
Uninterrupted views: real-estate advertising and changing perspectives on coastal property in New Zealand

Damian Collins

Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E3, Canada; e-mail: damian.collins@ualberta.ca

Robin Kearns

School of Geography, Geology and Environmental Science, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand; e-mail: r.kearns@auckland.ac.nz

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Abstract. This paper considers the landscape of coastal property in New Zealand through the lens of real-estate advertising. In analyzing a sample of 236 newspaper advertisements, it connects representations of coastal housing to broader concerns about the development of the coastline. Much public anxiety centres on the notion that coastal residential development and escalating property values signal private gain, but public loss. What is lost, it is claimed, is a landscape that is open, physically but also socially: the presence of imposing holiday homes detracts from the experience of *going* to the beach, and contributes to the unaffordability of *staying* at the beach. Such notions do not, of course, feature prominently in advertising. We find that views *from* private property over the coast are often prioritized in advertising, while the coast itself is typically portrayed as devoid of people. This invites viewers to place themselves in the image—as prospective property owners—and appeals to notions of *going* to the coast to secure privacy and opportunities for passive relaxation. Advertising for coastal real estate, we conclude, promotes a way of seeing the coastal landscape that is consistent with the ideology of enclosure.

1 Introduction

There is currently widespread public anxiety in New Zealand about coastal property. Underpinning this concern is a perception that coastal landscapes imagined as public, democratic, and relatively unspoiled are being transformed into elite and privatized spaces with a heavy human imprint. This is due primarily to residential housing development. Large, expensive houses—both stand-alone dwellings and subdivisions—are rapidly replacing earlier forms of coastal settlement and land use. Specifically, they are supplanting settlements comprised of modest, low-density, do-it-yourself dwellings known as ‘baches’ (Kearns and Collins, 2006); campgrounds which offered opportunities for low-cost, if basic, accommodation on grassy fields behind sandy beaches; and coastal pastoral farms.

On the one hand, such processes are consistent with the logic of capitalist property—according to which, “Progress is inevitable (and usually beneficial), and entails the valorization and intensification of the land” (Blomley, 2004a, page 84). Yet, on the other hand, they are far from universally welcomed as signalling the conversion of coastal land parcels to their highest and best use. Instead, they are interpreted as representing “death by a thousand cuts for the coastline” (Cumming, 2004, unpaginated). In addition, dramatic escalations in the value of coastal property are seen to be putting the bourgeois dream of owning ‘a place’ at the coast beyond the means of the overwhelming majority of New Zealanders (Barber, 2005; Butcher, 2007). In this respect, the coast may be becoming as exclusionary as other propertied landscapes, such as those which have been gentrified (Blomley, 2004a).

In this paper we investigate the changing social and cultural values associated with coastal property development and ownership in New Zealand. We do so with reference to advertisements for coastal real estate—powerful assemblages of images and text that reveal much about how (capitalist) property rights at the coast are envisaged. In so doing, we follow Moon et al (2006) in recognizing that advertising and promotional materials help to frame the nature of places—in particular, by shaping them as commodities to be desired. In this sense, there is a recursive link between the material (eg the physical reality of a cliff-top home offering panoramic coastal views) and the ideological (eg advertising urging prospective buyers to ‘grab these exclusive views’).

Perkins and Thorns (2001, page 197) characterize “the flight from the urban areas to the country (beaches, mountains, lakes and rivers), particularly in the summer, but also increasingly at other times of year” as “the most significant feature of domestic tourism” in New Zealand. Temporary, if routinized, escapes from the urban have conventionally been linked to intergenerational ownership of (initially very modest) holiday homes. In addition, as part of the so-called ‘sea change’ in preferred residential locations, there is increasing permanent migration to the coastal margins of countries such as South Africa (Visser, 2004), Australia (Burnley, 2004), and New Zealand (Bedford et al, 2005). Coastal areas relatively removed from large cities are taking on new meanings as sites of permanent settlement, and as sites of investment (especially for middle-aged couples realizing the equity on their primary homes), in addition to their well-established roles as sites of recreation and relaxation.

In this paper we focus on advertising for coastal real estate in the print media, and consider the degree to which it reflects and reinforces perceptions that New Zealand’s coastal landscapes are increasingly captured, and indeed dominated, by private proprietary concerns. Specifically, we survey advertising text and images for tropes such as privacy, exclusivity, finitude, increasing cost, and command over space. In so doing, we follow Harvey (1989) in recognizing advertising as one of the dominant texts in contemporary social life, promising ever-more innovative places to consume. We also recognize a relationship between the symbolic places of advertising, and material landscapes of property development: real-estate advertisements mediate viewers’ understandings of place. In this respect, advertising for coastal real estate in New Zealand may contribute to collective anxieties about development at the coast, independent of firsthand knowledge of the particular sites portrayed. In being attentive to the ways in which advertisements encourage and/or prioritize private claims at/over the coast, we seek to contribute to literature that seeks to clarify contemporary dynamics of privatization by articulating “what exactly is privatised and how privatisation is carried out” (Glasze, 2005, page 222; see also Blomley, 2004b).

The remainder of the paper is arranged as follows. In section 2 we survey the significance of the coast to New Zealand, affording particular attention to changing forms of beach settlement. Next, in section 3 we turn our attention to property considerations and, specifically, to the legal geographies of the New Zealand coast. In section 4 we review the place of advertising in reflecting and promoting the propertied landscape. An outline of the methods adopted for this research follows in section 5. In section 6 we offer an indicative exploration of the conceptual themes raised, with reference to two property press publications. We then consider the significance of these results in section 7, before the conclusion (section 8) reflects on the connections between advertising and the changing landscapes of coastal property.

2 Going coastal in New Zealand

New Zealand is a strongly coastal nation, not only in a physical sense—its coastline stretches 19 883 km (LINZ, 2003)—but also in a very human sense: five of its six largest urban regions are coastal, and the beach features prominently in national identity and culture. Mass participation in beach-based activities has been facilitated by the relative proximity of the coast for most New Zealanders. This accessibility, combined with the popularity of beach-based recreation, has also fuelled demand for *staying* at the beach—for opportunities to reside at coastal locations, either as a camper or as a ‘bach’-owner.

