly prized commodity these days. They have published a book-length manifesto envisioning a large number of new floating city-states in international waters that could eventually house as many as a billion people. These are clearly modeled on Sealand (though the book pointedly fails to mention it), but, more important, they are modeled on the shining "city on the hill," the undying vision of America as a New Jerusalem. Settling the open seas is also, no doubt, imagined as a variant of the American frontier myth, the myth that was brought to a sudden stop when the West was won and there was no more room for expansion into "unclaimed" lands.

Floating city-states on unclaimed seas, the authors argue with great passion, would thrive in a symbiotic relation with the oceans and restore the environment that land-based people have destroyed. These floating oases would be refuges from the ravages of the modern world. They would help enrich the land-based poor, who would immigrate to floating cities in hordes and find remunerative jobs farming the seas there. They would cure the sick by offering cheaper and safer off-shore health care emancipated from burdensome regulations. Last but not least, they would liberate us from politicians, an especially appealing promise in 2017: "Citizens of existing nations must endure wars they can't refuse to fund . . . and politicians whose schemes they can't refuse to participate in."

WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK

Marilyn Takes Manhattan

She had affairs with Brando and Sinatra, who gave her a dog she called “Maf,” short for Mafia. But most important, having just ended her brief marriage to Joe DiMaggio, she took up with the playwright Arthur Miller. Moira Hodgson reviews “Marilyn in Manhattan” by Elizabeth Winder.

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No more. Messrs. Quirk and Friedman promise a libertarian heaven and an anarchist dream come true, the demise of the abhorrent regulatory state and the ultimate restoration of our lost freedoms. “Imagine a thousand floating Venices . . . where citizens would engage in such fluidity of movement that tyrants would have a very hard time getting a foothold, and political power would be radically decentralized and shared. Floating cities that best pleased their inhabitants would expand, while others which failed to do so would decline and disappear. . . . The smallest minorities, including the individual, could vote with their houses.” E Mare Libertas.

Quite simple: Come if you like, be nice to one another, and then, if you don’t like it, you can leave. Floating cities with the best rules thrive. Those with deranged rules quickly perish. This is a new incarnation of active evolution, based on the principle of the survival of the fittest, the fittest being the city with the best rules: “A market of competing governments, a Silicon Valley of the sea, would allow the best ideas for governance to emerge peacefully. . . . A process of trial and error on a fluid frontier will generate solutions we can’t even imagine today.” Floating dystopias, like the “Waterworld” of film, will have no staying power. People will just abandon them. And the familiar banes of human society—the corruption, zealotry, bigotry, oppression, ignorance, exploitation, brutality, abuse, or unfairness that our civilizations are finding so hard to restrain—would never have the time to take hold. You could always avoid them by simply sailing away.

In essence, all we need to do, we are told, is to invent new sets of simple rules that govern nascent floating states where none of the above imperfections apply. People will then flock to these states. The competition among a large number of states to attract citizens by offering them the best possible rules thus ensures the coming of the age of utopia.

There are more than a few reasons to be skeptical of such a vision, but I tried to put those aside and sustain disbelief while turning its pages. “Seasteading” provides some thought-provoking visions of the future. Messrs. Quirk and Friedman introduce us to some very interesting people experimenting with some very interesting technologies, all having to do with living and working on the sea. “Water is a very good solar collector,” we are told; “it’s much more energy efficient,” a Dutch professor is quoted as saying, “and you no longer need fossil fuels.” The authors tantalize us with tales of “absolutely delicious” algae and light bulbs filled with bioluminescent bacteria. Or imagine vegetarian fish in underwater spherical pens that move with the currents and never pollute; algae that produce oil; and millions and millions of jobs for poor people harvesting seaweed. Offshore assembly-line hospitals, the authors suggest, could provide affordable health care. Terawatts of energy could be produced by converting the ocean’s thermal energy to electricity, with clean water as a byproduct, and rare minerals might be harvested from the ocean floor. And that’s not to mention upside-down floating skyscrapers.

Will it all work? On a practical level: What about storms? Don’t you worry, the authors assure us: Typhoons are not a problem, at least on the equator, where they never happen. Smaller floating cities can simply float out of the way of nasty storms, or, like

modern oil rigs, be built to withstand hurricanes. Yes, the authors admit, “building town-sized platforms that can withstand hurricanes remains a naval engineering challenge, but we expect these challenges to be met with increased economic incentives to colonize the seas.” In other words, we are asked to put our trust in human ingenuity, in social and technological inventions yet unimaginable that will make our familiar problems disappear into distant memories.

The utopia imagined by “Seasteading,” like all other utopias, embodies a scathing critique of the world as we know it, focusing on its failures rather than on its achievements. Ebenezer Howard, in his classic 1898 “Garden Cities of Tomorrow,” for example, envisioned suburban new towns built from scratch that would correctly blend town and country. Howard was responding to the industrial cities of his time, where dire poverty, infectious disease, toxic pollution, overcrowding and human degradation were the order of the day. Now we have, in the words of the authors, “sea level rise, fish extinction, poisonous coastal ‘dead zones’, food shortages, peak oil, water crisis, resource wars, and poverty.” Their proposed solution is fundamentally the same as Howard’s: We can never expect to solve the problems of the cities of today; instead we must turn our back on them, move away and start afresh. The same logic prevailed when the government of Angola recently mortgaged more than \$3 billion in future oil revenues to China to pay for Kilamba, a new turnkey smart city meant to accommodate some 200,000 people, built by the Chinese from ground up outside Luanda, the bustling yet dysfunctional capital city of more than 5 million.

Let’s do the numbers. Howard imagined a garden city of some 32,000 people. The city-state imagined by Plato in his “Republic” had a similar population. One could imagine that a floating city-state of this size could be a nice place to live. But to house a billion people in floating city-states of this size will require increasing the number of independent states in the United Nations to more than 30,000. To “let a thousand nations bloom” will require each to have one million people, on average.

Surely in the years to come some people may flock to the oceans, and some floating city-states may come into being—if only because there is no particularly compelling reason to prevent that from happening. That said, there is also no particular urgency to settle the oceans, as plenty of land remains for building cities: They occupy only about 1% of the land of countries today. And it is much cheaper to build cities on land than on the oceans.

A note of caution for cynics and small minds: In his book “Profiles of the Future,” Arthur C. Clarke wrote that “anything that is theoretically possible will be achieved in practice, no matter what the technical difficulties, if it is desired greatly enough.” This book assures us that the technology for large-scale seasteading is already here. Whether enough people will want it badly enough to make it happen, and to make it happen in time to save us from ourselves, is altogether another matter.

—Mr. Angel, a professor of city planning at the Marron Institute, leads NYU Urban Expansion program.