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EXTREME LANDSCAPES
A 21ST CENTURY SUBLIME
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Dangling, upside down, by a rope. Suspended in a chasm. Pure fear, delicious. Here is Shelley’s “Dizzy Ravine,” and Coleridge’s “precipitous, black, jagged rock.” All of those Romantic visions of terror and torrents, the sublime delight in the landscape’s extremes. But this is far from the grand tourists wandering through Europe. This is Queenstown, New Zealand.

Trembling, awe-struck, in a devastated city. The ground in turmoil. Death and destruction. Like Captain O’Hara’s “awful yet tremendous scene” on viewing Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake. Or Charles Darwin’s witnessing of the 1835 Chilean earthquake and reporting the “most awful yet interesting spectacle.” This is Christchurch, New Zealand.

Queenstown and Christchurch are twin poles of New Zealand’s landscape of risk. As the country’s ‘adventure capital,’ Queenstown is a spectacular landscape in which risk is a commodity. Christchurch’s landscape is also risky, ruptured by earthquakes, tentatively rebuilding. As a far-flung group of tiny islands in a vast ocean, New Zealand is the poster-child of the sublime. Through the eyes of the European artists of the 18th and 19th centuries, this landscape offered up sublimity in its mountains, lakes, waterfalls, glaciers, and fiords — a microcosmic Grand Tour. Themes of remoteness, solitude, danger, beauty, and drama resonate throughout its short history, and were underlined by the imagining of New Zealand as Tolkein’s “Middle Earth.”

For Queenstown, the sublime drives an industry that runs on danger. It’s the place for an “adrenaline rush,” and home to “the latest and greatest adventure activities, there are Queenstown adrenaline activities for every thrill seeker, from iconic Queenstown bungee jumping to whitewater rafting, river surfing, canyon swinging and thrills on a jet boat. Queenstown has it all!” The sublime has burst out of its 18th-century frame and is no longer held at arm’s length, but plunged into. Aesthetics, after all, embraces much more than the merely visual; it was, as literary theorist Terry Eagleton explained, “born as a discourse of the body.”

Queenstown’s sublime builds on its spectacular setting, and wrings out of this landscape as much as possible in terms of a theatrical performance of risk. For designers, the sublime drives challenges: to maximize the awe, to dangle the tourist further over the abyss, or propel them faster through the maelstrom. Queenstown’s endless appetite for thrills ripples out through the landscape, testing designers not just to be infinitely innovative in tourist experiences, but also to increase access into the landscape. A monorail, gondola, and tunnel have all been proposed as ways of getting tourists further into the wilderness. And in 2016, $18 million was spent for additional lights and runway widening to allow night flights to bring in even more adventure tourists to Queenstown.

Improved access highlights the paradox of the 21st-century sublime. It is increasingly possible for anyone to enter into this truly dangerous landscape. The terrain around Queenstown is treacherous, an extreme landscape of avalanches and alpine conditions. Beyond the managed risk of commercial thrills, the proximity of extreme landscapes makes the danger very real — and increasing access amplifies the situation. Already it is possible to drive your car very close to glaciers, mountains, and wild rivers, get out and go for a walk. Recently a mother and daughter visiting from the United States went out for a walk, and ended up being rescued days later, “just hours from death.” The risk that comes with going for a walk is not the spectacular theatrics of dicing with death that drives “muscular tourism” such as whitewater rafting, bungee jumping, and skydiving. In a sublime landscape, death can come from the simple act of getting lost.

Risk’s significant other — safety — tethers New Zealand’s 21st-century sublime. The experiencing of fear in Queenstown is something of a sleight of hand, a carefully orchestrated plummet into the unknown, with a precise dose of adrenalin. The theatrics are played out as a pseudo-sublime, gently cushioned by legislation. New Zealand’s
health and safety regulations respond to a legacy of adventure tourism deaths, alongside the high fatality rates in risky industries like mining and forestry. In the decade 2004 to 2014, 63 overseas tourists died in adventure tourism accidents in New Zealand, and tourism operators are very aware that deaths are bad for business.