The term ‘bach’ (pronounced ‘batch’) is unique to New Zealand—originating in the assumed connection between being a *bachelor* and living in basic accommodation—and has conventionally been used to describe rudimentary holiday cottages. The bach was traditionally a modest, low-cost site of temporary accommodation built in relatively low densities along the coast, as well as at some lakefront and high country sites. It was typically small and single level, often built with family labour from secondhand materials, and commonly lacked electricity and indoor plumbing (Yoffe, 2000). The minimalist, do-it-yourself nature of construction meant that baches displayed a vernacular style of architecture (see figure 1). They were usually sited in the centre of a small, unfenced yard, and oriented towards the water.



Figure 1. [In colour online, see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a4085>] A bach at Ocean Beach, Hawke’s Bay (source: authors).

Keen and Hall (2004) observe that bach development in New Zealand progressed through various stages, corresponding with increasing prosperity and regulatory control. An initial phase, beginning in the 1890s and continuing until World War 2, involved roughly constructed baches being established on both public and private land, primarily at the coast. Land titles were often informal (in the case of leases over private land), and sometimes nonexistent (in terms of squatter settlements on public reserves). A second phase of bach development coincided with the postwar boom, and entailed incremental increases in numbers, quality, and formality. Some of the original bach settlements closest to major cities were enveloped by urban expansion at this time, although this was compensated for by new construction on sites more distant from population centres. For example, Morton et al (1973, page 52)

recount a subdivision on the remote Karikari Peninsula in the far north of the North Island:

“In 1956, 85 sections were offered.... The price per quarter acre was £200. Alternatively, the sections could be paid off at 10 shillings a week after a deposit of £10.

This brought the land within reach of almost any pocket. Road access was poor, subdivision roads were metalled and the only service available was water.”

A third phase of bach development began in the 1960s, entailing higher quality construction within planned subdivisions, in a manner that was more large-scale and capital intensive. More recently, we can identify a fourth phase of residential property development at the coast, in which baches (and associated notions of ‘basic’ living) have increasingly given way to larger, professionally built, holiday homes. This trend, and related dramatic increases in the sales prices of coastal housing and land, has been particularly noticeable in coastal areas in the north of the North Island, but has been observed near major cities and resort towns throughout the country (Keen and Hall, 2004). It is evident in both new coastal subdivisions, of which there are many, and on sites formerly occupied by traditional baches and/or campgrounds.

This post-bach phase is also characterized by a marked change in architecture, with vernacular designs giving way to an international style emphasizing indoor–outdoor flow, separation of living and sleeping quarters, extensive use of glass and elevation to maximize sea views, and incorporation of natural timbers and hues. Indeed, a recent international survey of twenty-five architecturally noteworthy ‘beach cottages’ (Falkenberg, 2002) included four New Zealand examples of this style. The differences between the New Zealand beach houses portrayed in this volume and the archetypal bach are stark—in terms of design, size, grandeur, and amenity.

In terms of price increases, one illustrative examination of six small coastal settlements found median sales prices increased between 125% and 240% in the five years from 1999 to 2004 (Cheyne and Freeman, 2006). These rates of increase were considerably higher than those observed in both the larger regions of which these settlements were part, and New Zealand as a whole (where the increase over this time was 46%). More broadly, data from the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand (REINZ, 2006) reveals that in the five years ending May 2006, national median house sales prices increased by 74%. Regions known to have active second-home markets generally experienced increases at or above this level: particularly high rates of increase were experienced in Queenstown, a South Island lakefront resort (135%), western Bay of Plenty, which includes many of the beach settlements of the Coromandel Peninsula (106%), coastal parts of Northland, including the popular Tutakaka coast (106%), and the Mangonui region, encompassing the Karikari Peninsula referred to above (99%). One exception to this pattern was for the islands in Auckland’s Hauraki Gulf, where the five-year rate of increase was consistent with that found in the Auckland region more generally—a still impressive 64%. It is also useful to note that prices within Auckland were escalating from higher base prices (REINZ, 2006).

While the increases in the price, formality, and amenity of coastal residences in New Zealand are dramatic, broadly similar trends have been observed in other second-home markets. Parallels can be seen, for example, in Selwood and Tonts’s (2004) account of the development of coastal residential property in Western Australia (a progression from ‘shacks’ made from basic materials, often built by squatters on public reserve lands, through increasing formalization of title and provision of services, and the development of distinct holiday centres, to the more recent building of condominiums, elite subdivisions, and resorts). The Danish experience of summer vacationers developing second homes on the coast is also pertinent: makeshift construction began in the 1890s, with modest structures “built as close as possible to the

beach or in places with views of the sea” (Tress, 2002, page 113). Many of the earliest settlements subsequently became part of Copenhagen, but construction, in increasingly formal and standardized styles, continued in more remote locations. By the 1960s, with increases in “public welfare, individual mobility and leisure-time”, second houses changed from being “as small and as cheap as possible” to “smaller copies” of urban houses (page 115). However, from the early 1970s Denmark began to enact strict planning laws severely limiting new development—whereas Western Australia and New Zealand continued with relatively laissez-faire attitudes.

In the Canadian context, Halseth (2004) notes that the summer cottage (or cabin) at the lake has both material and symbolic importance. While situated in predominantly rural landscapes, they are separate from rural life, and appeal primarily to urbanites as places of leisure, relaxation, and escape from routine. This cultural perception, combined with increasing prosperity, has seen considerable upwards pressure on property prices, transforming cottage country into an increasingly elite landscape. In Ireland, Mottiar and Quinn (2003, page 114) observe that capital-intensive redevelopment of traditional seaside resorts threatens to undermine their value to second-home owners, by detracting from “the recreational possibilities afforded by the area’s environmental resources (open space, ‘undeveloped’ status, natural amenities, etc).” Concern to protect the leisure-related amenity values of recreational landscapes has prompted political organizing and protest among some second-home owners in Ireland.

