

The Shift from Technical to Expressive Use of Small Harbors: The "Play-Full" Harbors of Southern California

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Abstract This paper examines the reorganization of the cultural reality of the small harbors and bays in Southern California. The expressive/recreational use of these harbors is displacing their technical/commercial uses. Personal involvement with these sites is based in the practice of leisure pursuits and their intangible benefits. This paper briefly reviews the development of this phenomenon and then describes, as the type case, the expressive character of Newport Harbor.

Introduction

The small harbors and bays of the Southern California coast—Santa Barbara, Ventura, Channel Islands, Marina Del Rey, Kings, Avalon, Huntington, Newport, Dana Point, Oceanside, Mission Bay,

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and sections of San Diego and San Pedro Bays—are becoming exclusively dedicated to recreational/expressive¹ uses. The waterfront, leisure-styled residences, the yacht clubs and marinas, the harbor-view restaurants, and hostelrys economically preempt the wharves and fish landings, the commercial boat yards and related marine industrial businesses.

The new commercial sector in these small harbors is primarily engaged in recreational services (tour boats, sport fishing boats, ferries, boat charters, and rentals) or businesses supporting recreational boating, fishing, swimming, skin diving, sunbathing, and general vacationing (recreational boat yards, brokerages, dive shops, restaurants, hostelrys, and sundry other businesses). The increasing demand for marine-oriented recreational facilities and communities is even challenging the status of such coastal ecological preserves as the Bolsa Chica Marshland and Newport Back Bay.

The almost exclusive use of the small harbors and bays for expressive/recreational purposes has developed in the last four or five decades of this century. This shift reflects a reappraisal of the potential opportunities for human involvement in the coastal zone and the marine environment. The coastal inhabitants have begun to explore the Pacific in the course of providing a meaning for the well-defined, non-work part of their lives.

In this paper we will notice the cultural and historical conditions associated with this shift from technical to expressive interests; we will also describe the range of expressive types of activity in Newport Harbor, and we will point out the probable developmental character of this situation.

The Centering of "Play" in Leisure

The idea of leisure time being available to the population in general is really not much older than its expression in marine-oriented activity. Veblen's (1899) indictment of the "leisure class," while equating the presence of leisure with wealth, failed to anticipate that leisure would become one of the general, highly valued goals of all citizens in the latter part of the twentieth century. The earlier development of the idea of *work* as being a well defined activity, performed in specific locales and during specific periods, contributed

much of the meaning to its opposite, *leisure*, a period in which the individual would structure his own time for pleasure—interest expressed through emotional, intellectual, and physical involvement. As Dumazedier (1968, pp. 251–252) points out, this condition is satisfied only in industrial and postindustrial cultures.²

Modern leisure manifests itself in play:

A free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13).

The Coastal Margins and the Pacific as Playgrounds

The perception of the sea as providing opportunities for self-expression through play is a relatively recent discovery. Yachting off the Southern California coast did not develop to a great extent until the second decade of this century.³ It has only achieved its present popularity since World War II. Yachting relied heavily on the earlier commercial maritime experience and, as a matter of fact, incorporated a suitable subset of commercial goals. Such highly prized features as speed, seaworthiness, maneuverability, and ease of operation were incorporated into rules, ratings, and contests, and influenced the ways in which the new leisure craft were built. The earliest yachts on the West Coast were scaled-down versions of commercial craft just as the smaller bay boats were modeled from tenders, dories, and smacks.

The artifacts and implements that make up the expressive tradition reflect its heritage, its beginnings in the age of maritime commerce. The business of transport by sea evolved into its expressive counterpart of travel by sea under no commercial constraint to carry freight or passengers. Similarly, and somewhat earlier, the business of fishing evolved into its expressive counterpart of sport fishing, which focuses on the process of catching/luring particular species of fish rather than on the commercial value of the catch. Even the expressive use of the beaches and the shore finds its earlier

functional counterpart in the coastal population's desire to escape from climatic extremes and to bathe in the sea.

