

Performing freedom: An examination of Ocean Builders' successful failure in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

In February 2019, Ocean Builders, a private company, anchored a six-square-meter inhabitable octagonal structure in the Andaman Sea, twelve nautical miles off the coast of Phuket in Thailand, within the country's exclusive economic zone. Over the next three months, it was periodically occupied by a couple, Chad Elwartowski, an American citizen, and Supranee Thepdet, a Thai citizen. Both are supporters of the seasteading movement to colonize international waters with autonomous modular platforms to experiment with competitive governance and challenge the status quo of the nation-state. In April 2019, the Thai government found that the structure and the couple's plan to develop an independent seasteading community threatened Thailand's sovereignty, and the Thai navy seized and dismantled the seastead. Elwartowski and Thepdet later described their stay on the platform as a moment during which they were “truly free.” I argue that the seastead functioned as a space of freedom only to the extent that its occupants performed freedom and their identities as sovereign individuals, a performance that was convincing enough to attract new supporters and investors, and for the Thai state to take action and engage in its own performance of sovereignty. I further argue that Ocean Builders' performance was designed to create freedom-as-a-product that could be marketed and sold in the form of a seastead. As a case study, Ocean Builders' venture illustrates the complex relationship between performance, materiality, space, discourse, power, and identity, and how these elements interact in the constitution and performance of micro-territories and of contested oceanic claims to sovereign territory.

KEYWORDS

seasteading, performance / performativity, freedom, ocean, sovereignty

Introduction

In early February 2019, Ocean Builders, a private company, anchored a six-square-meter inhabitable octagonal structure attached to a twenty-meter-tall spar in the Andaman Sea, twelve nautical miles off the coast of Phuket in Thailand (Fig. 1). As defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a country's sovereignty extends to twelve nautical miles from its baseline, an area known as the territorial waters, but its jurisdiction extends two hundred nautical miles into what is known as the exclusive economic zone. The structure was thus located outside Thailand's territorial waters but within its exclusive economic zone. Over a period of three months, it was sporadically occupied by a couple, Chad Elwartowski, an American citizen, and Supranee Thepdet (who goes by her chosen name, Nadia Summergirl), a Thai citizen. Both are Bitcoin enthusiasts and staunch supporters of the seasteading movement, which advocates colonizing international waters with autonomous modular platforms, called seasteads, to challenge the status quo of the nation-state and experiment with new governance models (Friedman and Taylor; Quirk and Friedman). Elwartowski and Thepdet sought to demonstrate that seasteading is both feasible and affordable. The couple and their followers celebrated the anchoring of the "first functional one-family seastead" as a "proof of concept of a world of more competitive governance and greater ocean environmental health" (Doherty, "First Seastead in International Waters Now Occupied, Thanks to Bitcoin Wealth"). Ocean Builders, whose ownership and corporate structure was not public at that time, planned to build and sell twenty more seasteads in the Andaman sea to welcome a community of "freedom-loving people" (Elwartowski qtd. in Quirk).

Fig. 1 Inhabitable structure in Andaman Sea, 2019 (Ocean Builders)



The venture came to an abrupt end in April 2019 when the Thai government found that the structure, the installation of which had not been approved, and Elwartowski and Thepdet's plan to develop an independent seasteading community were in violation of the criminal code and threatened Thailand's sovereignty. Elwartowski and Thepdet found themselves liable to life imprisonment and even to the death penalty. The couple went into hiding and fled Thailand on a sailboat as the seastead was seized and dismantled by the

Thai Navy. Undeterred, they relocated to Panama, where Ocean Builders is now building “seapods” in a facility in the Linton Bay Marina. In October 2020, Ocean Builders also announced the purchase of a cruise ship, *MS Satoshi*, named after Satoshi Nakamoto, the pseudonymous inventor(s) of Bitcoin. Also known as the Crypto Cruise Ship, the vessel would welcome 1,500 people onboard the “first operational seastead community” and provide a “gathering place and incubator for crypto enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, researchers, and digital nomads” (Ocean Builders, “Introducing the Crypto Cruise Ship”; Ocean Builders, *This Is the Breakthrough We Have All Been Waiting For*). In December 2020, the company announced it had been unable “to get insurance to use the ship as a stationary residential cruise ship” and that it was being sent to a scrap yard in India (Ocean Builders, *Satoshi’s Final Voyage*).

Fig. 2 MS Satoshi (aka The Crypto Cruise Ship) 2020 (Ocean Builders)



In what follows, I examine how Ocean Builders’ venture in Thailand illustrates the complex relationship between performance, materiality, space, discourse, power, and identity, and how these elements interact in the constitution and performance of micro-territories’ claims to sovereignty. This article engages with the theory of political performativity, scholarship on the social construction of the ocean, and architectural theory to examine how, during the construction, occupation, and evacuation from the seastead, Elwartowski and Thepdet performed freedom for an audience of seasteading supporters, potential investors and buyers, and media. I argue that the seastead existed as a space of freedom only to the extent that its occupants performed freedom and their identities as sovereign individuals, a performance that was convincing enough to attract new supporters and investors, and for the Thai state to take action and engage in its own performance of sovereignty. [1] I further argue that Ocean Builders’ performance was designed to create freedom-as-a-product that could be marketed and sold in the form of a seastead.