Returning to the New Zealand context, we can see that there are clear international precedents for many of the trends currently being observed. Nonetheless, they evoke high levels of consternation (see, eg, Barber, 2005; Butcher, 2007; Cumming, 2004). While this anxiety is sometimes lent specificity by the particularities of a proposal or new development (eg the closure of a campground and its replacement by town houses), more often than not it is curiously vague. It reflects generalized fears, in both emotional and technical terms, that the subdivision of the coast signals private gain, but public loss. By way of example, illustrative comments in recent newspaper reports suggest “everybody loses something” when coastal farms are “carved up” (ie subdivided); that new residential developments devalue, if not destroy, “secluded bays and hillsides with jaw-dropping views of the rugged coastline and the shimmering, island-studded waters”; that key areas must be “secured forever” in public trust and thereby “saved” from development; that ecological and historical sites are under threat from increased population pressure; and that undeveloped coastal sites are “pristine”, even when intensively farmed.

It is important to note that, while such anxieties have been expressed with increasing intensity in recent years, they are not without precedent. Concerns about subdivision at the coast were expressed as early as 1973, in Morton et al’s influential volume *Seacoast in the Seventies: The Future of the New Zealand Shoreline*. The authors’ central concern was the ad hoc development of beachfront residential areas in the absence of a national planning policy. Specifically, the “large scale procurement of beach frontage for subdivision and marketing [which] began in the early 1950s” (page 52) was followed by residential development involving “unnecessary expenditure of capital..., closing of leisure options to many of the people, damage to the coastal landscape and multiplication of the suburbs” (page 55).

More than three decades on, the settlements critiqued in *Seacoast* appear remarkably small and modest. They represent the archetypal postwar bach landscapes that were later normalized along much of the New Zealand coast; they came to be seen as an appropriate form of development, which did not unduly strengthen private interests at the expense of public values. Yet, at the time, Morton et al regarded them as

retrogressive and destructive. Such characterizations were in large part aesthetic—new developments were consistently described as “scars” on the landscape—but they are also criticized for being increasingly inegalitarian (due to the increasing costs of ownership), for restricting public access to the coast outside of narrow government-owned foreshore reserves, and for removing opportunities for camping, particularly informal or ‘freedom’ camping. These concerns were later picked up within the *New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement 1994* (NZPCS), the document which today guides local authorities in the use and management of the coastal environment.

The NZPCS identifies five matters of national importance, two of which concern protecting the coastal environment from “inappropriate subdivision, use, and development” (s.6a–b), while a third requires the “maintenance and enhancement of public access to and along the coastal marine area” (s.6e). The remainder of the statement provides some guidance as to which types of coastal development are appropriate and which are not: for example, subdivision may be encouraged “in areas where the natural character has already been compromised” (policy 1.1.1a), but sprawl and sporadic subdivision must be prevented, adverse effects should be avoided or mitigated, and adequate services must be provided, especially for waste disposal. Thus, concerns about the effects of coastal residential development are long-standing and (now) officially mandated in New Zealand, and private property rights on the coast are somewhat constrained by environmental concerns (and the concept of risk vis-à-vis hazards).

3 Coastal New Zealand as a propertied landscape

In New Zealand the first property regime was that of the Maori, under which rights (particularly rights to access and use resources) tended to be allocated among a number of individuals and families on a functional and nonalienable basis (Banner, 1999). With colonization, it was rapidly replaced by an English property regime, under which land was a commodity, and property rights over land were organized on an exclusive geographic basis. Subsequently, owners enjoyed a set of negative rights that promised “the ideal of command over a geographic space” (page 811). As elsewhere, the eventual outcome was a system in which *private property* prevailed, and property boundaries were understood to separate the owner from the state, and, indeed, from all other members of the (nonowning) public (see Blomley, 2004a).

In New Zealand, property law is murky on the boundary between land and sea; the landscape of coastal property is highly variegated, and subject to measures of both legal and popular contestation. It is structured in part by two related, and relatively widespread, notions: first, that the public *should* have a universal right of access to the coast; and, second, that this right *is secured*, in a practical sense, by the ‘Queen’s Chain’—a 20 m wide strip of land extending inland from the mean high-water springs mark (as well as from the edge of lakes and navigable rivers) in the ownership of the Crown or local government (LINZ, 2003; Storm, 2005). The Queen’s Chain, in theory, gives the public the right to use a marginal strip of coastal land, and thus to move up and down the coast, but not to cross privately owned land in order to access it.

However, many private titles to waterfront have been issued, especially prior to the mid-19th century. The result is a complex system of coastal property ownership in which the (still informal) notion of a Queen’s Chain is only partially realized. A recent survey (LINZ, 2003) found that 38% of the coastline is in Crown ownership, 31% is owned by local government bodies, and 30% is in private ownership. The overwhelming majority of private land parcels adjoining the coast extend below the mean high-water springs mark and thus potentially compromise public rights to use

the high-tide beach. Most have been surveyed to the mean high-water mark, and rarely extend further to encompass any part of the seabed.⁽¹⁾

Critically, for present purposes, the overwhelming majority of contemporary coastal residential development occurs on privately owned land, and is sufficiently set back from the beach so as not to pose direct physical or legal barriers to public access. Moreover, when residential subdivision *does* occur on land adjoining the coast, local government is empowered to reclaim any marginal land in private ownership, so as to protect and enhance public access, recreational opportunities, and/or conservation values. The resulting ‘esplanade strips’ and ‘esplanade reserves’ give additional purchase to the notion of a Queen’s Chain, and at the same time reduce the potential for housing construction in areas of high hazard risk (ie sites prone to erosion, inundation, and/or flooding). Beachfront sites continue to attract considerable premiums, but are a highly limited commodity. As many coastal residential communities expand, much new residential development is occurring on lots distant from the beach, including on sites located beyond reasonable walking distance of sand and surf. Narrow, ‘ribbon’ development of the type that characterized many bach communities in the mid-20th century is increasingly rare.

Contemporary coastal development does not typically, or necessarily, compromise public access to the coast *in formal legal terms*. Development can, under certain circumstances, actually improve access (eg through the provision of new roads and walkways, and local government taking possession of marginal strips). However, this is contrary to widespread perception that, in the words of one senior government minister, “[a] high proportion of coastal land in New Zealand ... is being sold off into private ownership without necessarily having the access rights that have been previously available preserved” (quoted in Fleming, 2007, page 3).