Newport Harbor's Evolution

As early as the 1870s, people traveled from their inland homes to spend the day, the weekend, or the summer at the shore. There were summer camps at such places as Oceanside, Laguna Beach, and Newport Beach.⁴ As time passed, tents were replaced by cottages and hotels. Summer seaside resorts were linked with major urban centers by electric and steam-powered railroads such as the Long Beach Line that had its terminus in Newport Beach.⁵ Land developers converted seasonal residential interest into real-estate development. Newport Bay was dredged, which led to the creation of a fishing fleet and fish processing plants. Recreational fishing in the bay developed by the second decade of the century when day boats and fishing barges began to cater to the leisure interests of the working class. Yacht clubs were formed in the twenties to sponsor racing and cruising events.

The interests of the new leisure-oriented community and the commercial fishing interests came into early conflict in Newport Bay. Beek (n.d., p. 57) reports:

In 1919 Balboa Island residents seeking annexation to the city of Newport Beach faced stiff opposition. Newport at this time was interested almost entirely in commercial activities. . . . There was an incipient war between the Balboa and the Newport ends of town, Newport being concerned with commercial interests and Balboa with recreational and residential development.

The definitive shift from commercial to expressive use of the bay, however, came only at the end of World War II with the termination of the wartime shipbuilding contracts. Local shipyards were reduced to the maintenance of yachts and workboats and to minor construction. As the fisheries moved farther offshore, the fishing fleets began to be based in San Pedro or San Diego.⁶ With the development of fiberglass as a material for the construction of hulls

in the late 1950s, boat building became cheaper and recreational boating a possibility for more and more people.

Leisure Interest and Involvement: Play and Our Seafaring Tradition

In the shift from commercial to expressive use, the form of the latter tends to reflect the former — specifically, those aspects of commerce that have esthetic, artistic, or romantic value today. We seem to appreciate the organized and international character of expressive behavior to the degree that such behavior has been imbedded in larger, customary behavior systems that are accepted as having an appropriate and orderly structure. In other words, we enhance our experience of leisure by engaging in activities that once figured as central to our technical, commercial, and protective purposes. This can be seen in the reconstructing of a harbor scene to reflect the shoreside picture of the heroic age of seafaring.

On the East Coast, such “postcard” harbors as Mystic Seaport, Oxford, Newport, Marblehead, Bar Harbor, Rockport, Beaufort, and Vineyard Haven effectively hark back to an earlier working time. The proper organization of images can considerably intensify the expressive experience in the same manner that church architecture intensifies the religious experience.

Southern California’s small bays and harbors, however, largely lack histories that extend back into the time of sailing workboats. Consequently, finding the bridge between working and expressive traditions is not easily accomplished. Although in Newport Harbor a fish canning plant has been idealized and made into a restaurant, a dory fishing fleet still operates off the beach in the main tourist area, and a Baltic trading schooner operated by the Sea Scouts occupies a prominent place in the main channel, the principal emphasis in the architectonics of the harbor reflects general Southern California tradition rather than the harbor’s particular history.

The Variety of Expressive Forms in Newport Harbor

Because the individual can select the form of play to enjoy at lei-

sure, he may choose play that emphasizes responsibility or diminishes it; that focuses on risk-taking or reduces risk; that heightens sociability or the experience of solitude; that highly structures experience in terms of temporal order or alternatively exposes the atemporal flow. Different combinations of values on these dimensions to produce different types of play activities.

With the exception of a few commercial fishing boats, Newport Harbor today is totally devoted to recreational boating. Its expressive use has a number of variants, among them the following.