The article is divided into four sections. First, I situate Ocean Builders within the history of libertarian micronations at sea and the contemporary movement to build stateless start-up societies. Second, I explain how Elwartowski and Thepdet performed freedom and how this performance was contingent on a postmodern construction of the ocean as a space to be annihilated, territorialized, and stewarded (Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* 159–88). [2] I examine how the construction of the seastead as a space of freedom

[1] I borrow the term sovereign individual from *The Sovereign Individual* (Dale Davidson and Rees-Mogg), which argues that those individuals able to take advantage of the transition to the “Information Age,” in particular through the adoption of digital cash, will “escape the shackles of politics” and the power of the state, and become denationalized “customers of governments operating from a ‘new logical space’” (28) who will “sho[p] for jurisdictions” (298) in a market of “commercialized sovereignty” (321, 341).

[2] Here “annihilation” refers to the annihilation by capitalism’s spatial tendencies of the characteristics of the sea “as a distinct place or environment,” as a “friction surface” and as a “great void to be annihilated” through the “conquest of distance” and replaced by a construction of the ocean-space as a “seemingly friction-free surface across which capital can move without hindrance”

(Steinberg *The Social Construction of the Ocean* 163, 165-166, 168).

Those characteristics are never completely annihilated: “If capital ever truly were to *succeed* in annihilating spatial friction and geographic difference, it would be deprived of these acts that mark and constitute one aspect of its success. [...]

Within this construction of ocean-space, the sea is successfully *imagined* as annihilated, but it remains an important space in the actual workings of the world economy” (167-168, italics in original).

entailed engaging with a frontier narrative. I also explore how the couple’s performance of freedom was the result of discursive-material efforts as well as an embodied performance and how these elements shaped the couple’s performance of their identity as sovereign individuals. Ultimately, the construction of the seastead as a space of freedom opened up an opportunity for the Thai state to engage in its own performance of sovereignty and it became a stage for conflicting articulations of power. Third, I briefly discuss how Ocean Builders’ performance of freedom and its construction of freedom as a product was also a claim over ownership of the future. Fourth, I conclude with a reflection on what Ocean Builders’ experience in Thailand can tell us about freedom and how to achieve it.

Libertarian micronations 1960s – 2020

Initiatives to build juridically autonomous cities and micronations based on libertarian and anarcho-capitalist ideals have proliferated in the last decade. These include seasteading (*The Seasteading Institute*; *Blue Frontiers*; *Freedom Haven*), “free private cities” (Gebel; Ruchlak and Lenz), charter cities (*Charter Cities Institute*; *Pronomos Capital*; Lonsdale), and micronations (*Free Republic of Liberland*; *Free Society*). These ventures are part of a decentralized movement to build so-called start-up societies that advocates the development of experimental, small-scale communities to explore alternatives to the nation-state model of governance (*Startup Societies Foundation*). The secessionist ambitions of start-up societies enthusiasts have been described as a form of “enclave libertarianism” in response to the 2008 economic crisis and to a dissatisfaction with neoliberal reforms that have failed to fundamentally transform the structure of the state (Lynch). Initiatives to build seasteads and libertarian private cities have multiplied since the crisis, but the phenomenon dates back to the 1960s and 1970s when American and British entrepreneurs attempted to create new countries both on land and at sea. Many were inspired by Ayn Rand’s objectivist philosophy and her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the story of a group of entrepreneurs, industrialists, and artists retreating to a secret community as society collapses under socialism (Strauss; Rand). Start-up societies ventures are better understood as a continuation of this trend, albeit responding to contemporary political and economic crises and shaped by a broad spectrum of political and cultural influences. Today’s ventures share a reliance on such emerging technologies as cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies to solve contemporary crises.

Well documented earlier projects to build libertarian micronations at sea include Operation Atlantis, the Republic of Minerva, and the Principality of Sealand (Simpson; Horn; Menefee 95–102; Grimmelmann; Taylor-Lehman). Arguably the most successful of these is the Principality of Sealand, an unrecognized micronation established in 1967 on a World War II anti-aircraft platform in the North Sea by Roy Bates, an entrepreneur and pirate radio operator that still exists to this day. All three projects were entrepreneurial ventures that their founders intended to be not only profitable, but jurisdictionally sovereign. To this effect, each sought to reproduce the symbols of state sovereignty; they minted coins, printed stamps, and designed flags. For a time, the Republic of Sealand also sold passports, and it is possible to purchase identity cards and titles of nobility on its website. Ironically, this gives

Sealand, as well as Operation Atlantis and the Republic of Minerva, an “‘ancient’ appearance” that inscribes the micronation “into the codes of the very system it challenge[s]” (Vishmidt et al. 76).