Public concern often centres, then, on the notion that development and escalating property prices represent a form of private taking. This taking is of a landscape that was once ‘open’, not only in a physical sense (eg rolling pastures behind the beach, albeit fenced and privately owned) but also in the sense that claiming a *place* on the coast was open to New Zealanders from across the socioeconomic spectrum. In this vision—partly romantic, yet partly grounded in actual experiences over much of the 20th century—a family of moderate means could aspire to purchase a small parcel of coastal land and build their own bach, and anyone could claim a site at a commercial beachfront campground. In addition, all beachgoers, including day-tripping sojourners, could attain uninterrupted views of the coast and its hinterland (rather than being seen by property owners, and seeing their dwellings).

How should we interpret contemporary concern about much coastal property development? Certainly, there are grounds for scepticism. Given rapid escalations in housing prices across almost all regions of New Zealand, many households find themselves unable to purchase a first home in their primary place of residence. One recent report into real-estate prices begins by noting that “over the quarter ending November 2006 national home affordability declined by 5.1%”, as median house prices increased at more than four times the rate of average wages (Hargreaves and Histen, 2006, page 1). Moreover, a decline in affordability had been recorded “for each quarter over the last 4.5 years”. Unsurprisingly, homeownership rates in New Zealand are falling (Department of Building and Housing, 2006). In this context, focusing on the inability of some people to purchase second homes at the beach is politically questionable.

⁽¹⁾ A related, and highly complex issue, concerns Maori customary rights over the foreshore and seabed, and the possibility that these might support claims to title.

Moreover, in terms of the normal operation of housing markets, the demolition and replacement of older, often ramshackle dwellings—as well as the development of new subdivisions in areas of high demand—does not appear to be any particular cause for alarm. Such development may pose ecological risks, although in most instances this development is occurring on landscapes that have already been thoroughly modified by human activity, especially pastoral farming. These points aside, the ability to *stay* at the beach over summer holidays and on select weekends throughout the year *has* formed a key part of recreation and domestic tourism in New Zealand, and is today seen to be jeopardized by ‘inappropriate subdivision’.

4 Reading the advertised landscape

Our approach follows the perspective of a number of cultural geographers (eg Anderson and Gale, 1992) for whom places and their attendant imaginings are not given, but rather are made through contested processes. In this sense, landscape is a representation rather than an image or empirical object per se (Cosgrove, 1998). In terms of coastal property, we are concerned with representations of material sites in advertising. In the first instance, the purpose of this advertising is to stimulate demand and increase the desirability of both the particular sites portrayed, and coastal property more generally. Beyond these immediate aims, advertising also contributes to legitimating certain forms and understandings of coastal property in the collective imagination.

Advertising is, in some senses, an obvious focal point for such work: it not only deploys images of landscape, but also encourages particular ways of seeing. This is certainly true for real-estate advertising, which Ellis (1993, page 119) likens to “the dime novels of our times”: cheap and disposable, but forging “human geographies where ideologies of individuality, opportunity, and commodity divide the landscape into a complex grid of transferable property”. More generally, Davidson (1992, page 7) characterizes print advertising as “perhaps the best place to quarry for a sense of how our society works”. Advertising must be interpreted rather than simply described and enumerated, as its function is not only to inform but also to persuade (Kearns and Barnett, 1997). Such interpretation frequently involves examining *signifiers*, or the things portrayed, so as to illuminate the *signified*, or the underlying ideas (Williamson, 1978).

While by no means the only source of data that might inform study of controversial residential development, advertising provides relatively detailed representations of houses and land that extend beyond the issue of price. While sales price are frequently central to academic and popular concern, they ultimately convey limited information about property dynamics. Advertising, by contrast, is created by real-estate agents and marketers to reflect the material and cultural concerns of potential buyers, highlight status distinctions, and emphasize symbolic benefits (Bridge, 2001). For this reason, it has proved to be a useful lens in identifying and interpreting changes in the landscapes of consumption associated with gentrification (Mills, 1988; Phillips, 2002). With respect to coastal real estate in particular, advertising offers its readership rich textual and visual descriptions of landscapes that may be increasingly difficult to access firsthand, at least in any sustained way, due to the exclusivity that has accompanied dramatic increases in price and formality.

The potential of taking real-estate advertising seriously is also illustrated by Cheung and Ma’s (2005) consideration of changes in social constructions of ‘home’ in Hong Kong. As basic housing needs are increasingly assured, the focus of marketing has shifted from interior to exterior spaces: apartments are now differentiated according to “private gardens, sun decks, swimming pools, tennis courts, even a privatized window view of sea and sky” (page 73). We see the last point in this list to be of

particular relevance: the spaces included in advertisements, and thus metaphorically claimed, may extend beyond property boundaries.

Such claiming may be particularly apparent when water views are on offer. For example, Cheng (2001, page 216) suggests that real-estate advertising in Hong Kong portrays harbour views in a manner that presents them as “an extension of the home’s private space”—something that can be possessed and privatized. More generally, Blomley (2004b) observes that housing may be designed in such a way as to encourage residents to extend their property claims into adjacent public spaces. The result is not a literal privatization of public space or the formation of a new property right, but a “provisional and extra-legal” extension of proprietary concern that creates “a form of ‘illusory property’ or ‘unreal estate’” (Blomley, 2004b, page 617).

5 Methods

The advertisements analyzed for this research are from two sources. The first was the April 2006 edition of a quarterly ‘Coastal Properties and Holiday Homes’ lift-out section from the *New Zealand Herald*, a high-circulation Auckland-based newspaper. The selected lift-out was 37 pages long, and carried 231 advertisements, 183 of which were ultimately included in the analysis. Those excluded were duplicates and those which were too brief to yield any useful information, promoting property outside of New Zealand, or advertising local real estate (curiously) far removed from any significant body of water. Nine advertisements portrayed real-estate adjacent to lakes, and these were retained, as many lakefront areas in New Zealand are subject to development pressures akin to those found on the seacoast. The advertisements from this source included in the sample ranged in format from half-page spreads with multiple, high-quality colour photographs, to textually dense ‘advertorials’, to small listings printed at a density of over 20 per page.

