

REVIEW

BOOKS

Floatopia

Can libertarians escape government by building their homes in the sea?

BY RACHEL RIEDERER

IN 1968, THE inventor and environmentalist R. Buckminster Fuller wrote an essay in *Playboy* envisioning the city of the future. The new metropolis would consist of a giant tetrahedron—a pyramid made of equilateral triangles—a shape that Fuller, the popularizer of the geodesic dome, admired for its stability and symmetry. Each edge of the pyramid would be two miles long; each face would accommodate dozens of detachable housing units, with sky-facing windows and terraces. Inside the pyramid, in the vast space formed by its base, a public garden would be illuminated by shafts of sunlight from openings on the pyramid's sides. A funicular would deliver residents up and down the giant structure. And the whole thing would float on the open ocean.

“The depth of its foundation would go below the turbulent level of the seas,” wrote Fuller, “so that it would be, in effect, a floating triangular atoll.” Commissioned to design a pyramidal city to float in Tokyo Bay, Fuller envisioned spacious and sunlit living quarters, but also radical efficiency: The floating communities would be powered by nuclear reactors, whose excess heat would desalinate seawater for use in the city. The project offered freedom from life on dry land, the chance to build an ideal society out of nowhere. Technology, Fuller believed, was the only path toward a better life: “If humanity succeeds,” he wrote, “its success will have been initiated by inventions and not by the debilitating, often lethal biases of politics.”

The project wasn't to be: When Fuller's financial backer died in 1969, the plans were dropped. Yet they weren't entirely lost. Today a new set of futurists is envisioning the next iteration of the floating city. They call their movement “seasteading”—and, as Joe Quirk and Patri Friedman outline in their new book of the same name, Fuller's heirs believe their ocean utopias will allow humanity to “feed the hungry, enrich the poor, cure the sick, restore the environment, power civilization sustainably, and live in peace.” These lofty goals will be made possible, they reason, by the particular characteristics of the ocean

itself—sunny, windy, huge, empty, full of waves and algae and temperature gradients and fish—and the technologies that will spin those assets into city-state gold.

The seasteading movement has already garnered considerable backing for its unlikely-sounding vision. When Friedman launched the Seasteading Institute in 2008, the organization received early funding from libertarian billionaire Peter Thiel. Not all seasteads are marvels of design, like Fuller's plans for Tokyo Bay; they can be anything from a modified cruise ship to an abandoned oil rig. The first floating city, in fact, may soon become a reality: In January, the Seasteading Institute signed an agreement with French Polynesia to begin work on a floating island project that will ultimately have its own “special governing framework” and “innovative special economic zone.”

Independence—political and financial—is a central goal of seasteading. The movement doesn't just strive to utilize the empty expanse of the ocean for human habitat—it seeks to create a space for new kinds of societies to spring up. And while the promise of technology is at the heart of their vision of a better life, seasteaders also argue that government would work better on the high seas—that the ocean, like all frontiers, would foster a new and unexpected form of politics.

ACCORDING TO THE authors of *Seasteading*, the movement began when Friedman, an engineer at Google, concluded that land itself was getting in the way of his father and grandparents' vision for the world. His father is David Friedman, an economist and theorist who advocates anarcho-capitalism; his grandparents were the economists Rose and Milton Friedman, whose 1980 best-seller *Free to Choose* provided the intellectual underpinning for the New Right's case that free markets and personal choice would ease society's woes. “The Friedmans proposed that humanity rethink society from the ground up,” write Quirk and Friedman fils. “Unfortunately, all ground was claimed by existing governments.”

Quirk and Friedman spend a lot of time demonstrating that the sea is a viable alternative to land, detailing cool technologies and sketching out the abundance they could provide for the future's salty, maritime utopias. They introduce us to a cast of colorful characters, including Neil Sims, a pescatarian aquaculture expert who makes a disdainful face every time he mentions “land animals.” Sims walks readers breezily through the technical details of his plan for open-water fish farms. “I mean, really, from a humanitarian, empathetic perspective,” Sims says, “I want to eat fish that have actually swum in the ocean, that have tasted raw salt water, rather than something that's just kept in a feedlot.” So Sims invented a system of submerged fish pens, geodesic spheres that bob just below the surface of the water; as the fish inside swim around, their cages swim along with them.