In contrast, start-up societies do not seek to reproduce the symbols of state sovereignty but rather aim to “build alternatives to traditional politics, business, culture and technology” (*Startup Societies Foundation*). They reproduce a corporate structure whose rules are written in a charter and formalized in contracts, rather than in a constitution. Instead of minting coins, they promote stateless cryptocurrencies. [3] They challenge the relationship between sovereignty and territory with proposals for geographically distributed autonomous urban spaces linked by legal agreements (Bell). When they draw inspiration from the past, it is partly to advance a disruptive, techno-optimist vision of sovereignty. For instance, one proponent of start-up societies advocates the creation of a “new Hanseatic League” of “free zones and free cities” and “aligned online guilds of volunteers” that would offer “blockchain-based land registries, smart contracts, e-governance toolkits, and arbitration services” (Frazier). In sum, rather than reproducing the discourses and symbols of the nation-state, proponents of start-up societies advocate the creation of hybrid, private city-states. Their websites display sleek, futuristic representations of such urban spaces as eco-island enclaves or individual pods and floating platforms that allow sovereign consumers to easily exit one community to join another.

[3] An exception is the Free Republic of Liberland, which has a constitution and its own virtual currency, the Liberland Merit.

Acting on the premise that the mechanisms and structures of modern governments are broken beyond repair, proponents of start-up societies advocate building new cities “from scratch” (Friedman, “Beyond Folk Activism”) on unoccupied land or ocean-space that would provide a “blank canvas” (Friedman and Gramlich 295) or a “blank slate” (Mason) which they construct as free from historical, political, and socio-economic constraints and open to radical experimentation. Drawing on libertarian and free-market philosophies and discourses, they argue that competition between privately-owned cities would accelerate policy innovation and lead to greater political and economic freedom of choice. Freedom in this context refers primarily to freedom from government interference, in particular freedom from regulations and taxation, but also to the freedom to “exit” at low cost (“Ethical Code: The Exit Principle”). Proponents of start-up societies argue that “exiting,” or voting with one’s feet (Peck 898–99; Tiebout; Dale Davidson and Rees-Mogg 341–43), is more effective than casting a ballot and being subject to the tyranny of the majority. [4] This system of “competitive governance” (Friedman and Taylor), they argue, would put pressure on the owners-operators of seasteads and private cities to offer innovative policies and optimal protections to attract and retain citizens.

[4] This binary between the options to either exit political relationships or voice one’s discontent in debate and via ballot is a simplified interpretation of a treatise written by Albert O Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Hirschman examines the interplay between these two competing options and the role loyalty plays in retarding exit and permitting voice to play its role in the contexts of firms, organizations and states.

The Seasteading Institute

The seasteading movement is particularly ambitious, both legally and technologically, in its aim to build oceanic colonies. As noted above, the concept of seasteading dates back to the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Barkley). It saw a resurgence with the foundation of the Seasteading Institute in 2008. The Seasteading Institute is a non-profit organization co-founded by Patri

Friedman, a software engineer, venture investor, who is also the grandson of the neoliberal economist Milton Friedman and the son of anarcho-capitalist theorist David D. Friedman, and Wayne Gramlich, a computer engineer who left the organization during its first year (Friedman and Gramlich). From its launch until 2014, the Institute received over USD \$2 million from Peter Thiel, a venture capitalist known for his conservative libertarian political philosophy and who made his fortune through early investments in such start-up companies as PayPal, Facebook, and more recently in the secretive data company Palantir (Quirk and Friedman 29). In a special issue of the libertarian journal *Cato Unbound* on the topic of building libertarian institutions and communities from scratch, Thiel (in)famously wrote that he “no longer believe[s] that freedom and democracy are compatible” (Thiel). To “escape not via politics but beyond it,” Thiel has suggested turning to “new technologies that may create a new space for freedom,” including cyberspace, outer space, and seasteading. [5]

[5] In *The Sovereign Individual*, the authors also suggest that individuals will be able to escape “beyond politics” thanks to technology (18-19).

Due to the technological and legal challenges building a floating city in international waters presents (Keith; Ranganathan; Saunders; Schmidtke), since 2014 the Seasteading Institute’s focus has been on establishing a partnership with a host country for the construction of a “coastead,” a seastead located within a country’s territorial waters (The Seasteading Institute, *The Floating City Project*). In 2017, at the initiative of Marc Collins Chen, an entrepreneur and former minister of tourism of French Polynesia, the Institute signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of French Polynesia to explore the feasibility of building a first floating island in the archipelago’s territorial waters. The idea was to create a prototype that could then be sold to countries “threatened by rising sea levels, overpopulation, or other dangerous phenomena” to develop new living spaces (*Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of French Polynesia* 7). The realization of the Floating Island Project, as it was called, was contingent on the creation of “innovative special economic zones” comprised of a part of land (the “Anchor Zone”) and of sea (the “Floating Islands Zone” or the “SeaZone”) (*Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of French Polynesia*; Bell 55–65). Seasteading would “maximize entrepreneurial freedom to create blue jobs to welcome anyone to the Next New World” by developing a “vibrant startup sector for governance” (“About”), and the “SeaZone” would function as “a floating legal entity designed to maximize personal and economic freedom, to empower island communities to adapt to sea level change on their own initiative” (“Homepage”).