The second source of advertisements was another lift-out real-estate section, sourced from a free local newspaper, the *Waiheke Week*. It was included because of its intended market: residents of, and visitors to, Waiheke Island. With approximately 40 km of (often spectacular) sandy beaches, Waiheke has experienced considerable development pressure over the last decade. This has stemmed both from gradual increases in the numbers of permanent residents to the current level of 7000 (many of whom commute to central Auckland by ferry), and from those based on the ‘mainland’ seeking holiday homes. While a wide range of housing types can still be found on Waiheke, the island features some of the most expensive residential real estate in New Zealand.

Our review of the advertisements proceeded as follows. First, a detailed description of each was entered into a database. This included details such as the property’s location, price (where stated), realtor, title, and byline; a record of the accompanying text (up to four sentences); and descriptions of the photographs and other images supplied. Where more than one graphic accompanied the advertisement, the size and positioning of each were noted. This dataset was then analyzed in several ways, in order to ascertain what it revealed about contemporary representations and understandings of coastal real estate and coastal property ownership. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of some elements of the data, although our primary focus was on a thematic interpretation of the visual and textual descriptions of properties for sale. In this, we followed Moon et al (2006, page 136) in seeking both to document and to deconstruct the images and metaphors used in promotional materials, and “to read the underlying discourses that reveal evidence of power and position in the maintenance of place”. Our focus was, inevitably, on the advertisements’ promotional intent, as opposed to assessments of their effectiveness. Similar approaches have been

employed in the small but instructive literature that takes seriously the relationship between the material landscape of real property, and representations of particular sites in advertising (see Bridge, 2001; Cheng, 2001; Cheung and Ma, 2005; Ellis, 1993; Eyles, 1987).

The central concern of our study focused on identifying particular themes within the images and accompanying text. We sought to look beyond the familiar, and often clichéd, rhetoric of real-estate advertising (eg ‘future investment’, ‘private retreat’) by searching systematically for tropes connecting with fears that the New Zealand coast is increasingly exclusive, privatized, and off-limits (eg privacy, exclusivity, finitude, increasing cost). We also considered straightforward descriptions of landscapes, views, lot dimensions, and buildings. In so doing, we were influenced by Ellis’s (1993, page 123) contention that real-estate advertising “can be examined in terms of the traditional analytical categories applied to literature—setting, characterization, plot, point of view, theme”. More specifically, we sought to blend a semiological concern for the relationships between *parts* of the text and associated images with a more systematic description of the *content* of the communication, in order to ‘read’ the portrayal of propertied coastal landscapes in advertising.

6 Examining the property press

6.1 Sample

Most advertisements in the *New Zealand Herald* were for real estate in the upper half of the North Island. The regions of Northland and Coromandel—located to the north and east of Auckland, respectively—each accounted for 26% of the advertisements. This is in keeping with their well-established status among Aucklanders (and to a lesser extent, residents of other cities in the upper North Island) as desirable locations for weekend and holiday retreats. The third most represented region was Auckland itself: 24% of advertisements were for houses and lots located within the urban region—some in well-established coastal suburbs, others on the fringe—and generally intended as primary residences, rather than holiday homes. Most of the remaining advertisements were for real estate scattered throughout the upper North Island; only two were in the lower North Island, and five were in the South Island. The lift-out from the *Waiheke Week* contained 53 advertisements (51 for real estate on the island). All were suitable for inclusion in the analysis, reflecting—in part—the way in which all real estate on Waiheke can be described as ‘coastal’.

The total number of advertisements included in the analysis presented here, then, is 236—the overwhelming majority of which were from Auckland (encompassing Waiheke Island), and other upper North Island regions with coastal real estate. While this geographical focus limits our ability to comment directly on trends in coastal property elsewhere in New Zealand, and its representation in advertising, similar trends appear to be at work throughout the country, albeit with property prices in regions more remote from Auckland (and other larger centres) escalating from much lower historical base prices (Cheyne and Freeman, 2006).

A variety of property types featured in our sample: the most common was a detached house and associated small parcel of land (62%), followed by undeveloped sites—typically farm paddocks (20%), and houses on extensive parcels of land, usually intended to be hobby farms (5%). High-density forms of residential real estate were relatively rare—only 9 apartments and 5 townhouses featured among the 236 advertisements—and were typically located in the centres of relatively well-established coastal towns. The low numbers of such properties signal that the coastal landscapes of the upper North Island are not under immediate threat of developing densities similar to those found in, for example, the Gold Coast region of Queensland, Australia.

This comparison is significant because, while the Gold Coast is an extremely popular destination for New Zealand tourists—some 195 000 visited in the year ending June 2006 (Queensland Tourism, 2006)—it is also, and somewhat contradictorily, seen by many as an example of grossly excessive coastal development, which should be avoided in New Zealand.

6.2 Findings

One of the primary concerns New Zealanders express about coastal property concerns escalating prices. Almost all advertisements in the *Waiheke Week* included sale price information, including 33 houses with an average price of NZ\$687 000, as well as 7 undeveloped sites averaging \$1.1 million (thanks in large part to one ridge-top property being offered for \$6.0 million), and 6 apartments averaging \$540 000.⁽²⁾ A significant proportion (over 40%) of listings in the *New Zealand Herald* supplement did not carry sale price information, presumably to necessitate inquiries at realtors' offices. It was notable, however, that, among the 103 properties in this publication for which prices were stated, 21 were over \$1.0 million, including 7 over \$2.0 million. Of all the houses listed with sale prices, across both sources, only 3 were on offer for *less* than the national average of \$328 000. Although such figures are necessarily only indicative, they begin to provide some support for notions that coastal property ownership is reserved for the elite.

Further support for this contention can be found in the changing vocabulary associated with coastal properties. The term 'bach', previously used to describe almost all stand-alone coastal holiday homes, at least in the North Island, was scarcely used—it appeared in only 12 advertisements. In most of these instances, it was employed in a matter-of-fact way ("Beach bach, designed for lazy living, beach just around the cnr."), but on three occasions it was used in an at least partially dismissive sense, to imply that a bach was a type of dwelling no longer adequate for the discerning coastal property owner. One advertisement, entitled "Land Value—Free Bach!", described an "older weatherboard bach with mod cons [suitable] to crash at while you design your dream". Another invited prospective buyers to complete building the bach currently on site, or to "use [it] as accommodation while you build your home". This contrast between 'bach' and 'home' was taken to a higher level in a third advertisement, in which 'bach' was used in a purely negative sense, in order to signal the quality of the dwelling on offer: "Not a bach. An immaculate north facing 3 bedroom multi level home, just 2 minutes flat walk to the beach."