Another visionary, Patrick Takahashi, introduces a technology that straddles the border of quirky and genius: harnessing the resources of the deepest parts of the ocean to create seasteads that are completely self-sustaining. While the ocean floor can be dark and cold, it abounds in organic nutrients



“Artisanopolis,” a winning entry in the Seasteading Institute’s contest to design a floating city, whose citizens could try new forms of government.

that fall from the life-filled shallows above. “The oceans are mostly a barren desert overlying a superabundance of fertilizer that the sunlight never reaches,” Quirk and Friedman explain. Takahashi proposes pumping this fertile material up to the surface, where seasteaders can use it to grow their own food. In a similar bid for independence, he envisions supplying power to floating cities through a process called Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion, which uses the temperature difference between warm surface waters and cold deep waters to generate electricity. “Someday, perhaps,” Takahashi wrote in a 2011 paper, “a thousand OTEC-powered Blue Revolution nations could well be plying our oceans, providing clean and sustainable resources for humanity in harmony with the ocean environment.”

BUT SEASTEADING IS about more than the development and dissemination of new technologies. Quirk and Friedman’s book also serves as a manifesto for the movement. The projects they describe, and those the Seasteading Institute currently has in the works, are suffused with a Silicon Valley ethos, one that values innovation, novelty, efficiency, and independence over the protections traditionally provided by governments and employers. “Think of seasteads as the hardware ... for creating new societies,” the authors advise. They treat government as little more than a failed business model: “When viewed as an industry, governance is the largest in the world.” It’s also inefficient. Worse yet, “some of the poorest performers kill their

own customers.” You can see the conclusion on the horizon line, churning toward the shore: The governance industry is ripe for disruption.

Here on land, the seasteaders propose, ideas about how to govern societies have stagnated. Politics is too entrenched; societal change comes slowly, if at all. “Our terrestrially trained minds are blind to the terrifying potential for tyranny in the power to claim land—fixed, immobile, where people have no choice but to live,” write the authors. Seasteads would upset this dynamic, since each floating city would be small enough and modular enough that individuals could come and go freely, shopping for governments and social structures. If residents didn’t like one utopia, they could simply sail off to a new one.

There’s something seductive about this idea. It’s the inverse of Francis Fukuyama’s proposition, in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, that global liberal democracy was the end point of politics and the world would seethe no more—a notion at once comforting and deflating. The Seasteaders imagine the opposite: an endless flowering of new power structures. At a TEDx talk in 2012, Friedman likened the seasteading movement to the Cambrian explosion—a moment in evolutionary history when the globs and mollusks of the primordial soup gave way to a diverse array of complex organisms. “Not only humans, but human societies evolve,” Friedman asserted. “We need new places to try new rules.”

The authors don’t say which new rules, exactly, they hope to try, and the Seasteading Institute makes clear that it will not

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be operating the cities itself. The particulars of each seasteading political system should be determined by its inhabitants—or an oligarch, if that’s the way it turns out. “Any set of rules is OK,” the organization’s FAQ page emphasizes, “as long as the residents consent to it voluntarily and can leave whenever they choose.”

Quirk and Friedman insist that their movement is apolitical: “Seasteading is less an ideology than a technology,” they claim. But the ability to choose among societies at sea is itself political, the expression of a belief that free markets are the ultimate guarantee of happiness. What’s more, the pitfalls of the free market seem even more dire when the commodity being produced is governance itself: In a world where citizen-consumers can move between societies as they choose, the poorest and most vulnerable could easily be priced out and left adrift. As with so many consumption choices on the free market, the “choice” is only available to those with means, while those with limited purchasing power are constrained and even coerced.