The Seasteading Institute, Marc Collins Chen, and other investors and interested parties launched a for-profit offshoot, Blue Frontiers, to develop the project. They hoped to help finance the endeavor with the sale of a cryptocurrency, Varyon, named to reference “increasing variation in governance” (Blue Frontiers, *Varyon - Increasing Variation in Governance*). Although it received the support of the President Édouard Fritch’s government, the Floating Island Project was strongly opposed by the population of Teva I Uta, a commune on the island of Tahiti and one of the proposed locations for the construction of a first floating island. Inhabitants feared losing access to the lagoon and its resources and were concerned about the potential suspension of tax and labor laws in the new special economic zone (Hina Cross). An anti-floating island association and a fishermen’s association were formed to oppose the project,

and a demonstration brought together hundreds of protesters (Raveino and Damour). The Floating Island Project became a contentious topic during the 2018 Polynesian territorial elections and was eventually abandoned.

Ocean Builders

Chad Elwartowski and his then-girlfriend (now wife) Supanee Thepdet joined the seasteaders in French Polynesia where Elwartowski acted “as a sort of ambassador without portfolio for seasteading” (Doherty, “How Two Seasteaders Wound up Marked for Death”). Elwartowski, a retired Bitcoin investor, previously worked as a software engineer contractor for the United States Army. In the past, he has volunteered for the Libertarian Party, attempted to run for Congress in Georgia, and contributed actively to libertarian candidate Ron Paul’s presidential runs. It is on a forum dedicated to the latter that he initially came across the concept of seasteading. Elwartowski subsequently volunteered as an administrator of a seasteading forum where he learned of the project of a German engineer, Rüdiger Koch, who was working on building a small ocean-going platform from which he could do space launches and who hoped to use seasteads to house workers while offshore. Elwartowski, Thepdet, and Koch met in Bangkok in 2018, where Koch had hired local workers to build a steel spar that could support a small dwelling. Enthusiastic about what they saw as an opportunity to advocate for seasteading, the couple “decided they could help promote the project by occupying and publicizing the first seastead” (Doherty, “How Two Seasteaders Wound up Marked for Death”).

Performing freedom

Elwartowski and Thepdet publicly documented their progress on social media and eventually also offered seasteading certification classes (Quirk, *Announcing the Seasteader Certification Adventure*; “Seasteading Certification Adventure”), but they decided not to notify Thai authorities of their activities to avoid a repetition of the Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers experience in French Polynesia. Joe Quirk, the executive director of the Seasteading Institute, also joined the couple in Thailand and produced an eight-part YouTube documentary titled *The First Seasteaders* that chronicles the perilous process of raising the twenty-meter spar and installing the platform as well as the couple’s flight from Thai authorities. [6]

[6] Episode 5, *Training the masters*, has not yet been released at the time of writing.

After the seastead was seized and dismantled, Elwartowski shared a nostalgic post on Facebook: “I was free for a moment. Probably the freest person in the world. It was glorious” (Elwartowski). But the inhabitants of the Ocean Builders platform were never truly “free” from the state. They were still citizens of their respective countries and located in Thailand’s exclusive economic zone, nor were they “free” from their dependence on the mainland, global supply chains, and infrastructure networks. In fact, while on the seastead, they were entirely dependent on the individuals who made their temporary stays possible and relied on friends for transportation from and to the mainland, supply runs, and garbage disposal.

I argue that the seasteed existed as a space of freedom only to the extent that its occupants performed freedom and presented themselves as sovereign individuals. The performance was not only convincing enough to attract new supporters and investors, but also incited the Thai state to take action and engage in its own performance of sovereignty. All sovereignty is, to some degree, performative. Examining the conceptualization and construction of micro-territories offers provocative insight on how “while ideals of sovereignty are produced (and challenged) through everyday practices these ideals themselves rest on continual negotiations and crossings as individuals seek to determine their identities and affiliations and ‘map’ these identities to space” (Steinberg and Chapman 284; see also Hayward). Here, I am interested in how Ocean Builders sought to produce sovereignty and sovereign identities through a performance of “being free” and used the seasteed and the ocean-space to do so.

At its roots, “‘to perform’ evokes two connotations in equal measure: ‘to do’ and ‘to act,’ which means that one performs a task, or one performs for an audience” (Wagner 1).

Taken together, these two senses of “perform” suggest that one’s words and behavior are always *productive* (they accomplish something), and that the “product” (the accomplished task) is determined in large part by the innate sense of audience that accompanies every instance of speech and action. (Wagner 1, italics in original)

In what follows, I examine how Ocean Builders’ performance of freedom is the result of a “material-discursive effort” (Rose-Redwood and Glass 7) and how it “produced” freedom for an audience of supporters, potential investors and customers, and international media. The “product” of this performance was not only the occupants’ sovereign identities, but also the construction of the seasteed as a space of freedom, and of freedom as a product that could then be marketed and sold. From a performativity approach, “both identities *and* spaces are performatively enacted” (Rose-Redwood and Glass 15, italics in original). Elwartowski and Thepdet’s performance of freedom on the seasteed was intrinsically connected to the construction of their identity as the “first seasteaders” and served to legitimize their claim to be sovereign individuals. It also constructed the seasteed itself, and the ocean, as spaces of freedom. Potential buyers were thus invited to buy more than a “new home on the sea” (*Ocean Builders*); they were invited to buy their freedom from the state and an exit from politics. But for the performance to be successful, the ocean itself had first to be constructed as a space of freedom.