If we take the term 'bach' to suggest a modest, one-level structure with vernacular style and basic facilities, then its logical counterpart on the coast is a dwelling which is elegant, professional, stylish, luxurious, and/or 'architect designed'. Notably, the last of these terms featured in 11 advertisements in and of itself: "Architecturally designed masterpiece enjoying wide estuary views in idyllic setting"; "The house was designed by renowned architect, [name], and is totally themed throughout with special features and detail of the highest standard, like the traditional bell tower that commands prominence on top of the villa." While such descriptions suggest opulence, direct claims to prestige and social status were relatively rare in the advertisements: indicators of quality more commonly took the form of references to spectacular views and beachfront locations (see table 1 below). Sales prices, and lists of amenities (eg marina access; private boat

⁽²⁾ New Zealand dollars used throughout. The average gross full-time salary in New Zealand is just under \$45 000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). In May 2006, the national average sale price for all residential property was \$328 000, while the equivalent figure for Auckland City was \$517 000 (Quotable Value, 2006). In 2006 the New Zealand dollar was valued at approximately US\$0.65, and €0.55.

Table 1. Textual themes in the advertising of coastal real estate (percentages in parentheses).

Textual theme	First sentence	Sentences 2–4	All sentences
Feature <i>within</i> house/site	85 (25.6)	60 (19.8)	145 (22.8)
Views <i>from</i> house/site	82 (24.7)	68 (22.4)	150 (23.6)
Proximity to coast	68 (20.5)	69 (22.8)	137 (21.6)
Lifestyle opportunity	23 (6.9)	21 (6.9)	44 (6.9)
Privacy/seclusion	18 (5.4)	20 (6.6)	38 (3.9)
Prestige/status	14 (4.2)	11 (3.6)	25 (3.9)
Rarity value	12 (3.6)	16 (5.3)	28 (4.4)
Accessibility	10 (3.0)	21 (6.9)	31 (4.9)
Investment opportunity	9 (2.7)	11 (3.6)	20 (3.1)
Miscellaneous	13 (3.3)	6 (2.0)	19 (2.7)
Total	332	303	635

launching facilities, air conditioning, tennis courts)—where provided—were also used to demarcate elite residential opportunities.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this sample of advertisements was the extent to which many communicated relatively little, and sometimes *no*, information about characteristics ‘internal’ to the dwellings and lots for sale. Rather, they emphasized the property’s location *relative* to the coastal environment. This emphasis took two predominant forms: one referring to the literal proximity of the site to the coast (eg “absolute beachfront!”), and the other to the views of the coastal environment the property afforded (eg “view to die for”; “Yes, this is the view from the property!”). With some frequency, these themes were combined, either directly (eg “Much admired site offers absolute beachfront & unobstructed views”), or through more subtle approaches indicating the sensory experiences that property owners might enjoy (“Picture turquoise and green-blue water, waves lapping, pohutakawa [tree]-guarded beach then add prawns and freshly caught fish sizzling on the barbeque and how about sandy togs and towels hanging on the deck”).

Together, the themes of proximity and views appeared to lend considerable support to the careworn real-estate adage “location, location, location”. Certainly, they featured prominently in associated advertising text, although not to the complete exclusion of more conventional descriptions. As noted above, up to four sentences from each advertisement were recorded (few were any longer), and then analyzed in terms of their dominant theme(s). Up to two thematic codes were assigned to each sentence, reflecting the tendency of many realtors to use run-on sentences and lists that evoke more than one idea. The first sentence of each advertisement was analyzed separately, on the basis that it was likely to describe the qualities of the property deemed most valuable, while sentences 2–4 were combined (see table 1).

Overall, the textual components of the advertisements surveyed were focused strongly on three themes: features internal to the house/site; the views afforded; and proximity to the coast. A relatively typical advertisement invoked at least two of these themes (eg “Watch the surf and sun rise across the harbour entrance. Uninterrupted sea views clear to Mayor and Clark Islands. Fabulous architecturally designed property with quality interior and fittings”). Perhaps surprisingly, relatively little was made of other selling points—such as lifestyle, prestige/status, and potential returns on investment. It may be that these features are largely taken-for-granted benefits of coastal property ownership in New Zealand; to a certain extent, it goes without saying that they are included with a site from which one can “walk to beach and boating or sit

back and enjoy the view”, or which is “set in beautiful park-like surrounds which include beautifully landscaped walkways to World Class Matapouri Beach”.

The quantitative information presented above, together with shifts in language away from ‘bach’ and towards terms that signal quality, clearly indicates that both the dwelling/site *and* the aspect matter in selling coastal property. It is thus hyperbolic to claim, as did one realtor in the *New Zealand Herald* lift-out, that “with coastal properties you are selling the aspect, not the house”. Nevertheless, the extent to which many advertisements emphasized “uninterrupted views”, sometimes to the exclusion of other features, was remarkable. By way of example, some smaller advertisements contained just single lines of text such as: “Watch the early morning sunrise over the Pacific Ocean”; “Full site. Magic Harbour Views”; “Fantastic views of Rangitoto [Island] and sea”. From the perspective of real-estate advertising, views are symbolic commodities which can be bought and sold (Bridge, 2001): they contribute greatly to the value of the land, and help to determine which features of associated dwellings are important. Windows, decking, and doors, for example, were typically mentioned *only* when they offered particular views: “French doors... open onto the large deck with peaceful valley views”; “You could enjoy twin views to both north and south from sheltered decks”; “Huge glass windows take in views from every room”.