Living on the Water. One of the smaller groups of marine-oriented people who use the harbor is composed primarily of individuals in the process of fitting out sailboats to cruise offshore. For these people, their boats are their homes. They are detached from the common concerns of the shoreside householders. They work to earn funds for their cruising expenses, but spend most of their time working on their boats. Their dream is to sail to the ends of the earth, across the Pacific to Raratonga, and then on to New Zealand, adventuring in the ocean world. For many of them, the bay is the entrance into a transcendental life, into a world of primary sense experience and a feeling that land-bound folk can only dream of. For these people, the essence of boating is play; their presence in the harbor is of value to others because they help nurture other people's dreams.

Closely related to these cruising-oriented sailors are the "live-aboarders," who may not have any long-term plans to cruise the oceans of the world, but share the attraction of the sea that prompts them to live on the water. Their boats range from converted Alaskan fishing trollers to older Chris Craft cabin cruisers. Some may occasionally cruise to Catalina Island; others may never leave the dock. In their sixties and seventies, some live-aboarders chose this life style not only for its intrinsic rewards, but also because it was inexpensive relative to buying waterfront property.

Owning a Classic. Another small segment of the actively involved ocean-oriented population consists of people who own and maintain classic boats, generally wooden boats modeled on either the working fishing fleets of the era of sail or, to a much more limited

extent, luxury-powered boats of the period ending about 1935. Classic boats are rare: in Newport Harbor there are fewer than one hundred. They require considerable maintenance and do not resemble current racing and cruising class vessels.

These boats represent the great tradition in boat design from the drawing boards of Herreschoff, Burgess, Alden, and others. They capture the interest of boater and nonboater alike with a blending of form and function that is uncommon in boats in current production, and in recalling the working craft world they enhance the expressive experience.

The Bay Boats. There is a class of open skiff that is primarily used to power around in the harbor. People simply enjoy being on the water in a busy and visually stimulating harbor situation. The prototype boat is either a wooden, lapstrake Lyman or a fiberglass copy of an earlier, rounded counter, open launch, possibly powered by an electric motor. A similar land-based activity is something like a Sunday afternoon drive in the park.

Coastal Cruising. Many of the boats in the harbor are involved in weekend cruising either to one of the Santa Barbara Islands or to one of the harbors bounded on the north by Santa Barbara and on the south by Ensenada, Mexico. These local cruising boats constitute the majority of the approximately 10,000 boats currently moored, in slips or in dry storage, in Newport Bay.

Racing. For specialized carriers of the past, such as slavers, smugglers, the China packets, and the fishing schooner fleets, fast passages and early arrivals translated directly into economic bonuses (Chapelle, n.d.). Today, another segment of the Newport Harbor boating community pursues a goal that goes back to the days of commercial sail — speed. The racing of sailboats enjoys a central place in the harbor today. Fast passages demonstrate a winning combination of designer, builder, and sailor and constitute one of the least ambiguous measures of achievement and success in the boating community. Record-breaking provides two contrasting kinds of pleasure: the first is characteristic of the expressive paradigm — total involvement in all aspects of the process; the second is

characteristic of the nonexpressive real world – the enhancement of one's status that comes with the success of any legitimate goal-oriented venture.

Displaying. For another segment of the boating community, audience awareness seems to play an important role in the expressive experience. Waterfront homes are matched by large yachts, most of which rarely leave their slips. Motor yachts congregate outside bayfront restaurants and yacht clubs. For these boat owners the audience seems to be a motivating factor; it seems important to them that people are watching admiringly. The following report from the *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 1981, is an example of the importance of audience involvement:

It was a bright, sunny Sunday morning when guests boarded Ileana and Nick Scobie's 50-foot Hatteras, *Mist*, at the dock of their Linda Isle home for a trip to Catalina for lunch.

Tom Smith, skipper of the *Mist*, made a brief stop at the Linda Isle dock of Shirlee and Bob Parker to pick them up before he headed out of Newport Harbor.

The Parkers joined Ileana and Nick and Kay and Dr. Victor McCay aboard the yacht.