This might sound silly: Seasteading, of course, would be an option, an add-on to land-based societies, and those who don’t want to go could simply stay on the shore. But if seasteading is also a grand thought experiment about decentralizing power and increasing mobility, it has to consider how those dynamics work for everyone. And that, by definition, means the nature of the endeavor is inherently political.

IT IS NOT hard to see why this free-market vision appealed to libertarian backers like Thiel. Libertarianism prizes freedom and autonomy, expressing skepticism of taxes, regulations, and any other version of state power that impinges on individual sovereignty. In 2009, with the world reeling from the subprime mortgage crisis that ballooned into a global banking meltdown, Thiel wrote that the crisis had been caused by “too much debt and leverage, facilitated by a government that insured against all sorts of moral hazards.” The response, he warned, would be even more government intervention; believers in the free market were “screaming into a hurricane.” The essay, “The Education of a Libertarian,” is also an elegy, lamenting the lack of “truly free places left in our world.”

Democracy did not strike Thiel as a path to the freedom he seeks. At the Seasteading Institute’s conference in 2009, he spoke about his own intellectual development. Where he once saw political argument as a way to solve problems, he now viewed it as a problem in itself. It is not only ineffective at making the world more free, it’s also unpleasant: All the fighting over political ideals reminded him of “trench warfare.” As he later wrote, he wished to “escape, not via politics, but beyond it.”

For Thiel, seasteading represented one of the few arenas in which individuals

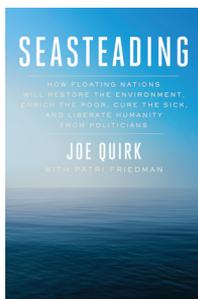
might still act free from any government restriction or regulation. “Unlike the world of politics, in the world of technology the choices of individuals may still be paramount,” he opined in his essay. “The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism.” This is more or less what Quirk and Friedman have in mind with their vision of life at sea. “We don’t trust people with power,” they write. “We trust them with freedom.”

In 2011, Thiel funded Blueseed, which was to be a floating tech incubator based in international waters off the coast of Northern California, a short ferry ride from Silicon Valley. The idea was to provide a base of operations for entrepreneurs who wanted to bypass the hassle of U.S. immigration laws—“an immigration hack,” as Atossa Abrahamian put it in a *Quartz* op-ed. The idea eventually fizzled out when Blueseed was unable to raise enough money to get its business hub for cruise ships off the ground. The company’s final missive, in January 2015, was a retweet: “When 99% of people doubt your idea, you’re either gravely wrong or about to make history.” It closed, touchingly, with “#inspiration” and “#start-up.”

For all its failures, Blueseed did achieve one thing: It exemplified the impracticalities and contradictions of the seasteading movement’s anti-political vision. To dream up a cruise ship business hub that parks just beyond the Golden Gate Bridge and sails under a Bahamian flag, allowing for easy international movement free of immigration laws, is both truly innovative and deeply political. It’s political to value open borders and internationalism, and to strive to create a center for innovation that would benefit from a particular system of governance.

The same can be said of the whole seasteading project: A nation where citizens can come and go freely, detaching their modular floating living quarters and sailing off to a better floating town, untethered by anything but their means and their free will, is not an island without politics—it’s an island with a very particular set of politics. I am, for instance, all for a carbon-negative island that floats over the ocean, clearing marine dead zones with its vibrant, submerged kelp forests and aquaculture structures, producing its own food in towering hydroponic gardens and recycling its desalinated seawater—all ideas put forward by Quirk and Friedman. But that’s because of my politics.

Technology can do many things, many of them verging on the miraculous—but it cannot bypass values, commitments, interests, and beliefs. Hearing the language and philosophy of tech disruption applied to government—when so many of the amazing technological advancements that have fueled recent disruptions have done so at the expense of labor rights and individual privacy—we landlubbers are right to be wary. Government is not simply an albatross around the neck of otherwise free individuals. When it works, it protects the vulnerable and guards the commons—essential tasks at which the free market so often fails. Ocean dwellers will also need those protections. Much as we might like to, we can’t escape the political, even by walking into the sea. 🌊



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