The importance of views, and their connection to the value of property ownership, is further underpinned in a relatively small number of advertisements seeking to assure prospective buyers that their views will not be compromised by the actions of other land owners. The prospect of being ‘built out’—a very real fear in property markets where views are prioritized (Cheng, 2001)—has considerable salience in coastal areas of New Zealand, many of which are experiencing increasing building heights and densities, as part of both new developments and the piecemeal demolition and replacement of older baches. For 10 of the advertised properties, however, the presence of a reserve between the dwelling and the coast ensured that views were secured: “The reserve alongside ensures you will never be built out and no roof tops to look over!”; “Full sun and uninterrupted views across the reserve”; “Bordering reserve on two sides

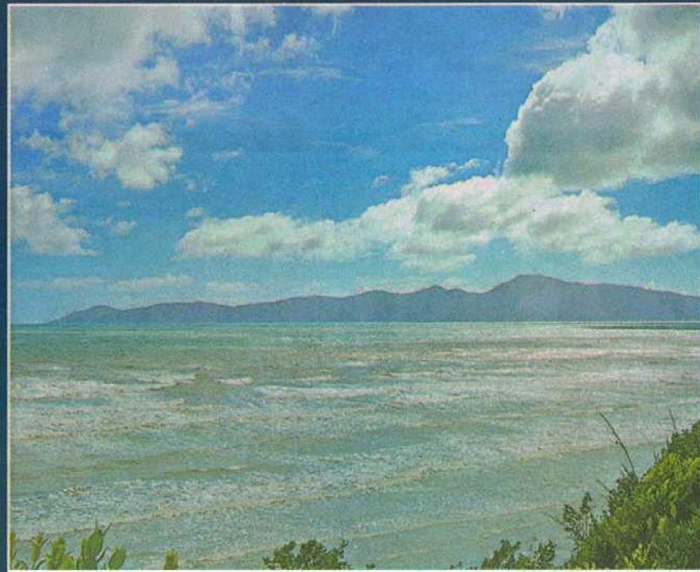
Table 2. Visual perspectives in the advertising of coastal real estate.

Perspective	Image type	Count	Percentage
Conventional (site feature)	Front of dwelling	78	25.7
	Interior (no view)	26	8.6
	Garden/yard	8	2.6
	Subtotal	112	37.0
Outwards view (from site to coast)	Over land/vegetation to water	48	15.8
	Over balcony/patio to water	35	11.6
	Out windows/doors to water	12	4.0
	House foreground; water background	8	2.6
	Subtotal	103	34.0
Other site views	Inwards from coast to site	16	5.3
	Aerial (site and coast)	14	4.6
	Subtotal	30	9.9
Nonsite views	Coast only (site not pictured)	23	7.6
	Golf course, marina, etc	11	3.6
	Subtotal	34	11.2
Other	Subtotal	24	7.9
	Total	303	100.0

affords this property privacy as well as protecting its views". Publicly owned reserves, which function primarily to allow for public access and movement along the coast, also protect the privacy and view-related values of adjoining private properties (lending an additional premium to those properties that are truly 'absolute beachfront').

This strong, although not exclusive, emphasis on enjoying, capturing, and securing a coastal view (and the closely related notion of proximity to the coast) was also apparent in the images associated with the advertisements. A total of 303 images—typically photographs—was included in the advertisements in our sample (only 19 advertisements did not have an image). In analyzing these images, we sought to determine the dominant perspective portrayed. Overall, the images conveyed similar messages to the text: while a significant proportion consisted of relatively conventional views of the site and its features (such as front of dwelling photographs), around one third portrayed the view from the site to the coast, and many of the remainder employed other techniques to emphasize the close connection between property and the coastline (eg views of beaches and other coastal landscapes in which the site itself is not included) (see table 2).

Of the images we classify as 'nonconventional', the property for sale was often only minimally apparent, and sometimes altogether absent. One common trope was a view over land or vegetation (eg treetops) to water, with no reference to property boundaries or the precise location from which this view might be enjoyed (see figure 2).



RAUMATI BEACH	111 Rosetta Road
<p>Take advantage of this serious opportunity & secure your own piece of NZ's breathtaking waterfront. Located minutes from the local Village & just over 30 minutes drive from Wellington's thriving CBD.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolutely stunning waterfront views and magnificent sunsets • Very large parcel of land 1821m (more or less) • This solid 3 bedroom 1940's Kiwi home could be enjoyed as she is or re-worked to suit your needs • Excellent site with subdivisible potential • Excavate your canvas, size and elevation are the key here 	<p>Auction 11am, Thurs 11 May 2005 The Bayleys Building Level 14, Cnr Brandon St & Lambton Quay, Wellington</p> <p>View Sun 2-3pm Or call for viewing times www.bayleys.co.nz/410436</p> <p>Michelle Taylor M 027 602 3234 B 04 499 6044 michelle.taylor@bayleys.co.nz</p> <p><small>BAYLEYS REAL ESTATE LTD MIMZLN</small></p>

Figure 2. [In colour online] Waterfront views (source: *New Zealand Herald*).



Figure 3. [In colour online] A view of life (source: *Waiheke Week*).

Indeed, the human imprint in such photographs was typically minimal—limited to moored boats, or a few houses barely visible in the distance—contributing to a sense of exclusivity and privacy, and possibly helping to reassure the viewer that the site will not be built out. A second common view from site to sea was more clearly placed—being taken from a deck, balcony, or patio (see figure 3). In some instances this was very apparent, as large areas of the deck and associated props were in the foreground, while in others only balcony rails were visible to indicate the position of the photographer. These images clearly associate coastal property ownership with a lifestyle of relaxation (spending time on one’s balcony, presumably with wine glass in hand) in a warm, comfortable climate (symbolized by sun umbrellas and potted palm trees).

Indeed, it is notable that ‘props’ such as picnic tables, deck chairs, palms, umbrellas, wine bottles and glasses (but never beer), plates of food, and even binoculars feature more prominently in the images than do *people*. In total, only 13 of the 303 images analyzed contained any visible people at all—and around half of these were of distant figures walking or swimming on otherwise deserted sandy beaches. At least two purposes may be attributed to the overwhelming majority of images being devoid of people, and sometimes of any human imprint whatsoever: first, they invite the viewer to place himself or herself in the image—as a prospective property owner; second, they appeal to notions of going to the coast to secure privacy and relaxation—to escape crowds, pressures, and, indeed, any unwanted human interaction. A similar pattern has been observed in the images incorporated in Hong Kong real-estate advertising, where the (unlikely) message appears to be “it is solitary leisure, enjoyed only by you and your family, with no one else to get in the way” (Cheng, 2001, page 217). For those images specifically focused on the coast (eg portraying only the beach, or an ‘over-the-treetops’ perspective), a third purpose can be detected: encounter with nature. This encounter is often framed in passive terms (“Sit on the bench and enjoy the view from the top of the world, beautiful beach backdrop!”)