After morning refreshments (champagne, Bloody Marys, coffee and croissants) and a smooth cruise, the party arrived at Avalon in less than two hours.

The party was met at the dock by a van from the Catalina Country Club provided by Lynn and John Nickerson – owners of the club – and whizzed up the hill for lunch.

It is not, of course, that racers or cruisers do not derive satisfaction or pride from the recognition of peers, but rather that among these groups the saliency of this factor is secondary to more important substantive issues (i.e., winning races, cruising to distant places). Racers, for example, gain prestige not from having fancy, high-tech boats, but from winning in them, and cruisers gain recognition not for having the biggest cruising yacht, but, for example, for having the smallest yacht to go around Cape Horn. What is valued by the person and his audience alike has much to do with social and economic factors which influence a person's beliefs.

Displaying can take a variety of forms. These can range from the inactive display of material artifacts to activities which involve "showing off." No matter what form displaying takes, it is an important factor in understanding participation in the harbor "scene."

Sport Fishing. Sport fishing has continued to play an important part in the harbor culture. Fishermen rent small skiffs to fish in the bay, or go out on charter fishing boats to bottom fish along the coast. Charter captains also take their clients further offshore to fish for such species as yellowtail. The most elaborate sport fishing technology is devoted to the search for major game fish, in particular the billfish. These fishermen use as fishing platforms high-speed, open-sterned yachts built by such firms as Bertram, Hatteras, or Pacifica. Luminaries in this subculture have included such persons as Ernest Hemingway and Zane Grey. The combination of marine design, speed, size, and gear provides the setting in which the billfisherman plays out the drama of man combatting, and ultimately dominating, a powerful marine antagonist — a modern-day enactment of the old sea hunt.

Clowning. There are also boat owners in the harbor who burlesque the serious boating fraternity. Their boats are miniatures, painted with polkadots, obviously unseaworthy, and more generally grotesque in every way. They serve the function that clowns serve in a circus: to parody the apparent seriousness of purpose of the expressive involvement. The "Character Boat Parade" in July demonstrates that these are a bona fide part of the Newport Harbor community. Its audience, part of that community, knows exactly what the jokers are deriding.

Watching. Participation is only part of the expressive use of the harbor. Play with boats is of considerable interest to its watchers. Moored boats, boats preparing to get under way, boats under way, and boats drawing away from the shore all provide opportunity for involvement through fantasy. Furthermore, American culture provides legitimacy for sports-spectacle involvement through audience participation.

Other Play. There are numerous other categories of people who use the harbor—among them windsurfers, bathers, recreational fishermen, small boat and day sailers (e.g., Hobiecats, Lido 14s, snowbirds, sabots and other small-class racers), canoers and kayakers, racing shell crews, and passengers on a variety of the crafts that are used to tour the harbor.

As a consequence of these expressive trends, a myriad expressive parts blend to produce the harbor “scene.” The thin stretches of water and land interfaces represent the centers for social interaction between various elements of the domain. Picture-window bars and restaurants feature views of the harbor which offer a maritime ambience effectively enhancing dining and social interaction.

This interface zone is the grandstand from which the audience can view the aquatic players and their equipment. But more importantly, it is a place where individuals can change hats back and forth from spectator to player.

Harbor Play Costs

Newport Harbor probably represents an extreme in a developmental sequence of events in the small harbors of Southern California. It has for a number of years suffered an acute shortage of slips and moorings, with the results that docking fees can exceed ten dollars per foot, and moorings are sold for as much as \$400 per foot. One consequence is that live-aboarders are moving from slips to moorings, in violation of a city ordinance. An individual may now have to pay close to \$1,000 per month to keep a 30-foot boat in the harbor; this includes monthly payments and docking fees but not maintenance costs (and the cost of marine supplies has gone up considerably in the past few years). Consequently, communal or joint ownership of boats—achieved through partnerships, leasing arrangements, boating clubs—is increasingly common.