While Queenstown pushes the envelope into higher and faster thrills, Christchurch's sublime is not a consumer product. Shaken apart by a series of earthquakes beginning in September 2010, the city's relationship with its landscape is one of awe and respect. As resident Gail Dowgray observed, "In a way it's quite magnificent looking at those cliffs. It is quite a magnificent sight what Mother Nature did to us." Christchurch is not in the hunt for endless thrills, but a kind of equilibrium, a stabilizing and recuperation. Here the dimension of aesthetics is bound to the idea of dwelling, of being-in-the-world, and an ethic of care.

Christchurch's design response draws deeply on the sublime's origins. While Queenstown's sublime is tempered by health and safety legislation, in Christchurch it finds a conscience through the frame of empathy. The sublime is fraught with paradox, including the tension between danger and delight. Finding pleasure in the spectacle of destruction became recognized as morally wrong, including in Ruskin's recognition of the "heartlessness" of images of suffering. Empathy and caring provide a balance, an antidote; some of the first examples of aid and compassion coming from far afield were experienced with the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, a "global, imagined empathy with the sufferings of distant strangers."  

The upwelling of empathy, care, and rehabilitation has brought surprising emotional responses for Christchurch, a city previously known for its conservatism and reserve. Residents vehemently expressed their love for the landscape, even the places that had killed some of the 185 earthquake victims. As Christchurch now goes about rebuilding a city where over 80% of the central business district was lost—and re-imagining parts of the city that can't be rebuilt, such as the residential red zone where 8,000 homes have since been demolished—design is carefully attuned to risk. Design is seen as restorative, both literally in terms of physical fabric, as well as in the spirit of the city and the well-being of its residents. Amidst the inevitable debates over the politics of the rebuild, there are many exemplars of the potency of temporary landscapes, and their vital place as moments of joy.

The importance of participation was underscored by the Christchurch City Council's Share An Idea project, which gathered 106,000 ideas to inspire the city's rebuild. The 48-Hour Design Challenge, Gap Filler [which develops temporary art spaces], Greening the Rubble [which focuses on temporary landscapes], and Life in Vacant Spaces [which matches community initiatives with available sites] are just a few of the design-focused responses to the post-quake city. And just as risk mitigation is formalized in the adventure tourism industry through health and safety regulations, the earthquakes forced dramatic changes to New Zealand's building codes. Commissions of inquiry and coronial inquests into Christchurch's building collapses have heightened the awareness of construction and compliance issues, and as a negative consequence many heritage and character buildings around the country are being demolished because it is not economically viable to bring them up to required standards.

Queenstown and Christchurch tell two different, yet complementary, stories about the sublime. Queenstown rushes headlong into embracing the sublimity of its landscape, augmenting it, amplifying it, selling it. This is risk as entertainment. Alongside the leaping, flying, jumping, skiing, and biking, are some of New Zealand's most exclusive restaurants, hotels, and boutiques. All of this built on a legacy of the paradoxical intersection of fear and pleasure. Christchurch's story is a reminder of the ethical dimension of the sublime. At the same time as landscape's danger can be a spectacle, there must also be a consideration for humanity, for the trauma experienced by those thrust into the middle of the events. Restoring and rebuilding happens amidst the ongoing fear, the knowledge that this might not be over, as the city still trembles with over 14,000 aftershocks.

Christchurch and Queenstown are vehicles for exploring the 21st-century sublime, for reflecting on its expansive influence on shaping cultural landscapes. Transcending the affectations of Shelley, Coleridge, Captain O'Hara, and Darwin, New Zealand's 21st-century sublime is vivid and immersive. Pushing at the thresholds of safety and risk, Queenstown is a place for designers to play. It is a place of innovation: this is where the bungee jump was invented, and the jetboat was developed nearby. And in Christchurch, the previously reserved and unemotional city has become a place where residents regularly have their say and have become active participants in debates about urban design and architecture. Risk drives innovation in Christchurch too, with internationally renowned seismic engineering alongside quirky and temporary experimental landscapes that nimbly negotiate the constantly changing context. Christchurch and Queenstown stretch and challenge the sublime's influence on the designed landscape. Circling the paradoxes of risk and safety, suffering and pleasure, the sublime feeds an infinite appetite for fear as entertainment, and at the same time calls for an empathetic caring for a broken landscape and its residents.