7 Discussion

Advertising for coastal real estate promotes a particular way of seeing the coastal landscape. Indeed, the ‘seeing’ is often literal: a foremost concern is the ‘right to gaze’ over the public domain of the coast, and in so doing to appropriate it symbolically. Panoramic photographs looking towards the beach promise the would-be owner a commanding position from which to observe and monitor the landscape—and from

which, more prosaically, to enjoy a vision of the good life (underscored by props symbolizing discernment, disposable income, and escape from quotidian concerns). Indeed, a majority of the advertisements we examined suggested (and sometimes overtly stated) that the social and economic value of coastal property ownership stems less from qualities contained *within* the parcel in question—including the dwelling itself, although this is often impressive—than from the *views* it affords of the coastal environment.

This emphasis may work, in part, to isolate potential buyers from the reality that many coastal communities are becoming both more intensely settled and more extensive in area as a result of ongoing development of the built environment. Accordingly, the much sought-after uninterrupted views are likely to be increasingly difficult to secure in practice. For its part, advertising denies that the quest for ‘a place at the beach’, when multiplied across many thousands of aspirant investors and households, reduces the amenity value of the coast, and produces a much more congested landscape. Clearly, it remains in the interests of realtors and developers to mask out this reality through selective imagery and text promising privacy and exclusivity. An additional tension springs from failure to acknowledge that the landscape features emphasized in promotional accounts of views—the sweeping bays, sandy beaches, dramatic headlands, and picturesque offshore islands—are in the great majority of cases *public space*. The reality of ownership by local or national government—and all this implies in terms of access and management—is seldom referred to; instead, the public elements of the coastal environment are enveloped by private, proprietary concerns.

In addition to depicting the coast (and properties for sale) as private, advertising also portrays it as largely unpeopled and passive: primarily through the use of photographic ‘stills’. This trend is notwithstanding the generally active use of beaches by New Zealanders. Indeed, our data invite a passive gaze over a disembodied landscape, as opposed to active participation in coastal recreation (cf Perkins and Thorns, 2001). This focus suggests that what is desired, and commodified, is a sedate lifestyle space in which the view out over sand and ocean is a large part of what is being bought and sold. The coastal holiday home is a stage to play out one’s aspirations through de facto acquisition of public space (via a view) as well as through de jure acquisition of property rights over a site and dwelling.

Our focus has been on the images and texts of advertising, and not on the ways these are consumed and interpreted. Thus, we cannot speak to how the advertisements are read and by whom. Rather, we have used our analysis of the advertising of coastal real estate as a route into broader debates about land use change and public and private interests on the coast. The shift in land uses signified by these advertisements is widely perceived to be profound, but is by no means the first set of property-related changes on the coast. Indeed, residential development is generally occurring on sites already thoroughly modified by human activity and economic interests (specifically, pastoralism).

This said, the pastoral is often interpreted in New Zealand as unspoiled, and is seen in naturalized terms—giving rise to claims that the subdivision of paddocks constitutes the destruction of ‘wilderness’. This is not to say that subdivision does not raise ecological concerns (eg increasing pressure on threatened coastal species), or that it does not represent a stark change in land-use patterns, both materially and in terms of amenity values (see Mottiar and Quinn, 2003). Indeed, the current phase of coastal residential development is relatively extensive and irreversible, and creates landscapes very different from those traditionally found on the New Zealand coast—in material terms of design, height, and density—but also in terms of the ‘carve up’ of large coastal farms into small lots, with the attendant loss of open space, fragmentation of title, and hardening of surfaces and skylines.

8 Conclusion

Our paper has involved an indicative exploration of the ‘landscape’ of coastal property advertising involving two relatively prominent sources, at one point in time. Our intention was not to monitor trends per se, but to identify the visual and verbal tropes deployed to sell private property on the coast. We interpret these tropes as encouraging symbolic appropriation of coastal views and amenities, thus creating a form of ‘un-real estate’ (see Blomley, 2004b).

Advertisements for coastal real estate are (necessarily) about private interest, whereas many of the debates about the New Zealand coast are about public interest. A large part of what appears to be at stake in these debates is not the formal right to walk down the beach, or to fish off a rocky outcrop, but, rather, the right to *stay* at the beach, to *reside* there, at least temporarily—to linger for longer than one day. Moreover, the communal element of *staying at the coast*—which characterized commercial beachfront campgrounds as well as many bach communities—appears to have been supplanted by a mindset emphasizing a private, relatively disembodied gaze over the coast. The tacit appropriation of public space in advertising for private real estate has been noted elsewhere (eg Cheng, 2001; Cheung and Ma, 2005); our analysis suggests that this extension of the proprietary gaze works by ‘losing sight’ of public ownership, and, indeed, the public, altogether. Thus, while unnamed others might enjoy similar views from adjacent private quarters, the coast itself is almost invariably portrayed as empty.

Yet, people do, of course, use the New Zealand coast—often in large numbers—and, for those who *visit* the beach, the experience may be one not of uninterrupted views, but of an increasingly dense landscape, offering *fewer* opportunities for privacy. Whereas once there were pastures and/or relatively unobtrusive baches on the land behind the beach, new residential developments create a heavier imprint on the landscape, and often incorporate private ramparts from which owners may look down upon the coast. Such experiences appear to fuel concerns that private interests are dominating a space of profound public importance. As Peart (2006, unpaginated) puts it:

“A laissez-faire approach to coastal development means that few benefit—the developer and subsequent property owners—while the wider public pays the cost through the loss of treasured wild coastal places. If we are all to benefit from coastal development, we need wise and strong management of the coast in the public interest.”

In this context, “wise and strong management” appears to imply the need for a policy of containment, as suggested by the NZCPS. Just as private property is centrally concerned with the enclosure of rights and opportunities, perhaps public policy towards the coast should incorporate greater concern to enclose select coastal *landscapes* (and not merely marginal strips), and to hold them in public trust, free from residential development.

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