Land ho!

Many of the world's greatest cities sit at the gateway to the ocean and many a weary voyager has celebrated the moment of their arrival to these shores in writing. **Tim Waterman** looks at how the approach to land from the sea has been documented in literature

In late May of 1850, a 28-year-old Frederick Law Olmsted was on deck as he sailed into Liverpool, at the beginning of a 13-week stay in England. This trip was to be the subject of his book *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* and it famously exposed him to Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park. From this he drew much of his inspiration for both his designs and his political battles to provide parks for the public good. Of the final stretch of coast along the Mersey, Olmsted wrote:

"We approached nearer the land, where, on the right hand, there was a bluff point, bare of trees, with large rocks cropping out at its base; beneath the rocks, a broad, hard, sand beach, and low on the water's edge, a castle of dark brown stone, the only artificial defense that I noticed, of the harbor."

Another eminent American, Washington Irving, author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, made the same approach some decades earlier, and described it in *The Sketch Book*, in a chapter entitled 'The Voyage':

"As we sailed up the Mersey, I reconnoitred the shores with a telescope. My eye dwelt with delight on neat cottages, with their trim shrubberies and green grass plots. I saw the mouldering ruin of an abbey overrun with ivy, and the taper spire of a village church rising from the brow of a neighboring hill; all were characteristic of England."

How often do we think of the approach to land from the sea these days? More often than not, our approach to foreign soil is through the arrivals hall of an airport, airports that the anthropologist Marc Augé calls "non-places". The gateway experience of approach, entrance and arrival seems so much more richly nuanced by ship and for that to be "characteristic of England", as Irving writes, is important. It's easy to see the "taper spire of a village church" as a landscape detail that is quintessential; every bit as much so as the White Cliffs of Dover, yet perhaps more fundamental because it is a feature of every English landscape, and not just of Dover in particular. By contrast, Portsmouth's Spinnaker Tower is rather too generic. It could be emblematic of any port city in the world, and, indeed, there are numerous similar buildings in other ports.

Many ports stand out for the singularity of the view of the waterfront from the sea. Most notable and most famous must be Venice. If only my first approach to Venice had been by sea. It is much more romantic to land in the Piazza San Marco than to arrive by train. Another key contender must be New York, which celebrates arrival with the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty. Other ports, though. whether small or large, have approaches with indelibly unique waterfronts: Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, both blessed with astounding topography; San Sebastian, an improbably elegant promenade along a curve of white beach guarded by sentinel islands; modernist Le Havre, with its relentless, magnificent slabs of buildings; Hong Kong, then-bustling colonial entrepôt, now stalagmitic with corporate architecture.

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IRVING AND OLMSTED both described the approach, and the entrance, and this moment of passing over the threshold between water and land has been celebrated with numerous scenes in both fiction and memoir of both ground-kissing and partner-kissing, and of the alienation of the immigrant. The point of arrival is an existential moment, and Irving speaks of arrival by sea in very particular terms:

"In travelling by land there is a continuity of scene and a connected succession of persons and incidents that carry on the story of life, and lessen the effect of absence and separation. We drag, it is true, 'a lengthening chain' at each remove of our pilgrimage; but the chain is unbroken: we can trace it back link by link; and we feel that the last still grapples us to home. But a wide sea-voyage severs us at once. It makes us conscious of being cast loose from the secure anchorage of settled life, and sent adrift upon a doubtful world. It interposes a gulf, not merely imaginary, but real, between us and our homes – a gulf subject to tempest and fear, and uncertainty, rendering distance palpable, and return precarious."

The first experience of a port city is what landscape writer J B Jackson called the "stranger's path" – that seedy but delightful route into town, where one is pressed from all sides by hawkers and whores, cheap flop-houses and tumble-down cafés and bars. But Jackson extends this analogy beyond just the garish byway to include some of the world's great streets:

"Among the famous and best-loved streets of the world, how many of them are simply glorifications of the Stranger's Path! The Rambla in Barcelona, more than a mile of tree-lined boulevard with more trees and a promenade down the center, is such a one; and the Cannebière in Marseilles is another. They both link the harbor (the point of arrival) with the uptown area; neither of them is a show street in terms of architecture, and they are not bordered by expensive or fashionable shops."

Perhaps this is where Portsmouth's Spinnaker Tower fails: it's just not faded enough yet. In years to come, when it has acquired a patina of age and perhaps a louche image like the Blackpool Tower, maybe it will speak of the place better. When designing for the waterfront, perhaps we should always allow room for a little raffishness to intrude. When Olmsted arrived at Liverpool, it was at its greatest and most muscular, and its seediness was counterbalanced by its glory. No less great was his arrival. It could well mark the emergence of the profession of landscape architecture as we know it. It also certainly marked the fact that landscape architecture had become part of a transatlantic dialogue, often one in which European ideas were tested in the New World and returned modified, sometimes perverted, sometimes enriched, from the colony to the metropole.

The European and American urban waterfronts are, in a way, symbolic of this conversation but, more than that, they are sites of engagement time after time for landscape architects in practice. While the brief for waterfront developments is often focused on the view from or along the promenade, we should never forget that the view of the waterfront from the water is crucial to how a place appears in the imagination and how it represents a place – and its nation – to the world abroad. ●

PHOTOGRAPHS: HULTON ARCHIVE/AECOM

Top: Pier Head in Liverpool circa 1890. Forty years on from Olmsted's landing, it appears much as he described his landing at the docks: "The landing-place was spacious, not encumbered with shanties or piles of freight, and though there was a little rain falling, there was a smooth, clean stone pavement, free from mud, to walk upon"

Above: Pier Head as it is today, with designs by Aecom and with the newly opened Museum of Liverpool by 3XN and AEW, a subtle and elegant complement to the Three Graces when viewed from the water

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