Seasteading as a postmodern construction of ocean-space

In the fourth episode of *The First Seasteaders*, the cameraman asks Elwartowski: “[T]here’s no rules yet [in the ocean-space]. The rules are not out there, because there ain’t no rules. You can do whatever you want. Is that correct?” Elwartowski replies:

I am not worried about the no rules. I’m looking forward to the good rules that people create as a community and coming up with smarter

systems as opposed to the systems they have already. It's basically a blank slate. So, with any blank slate, you can create some great art. So, hopefully with this great blank slate, we can create some great governance. (in Quirk, *Episode 4: Living the Life*)

In the seasteading conceptualization of ocean-space, the ocean is an extraterritorial space, a blank slate open for colonization. That the ocean is neither empty nor lawless, and that the conceptualization of ocean-space as a space disconnected and independent from the mainland is a social construction has been extensively documented in the geography and legal scholarly literature (Anderson and Peters; Braverman and Johnson; Ong; Peters and Steinberg; Saunders; Schmidtke; Lambert et al.; Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*). Indeed, many indigenous epistemologies make no distinction and understand land-sea as continuous rather than divided space (Hau'ofa; Winder).

Seasteading is illustrative of the postmodern construction of ocean-space, which Philip Steinberg describes as a “parallel intensification of each of the elements of the industrial capitalist-era construction of ocean-space,” namely the “annihilation of ocean-space,” its territorialization, and its stewardship (Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* 159–88). Steinberg argues that “[i]n postmodern capitalism, capital denies the existence of the sea as a distinct place or environment (even as its actual use of the sea continues to grow)” (165). The sea is portrayed as an empty space, “a great void to be annihilated” (168) with unique characteristics that must be suppressed in order for the ocean-space to become a “seemingly friction-free surface across which capital can move without hindrance” (163, 165). Proponents of seasteading understand the ocean as an environment which is unoccupied, unregulated, and whose surface’s smooth “dynamic geography” (Friedman, *Dynamic Geography: A Blueprint for Efficient Government*) makes it particularly suitable to experimenting with new forms of governance that reproduce the dynamics of capitalist market competition. It is a “distinct” place only to the extent that it is perceived as a lawless, ungoverned space. In discarding the characteristics of ocean-space, its friction surface, multi-dimensionality, and political and legal complexities, and advocating its colonization, seasteading seeks to develop new spaces of capital accumulation in international waters that would allow capital to accumulate in spatially fixed investments (seasteads). At the same time, seasteads remain highly mobile and would move capital and capital owners on the frictionless surface of the ocean as they leave unsatisfactory seasteading communities to join new ones.

The territorialization of ocean space, initially restricted to coastal area, is now extended to “ever larger areas of ocean-space” (Steinberg 169). Seasteading is an interesting development of this tendency. It advocates the territorialization of international waters by small-scale, private start-up communities, but does so to challenge the monopoly of the sovereign state on territorialization processes. Seasteading’s territorialization of the ocean is also presented as a benevolent act in the service of humanity (Quirk and Friedman). Although the seasteading movement initially shaped its ambitions around the annihilation and the territorialization of ocean-space, it now also positions itself as a form of stewardship that could both contribute to the development of the blue economy and preserve and even improve ocean health (Quirk and Friedman).

As a paradigm, ocean stewardship constructs the ocean as “a socially significant space providing crucial resources” (Steinberg 176). In the case of seasteading, the ocean provides both natural and political resources, and the territorialization of the ocean-space is presented both as eco-restorative structures and as spaces of individual freedom (Quirk and Friedman). For example, the sixth episode of *The First Seasteaders* documentary series introduces a seasteading supporter, “Sea Jobs,” who visited the Ocean Builders seastead and observed many fish around the structure, which functioned as a fish aggregating device. Based on this observation, he suggests that seasteads could contribute to “a thriving ecosystem in the oceans” (in Quirk, *Episode 6: Fleeing the Death Threat*). Yet, an ecological assessment of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia admitted the project would have significant risks and uncertainties with regards to how the environment would behave in the presence of floating infrastructure and the need for constant monitoring and adaptive management (Blue Frontiers, *Environmental Assessment Framework for Floating Development, French Polynesia* 61).

Seasteaders’ presentation of the ocean as a new extraterritorial space of political autonomy and a profit frontier thus relies on embracing contradictory conceptualizations of the ocean as simultaneously full of marine life and resources underwater and as a “great blank slate” on the surface. In this way, seasteading can construct the ocean as a great void to be annihilated and territorialized in order to be preserved, and as a blank canvas on which society and its governance can be reinvented. Seasteaders’ conceptualization of ocean-space thus discards the cultural, legal, and political elements that shapes its social construction, exploration, occupation, and exploitation, yet simultaneously relies on these same elements to justify their own claim to sovereignty. This conceptual contortion constructs the ocean as a space of freedom and a frontier to conquer.

