

*Where Land Meets Sea: Coastal
Explorations of Landscape, Representation
and Spatial Experience*

by Anna Ryan

Farnham: Ashgate, 2012
(ISBN: 978-1-4094-2935-7). 285 pp.

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Although Anna Ryan is based in the School of Architecture at the University of Limerick, *Where Land Meets Sea* is a boldly interdisciplinary work, which draws upon history, cultural geography and critical theory. At the text's core is the presentation and analysis of a participatory research project in two contrasting coastal regions of Ireland: Dublin's South Wall, and the Maharee Peninsula in West Kerry. The discussion of this project, however, is embedded within a complex methodology, which seeks to contextualise the experiences and creations of the research participants within contemporary theory. Ryan's intention, through deploying this method, is to reduce distinctions between the academic and everyday realms, emphasising 'the potential that this intimacy with the everyday world has in generating a worthwhile and purposeful academia' (p.6). This aim is related to a pedagogical motive: as an architect, Ryan hopes that this kind of academic empowerment can assist our ability to 'engage our surroundings in appropriately grounded manners as we plan, design and build' (p.6). She proposes that our everyday experience of landscapes has, in some sense, a 'reality' which can be contrasted with the misleading or illusory potential of focusing upon narrowly academic analyses of place.

Where Land Meets Sea's complex structure necessitates eight chapters, which vary widely in their methodological approach. As a result, despite Ryan's elegant prose and the confidence with which she approaches her broad disciplinary range, the shifts between chapters are occasionally jarring. Chapter One, 'Edge Horizon', draws upon a diverse range of writing and visual art to defend its claim that the zone in which land and sea meets 'encourages deep, though often unarticulated, awarenesses of the powerful impact of physical surroundings on senses of self' (p.41). Ryan's ability to draw philosophical connections between figures as diverse as Michael Palin and Paul Virilio – she notes that both writers appear 'actively attentive to their body knowledge, [...] allowing that knowledge to inform their experience of place' (p.17) – is characteristic of the ease with which she negotiates the pitfalls of an interdisciplinary approach. Her capacity to shift quickly between theoretical material and detailed analysis of primary texts is also impressive. Chapter Two, 'Philosophies of Synthesis', uses the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari, Abram and others to set out two broad philosophical claims: that movement is central to an understanding of 'the relationship between body and context' (p.64); and that representation should be considered as participation. The following chapter, 'Stasis and Mobility', looks specifically at non-representational geographers including Sinclair, Solnit, Sebald and Robinson, and aligns Ryan's project with their explorations of practice and bodily experience as ways of engaging with landscape.

Chapters Four, Five and Six establish the cultural and geographical context of Ryan's study, discussing the history of Irish engagement with the coast before describing the specifics of the

project. This involved recruiting sixty-two participants to record their experiences and reflections upon the places in question, using writings, drawings, photographs and interviews. The crux of *Where Land Meets Sea*, however, is Chapter Seven, 'Encounter', which presents and discusses this data. The transcripts, drawings and photographs presented here broadly support her claim to challenge boundaries between academia and everyday experience. While non-representational geography is sometimes criticised for being too insular or theory-heavy, Ryan's project 'activates non-representational concerns through the experiences, voices and communications of others' (p.128); there is, consequently, a strong imperative to minimise any influence on the experiences of participants by giving clues as to Ryan's theory or focus. She thus decides, for example, not to explicitly refer to the land or the sea in her briefings, in the hope that 'this openness would reveal the participants' more deeply felt connections with their physical surroundings' (p.117).

Despite Ryan's avowed non-interference at the level of data collection, however, her theoretical leanings are explicit. Having been outlined earlier, these are used to analyse and interpret participants' output. Thus, for example, a series of quotations illustrating participants' sense that attentiveness to the simple act of breathing generates positive experience is, she argues, supportive of Abram's thesis that 'air, wind and breath are highly important to the cultivation of an intensified contemporary relationship between self and surroundings' (p.208). An accumulation of such claims is ultimately adduced towards Ryan's core assertion, that her 'participant-accounts of spatial embodiment' indicate 'a sense of an agreement between the values of the philosophers and the values of the participants' (p.216).

Such assertions may exaggerate the extent to which the participant data actually *supports* Ryan's philosophical position, rather than being merely consistent with it; but *Where Land Meets Sea* never claims to hide its theoretical underpinnings, and is forthright throughout in its defence of them.

Ryan's study has, at its core, a laudable ambition to cross boundaries, both between academic disciplines, and more ambitiously, between the academic and the practical or everyday. Its interdisciplinary character means it will be of some interest to architectural scholars, although the central emphasis upon participant experience (and its interpretation) means its most significant value is as a work of cultural geography. Her methodology necessitates a lengthy engagement with complex critical theory, and as a result, *Where Land Meets Sea* may be less successful in its attempt to reach beyond the academy than Ryan hopes. There is also a more obvious weakness in the sheer ambition of its complex structure, which inevitably imposes strictures; only around eight pages, for example, are devoted to Ryan's discussion of Ireland's coastal past, despite her acknowledgement that such context is important in understanding certain 'relationships between Irish bodies and their coastal surroundings' (p.97). Yet every such section is slotted into the overarching methodology with an impressive clarity of purpose. That focus is matched by the lucidity of Ryan's prose, and collectively, these qualities ensure that *Where Land Meets Sea* is a remarkably assured and original contribution to cultural geography.