Economic conditions are also affecting the boating industry in the area. Costa Mesa, once an important small boat manufacturing center, now has many competitors and is in a period of decline. The scarcity of suitable harbors along the Southern California coast places limits on the expansion of boating at current technological and social organizational levels, and demand has suffered as a re-

sult. Some boatbuilders have been forced to leave because of high overhead and rezoning, while others have decided to relocate because of the opportunity cost of holding on to the property equity that could be used for investment capital (due to the value of real estate). Because of the high demand for boats in Florida, lower commercial and real estate values there, the ready availability of labor, and the almost endless supply of present and potential harbors in that area, many boat manufacturers have moved to Florida or the East Coast in general (e.g., Jensen Marine, Columbia yachts).

In spite of increasing economic barriers, people of various socioeconomic backgrounds still participate in the harbor "scene." Whether on water or on shore, these participants are attracted by the marine environment and what it has to offer. Presently, there seems to be a commitment to the pursuit of leisure that is still able to transcend economic barriers through expressive adaptations. There is no reason to believe this trend will not continue.

The costs, both monetary and non-monetary, of recreational boating have always been an acknowledged part of its mystique. The following clichés represent a folk appraisal of the cost of the commitment to boating: "A boat is a hole in the water into which one pours money." And "The day you buy it [boat] and the day you sell it are the happiest days you'll have while you own it."

The Future of Coastal Play

The small bays and harbors of Southern California are increasingly becoming theaters for the performance of expressive behavior. As long as leisure was limited to the upper class, and before the physical and spiritual values of play were clearly understood, such activity in general and such use of harbors in particular were not considered to have great value. Today, there is a much more general distribution of leisure time across all segments of American culture; there is also a new interest in the organization of expressive behavior and in the design of the settings in which such behavior takes place. New leisure retirement communities such as Sun City, new heritage communities such as Jamestown, and new fantasy theme

parks such as Disney Land and Disney World all point to such a conclusion.

Continual enhancement of harbors, such as Newport, for the commercialization of leisure can be anticipated in newly formed enterprises. The appreciation of the artifacts of the earlier marine working culture by the present marine leisure culture suggests that the embellishment of the present harbor environment with motifs and artifacts from the past will significantly strengthen the expressive experience. Provisions for maritime museums, classic-boat shops, collections of old sailing ships and workboats, viewing sites, walks, and tours are some examples of ways this can be achieved. There should be a blending of old and new with the old serving as a reference for present and future play. Providing for expressive experiences is becoming a well defined enterprise.

The small bays and harbors of Southern California are becoming the new points of embarkation for the personal exploration of the marine world. That these discoveries are being made in the context of leisure and play rather than in the traditional commercially formulated activities is a hallmark of our twentieth-century culture.

Notes

1. Expressive behavior is the general term used by psychologically oriented behavioral scientists for the domain of leisure pursuits. (Sutton-Smith and Roberts, 1967).
2. The conception of leisure as an activity clearly outside of work, or its related activities, did not occur until there were increases in technological complexity.

“One often noted consequence of technological specialization has been the emergence of ‘leisure’ in opposition to more and more clearly defined ‘work.’ In hunting and gathering or simple farming societies, it is difficult to separate work from play; more often than not, productive activities are so intertwined with social interaction, song, dance, play, or ritual, that one does not know where one begins and the other ends” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 334).

3. The concept of *yachting* did not appear on the American cultural scene

until the middle of the nineteenth century. One of the first clubs, the New York Yacht Club, was founded in 1844.

4. A fair summary of these aspects of Orange County history can be found in Pleasant, 1931, pp. 455–460.
5. *Op. cit.*
6. Extensive overfishing throughout the early part of this century changed the focus of the commercial fishery in Southern California to more available fish in the less traditional grounds further offshore. The change to bigger boats and different species affected the fish processing industry in Newport.

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