Pioneers of the blue frontier

Seasteaders often employ the narrative of the American frontier and its association with a quest for individual freedom and project it unto ocean-space, itself conceptualized as a frontier since the mid-twentieth century (Steinberg, “The Ocean as Frontier”). In an online presentation on seasteading, Joe Quirk, who in addition to being the executive director of the Seasteading Institute is a fiction writer, emphasized how “storytelling has been driving seasteading in the imagination of the next heroes and aquapreneurs” (Quirk, *Joe Quirk Online Presentation on Seasteading*). Using a frontier narrative to describe Ocean Builders’ venture elevated Elwartowski and Thepdet to the status of pioneers of the blue frontier and torchbearers of the libertarian ideals of individual and economic freedom. It helped craft a compelling story. The sixth episode of *The First Seasteaders* opens on Quirk speaking at the 2012 Seasteading Institute conference and asking the audience, “Who’s gonna be remembered as the Lewis and Clark and Sacagawea of seasteading?” (Quirk, *Episode 6: Fleeing the Death Threat*). The next scene answers the question by switching to shots of Thepdet and Elwartowski sailing to the Ocean Builders platform to the sound of *The Last Time* by the Rolling Stones. Ocean Builders’ venture in Thailand was thus discursively anchored in a frontier narrative, the performance of which they hoped would turn their ambitious dream into

reality. In the fourth episode Thepdet confidently tells viewers: “We are not just creating a story. We are creating history” (Quirk, *Episode 4: Living the Life*).

Elwartowski and Thepdet’s construction of their identity as the first seasteaders and as sovereign individuals was shaped not only by a material-discursive effort, but also by physical efforts. Episode two of the series documents the raising of the spar. Quirk praises Thepdet who, “when the spar wasn’t going anywhere, [jumped] in the water, and [started] pushing it” (Quirk, *Episode 2: Raising the Spar*). The crew manages to tow the spar to their chosen location but when on the next day they tow the platform apartment, the spar is nowhere to be found. “There’s just nothing out there,” Elwartowski comments, “a vast emptiness.” They do eventually find the spar and begin the complex operation of submerging it and positioning the platform above the spar so it can be lifted. In a final scene previewing the next episode, an exhausted Elwartowski addresses the camera and says he believes he has chipped one of his teeth on a hammer he was holding atop the spar when he was hit by a big wave.

Episode three shows the lifting of the seastead. Elwartowski puts on scuba diving gear and jumps into the water as Thepdet warns him of the presence of poisonous fish near the structure. A cable breaks, and the crew has difficulty submerging the spar. “I don’t know what happened,” Elwartowski tells the camera. “All the plans changed.” Koch, the engineer, is heard berating crew members in the background. “It’s kind of insane,” Elwartowski says, surprisingly calm (Quirk, *Episode 3: Lifting the Stead*). Unable to raise the platform before the sun sets, the crew decides to spend the night on the site. Their efforts pay off the next day when the small flat is successfully raised on the spar, and Thepdet exclaims “Look at that! A seastead!” By physically participating in the construction and installation of the seastead, Elwartowski and Thepdet secured their identity as the first seasteaders. The risky conditions in which the couple and the local crew (who are but figurants in the story) worked. The physical risks they willingly took illustrate how their performance of freedom was not only discursive, but also embodied and entangled with the materiality of the seastead.

Aboard the seastead

The architect and theorist Neil Leach posits that “[i]f identity is performed, then the space in which that performativity takes place can be seen as a stage” (Leach 180). Once assembled, the seastead became a platform from which a particular entrepreneurial, pioneering identity was performed. Set against a panoramic ocean background, it also became a stage for the performance of a romantic drama and the construction of story arc with good and bad characters vying for power. A scene in the fourth episode of the documentary series shows Elwartowski and Thepdet standing on the roof of the seastead, opening a bottle of champagne, and toasting to “the first seastead by Ocean Builders.” “May the seastead be a beacon to freedom-lovers everywhere,” Elwartowski cheers.

Fig. 3 Still from Episode 4 of *The First Seastealers* (The Seasteading Institute/YouTube)



A still image of this scene was reproduced in the media and became a key element in the crafting of a particular narrative of good versus evil around the venture. Sympathetic accounts by Quirk and in the libertarian magazine *Reason* told the story of “a young couple in love” (Quirk, *Joe Quirk Online Presentation on Seasteading*), “sweethearts ... bedding down in a cozy floating home” who “like any other vacationing couple ... shot videos to share with friends online” (Doherty, “How Two Seastealers Wound up Marked for Death”). Elwartowski compared his stay on the seasteed to “living in a log cabin, getting away from it all, very peaceful” (qtd. in Doherty, “How Two Seastealers Wound up Marked for Death”). Yet this portrayal of the couple as two lovers on a holiday conflicts with the description of the couple as the “first seastealers,” daring and entrepreneurial individuals working on an ambitious project to build jurisdictionally autonomous spaces – not a typical vacation. In Thai media, the small seasteed was described as a threat to Thailand’s sovereignty and a trespassing of its oceanic frontiers. The pair were vilified as insurgents. On both sides, the descriptions of the couple’s identity were adapted to the audience, and the seasteed became the stage for conflicting narratives and performances of power.

Brian Doherty, the editor of the libertarian magazine *Reason*, suggests that the act of living on a platform anchored in Thailand’s exclusive economic zone without authorization from the Thai authorities “would likely not, per se, have been judged a danger to the Thai republic. Simply living in the space would hardly have been worthy of calling out the navy and threatening a death sentence.” He continues to argue that the Thai government’s reaction was determined by how the couple’s “actions were publicly and repeatedly linked to the concept of seasteading” (“How Two Seastealers Wound up Marked for Death”). According to Doherty, it was “the intention, then, not the action” that led the Thai government to send the navy (“How Two Seastealers Wound up Marked for Death”). Elwartowski and Thepdet’s endeavor may have been discursively constructed as a tale of pioneering entrepreneurship and of romance at sea, but their actions were clearly and explicitly about territorializing the ocean-space and challenging the paradigm of nation statehood as the only legitimate form of political sovereignty. Elwartowski was upfront about Ocean Builders’ aim to build and sell “ocean-front property at a fraction of the cost of any other place you would get ocean-front property”:

[W]e're beginning something completely brand new. It's going to grow bigger and bigger. The whole seasteading concept will be better governance. Your business will grow, because you're actually in a smart system as opposed to all the gridlock and horrible systems that current governments have. They have a monopoly on land, but they don't have a monopoly on sea. (Quirk, *Episode 4: Living the Life*)

Projects to create oceanic micronations have always caused concerns about the precedent that a successful venture would set. Almost fifty years ago, legal scholar Lawrence A. Horn concluded his examination of the case of the Republic of Minerva with a warning that “measures must be taken now before notions of open sea rights, sovereignty, and security are upset and endangered” (Horn 553). He worried that it might inspire sovereign nations “to set up such artificially created lands throughout the world for strategic purposes” (Horn 553, 555). One British diplomat echoed this concern that, if successful, the Republic of Minerva would incite others to follow suit: “We’ll have every crackpot with an ounce of imagination claiming sovereignty over every last scrap of unclaimed land. The next thing you know, they’ll be demanding loans from the World Bank” (in Bongartz, 1974, qtd. in Menefee 101). Writing about the Principality of Sealand, Trevor A. Dennis concludes that existing nation states:

cannot afford to continue to ignore super empowered individuals who create an area not clearly subject to an existing state from which business may be conducted with the entire world. The risks are too great to the current international system based upon the notion of the traditional nation state. (Dennis 296)

China’s construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea is one example of controversial extension of sovereign territory through the construction of new land (Ong; Saunders). The legal loopholes have not been closed but are instead actively exploited by existing states to extend their territorial power at sea. In this context, it is unsurprising that Thailand reacted to Ocean Builders’ plan to create a seastead community at the edge of its exclusive economic zone. Descriptions of the seastead as a lovers’ retreat sought to downplay the actual aim of the venture to build an autonomous community. The seastead functioned as a stage hosting two simultaneous plays.

Identity and community on the blue frontier

In the latter part of the series, Elwartowski elaborates on the difference between a community of seasteads and the creation of a new nation:

Nowhere, ever, ever did I say I want to build a nation. I’d even said, “I don’t want to build seastead nations, just like I don’t want bitcoin banks.” The whole idea of “nations.” It’s an ancient idea. It’s something we can move forward from. I think we would come up with better, new terms for seasteads. (Quirk, *Episode 8: “Today Is D-Day for the Thai Navy”*)

Ocean Builders advocates self-governance and their performance of freedom sought to reclaim power over the self from the state and from broader

hegemonic norms. Rather than reproducing the norms of the nation-state, they sought to challenge them. This entailed rejecting a fixed identity imposed by the state (such as “citizen” or “national”) and instead performing an identity that is always in a constant state of becoming, fluid, dynamic, and consistent with the act of colonizing the “dynamic geography” of the ocean (Friedman, *Dynamic Geography: A Blueprint for Efficient Government*).

As an architectural object and as a space, Ocean Builders’ platform was designed to provide a home to people who feel they do not belong anywhere and for whom national citizenship incites feelings of alienation and of loss rather than a sense of communal identity (Quirk and Friedman 209, 212, 297). Leach argues that concept of “belonging” offers “a viable paradigm to replace the now somewhat outdated model of ‘dwelling’ that once so dominated much architectural discourses” (Leach 184). He further claims that “[b]elonging is a product of performativity” and a process through which meaning is given to the environment “by collective or individual behavior” (Leach 182). Ocean Builders’ ambitions bring together a community of “freedom-loving” people, each aspiring to perform freedom on their own seasteads. This sentiment of belonging and giving meaning to the ocean-space as a space of individual freedom extends the framework of Manifest Destiny to pioneer-logics over ocean-space.

Leach suggests that “[i]n a realm whose paradigmatic figures include the ‘wanderer,’ the ‘migrant,’ the ‘refugee,’ and the ‘exile,’ the notion of belonging offers a more sympathetic framework for understanding contemporary modes of identification with place” (Leach 184). Seasteaders identify with these paradigmatic figures for whom the state is a cause of alienation but do so most strongly with the figure of the pioneer. They describe themselves as in search of new environments where one can be “truly free,” liberated from oppressive norms and conventions dictated by the state. In the case of Ocean Builders, the ocean conceptualized as a “blank” and empty space – a space devoid of fixed meaning – is given meaning as a new frontier and a “free” space. Free in three ways: in the sense that it cannot be purchased; in the sense of a space of freedom from hegemonic norms; and also in the sense of a space where fluid and flexible identities can be performed. As Leach posits, “[b]elonging’ to a place can therefore be understood as an aspect of territorialization,” in this case one that is literally “transitory and fluid,” “and out of that ‘belonging’ a sense of identity might be forged” (Leach 182–83).

In the Ocean Builders’ performance of freedom, the construction of meaning was contingent on rejecting such hegemonic norms as the concept of the nation-state, the legitimacy of governments’ authority over individuals, and over the partition and fragmentation of space. At the same time, its counter-hegemonic project relied on the creation of new norms: “Nothing is authentic in itself. Everything is authorized through repetition. Yet through its own repetition it begins to instantiate a certain norm” (Leach 173–74). Only through the multiplication of seapods and the repetition of the discursive-material performance of freedom can the seasteads and the ocean-space be given a particular meaning as spaces of freedom. Through the repetition of Ocean Builders’ performance, a community could be formed. The ocean could be turned into a space of individual freedom through collective colonization. Yet, Ocean Builders could not escape the fact that the transgression of norms

(for instance, the conscious decision not to inform Thai authorities from the onset) “necessarily constitutes a recognition of and a response to social rules” including the authority of the state, and as such reaffirmed the state’s sovereignty (Wagner 2).

Ocean Builders’ performance of freedom, an explicit response to a dissatisfaction with contemporary territorial political economy, was also shaped by and adapted to the local political context. Although they anticipated that the position of the seasteed off the coast of Phuket would eventually be known to the authorities, Ocean Builders deliberately kept their exact location secret, “partly for security through obscurity” (Elwartowski, “Comment on the Video ‘The First Seasteaders 4: Living the Life’”). They preferred instead to wait until they recruited enough investors to build a “community of small seasteeds” (Doherty, “How Two Seasteaders Wound up Marked for Death”). The identity of Ocean Builders’ participants as performers of freedom was thus “produced by power” (Gregson and Rose 46); it was shaped by and constrained by the power of the Thai state and the hegemonic power of the nation-state more broadly.

Location, location, location

Performances bring spaces “into being” and “since these performances are themselves articulations of power, of particular subject positions” we then “need to think of spaces too as performative of power relations” (Gregson and Rose 47). What made the ocean-space a space of freedom to Ocean Builders was the opportunities a postmodern conceptualization opens up for political contestation through annihilation, territorialization, and stewardship. Conversely, Ocean Builders’ attempt to territorialize ocean-space through the anchoring of a seasteed and eventually a whole community of seasteeds opened a space for the Thai government to reassert its own power and sovereign authority over its territorial space.

In the second episode of *The First Seasteaders*, Elwartowski addresses the camera: “OK, I am currently in international waters, the location of my future home. International waters where there are no laws other than the [United Nations Convention on the] Law of the Sea” (Quirk, *Episode 2: Raising the Spar*). Ocean Builders’ platform was located twelve nautical miles off the coast of Thailand and within its exclusive economic zone where, as established by UNCLOS, a state has special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources. The surface waters, however, are international waters which cannot be claimed by any state. In another instance of conceptual contortion, Ocean Builders and its supporters criticized Thailand’s and, more broadly, “governments,” attempts “to enforce their will on a ‘contiguous zone’” (Doherty “How Two Seasteaders Wound up Marked for Death”) defined by UNCLOS, but at the same time relied on UNCLOS to legitimize their peaceful occupation of international waters.

Thai officials eventually learned of Ocean Builders’ plan to build, sell, and anchor more seasteeds and assemble a community of “freedom-loving people,” which “led them to believe the couple was engaging in the setting up of an independent state” (Chuenniran and Yonpiam). The Thai Navy also

argued that the platform was located in a shipping lane used for the transport of oil to Phuket and was a navigational hazard. Indeed, the Third Naval Area Command filed a police complaint against the couple. The seastead became the stage of a fight between competing claims to legitimate sovereign authority: authority of the sovereign individual over the self within unclaimable ocean-space, authority of the Thai state over its exclusive economic zone, and authority of both over the space of the seastead as a space of freedom in the case of Ocean Builders. The project was seen as a material threat to state sovereignty and state territoriality. As Thai officers boarded and dismantled the seastead, it transformed from a space of freedom to a space of state sovereignty.

This conflict illustrates how “space too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power” (Gregson and Rose 38) and how “particular performances articulate their own spatialities, as opposed to being just located in space” (53). In erecting the seastead in international waters, Ocean Builders claimed the power to self-govern in the “blank” spatiality of ocean-space. In dismantling the structure anchored in its exclusive economic zone, the Thai state articulated the spatiality of its oceanic territory. Both factions documented their actions for an international audience and asserted the legitimacy of their respective performances of sovereignty.

Owning a piece of the future

Ocean Builders’ venture was successful to the extent that, as a stage for a performance of freedom, the small sea home became an emblem for the seasteading movement. Episode six of the documentary series introduces two American seasteading supporters who traveled to Thailand to visit the seastead. “Sea Jobs” says that the seastead is “like this thing that represents freedom.” A woman nicknamed “Ladyseasteader” claims the platform “represents the next phase of human civilization.” Prospective buyers were offered the opportunity to buy more than a sea home, but a symbol of freedom and a space where it could be performed and experienced by pioneers civilizing the untamed “wilderness” of ocean-space.

In addition to creating freedom-as-a-product, Ocean Builders also markets the possibility of individual ownership of the future. The company is working with Waterstudio, an architecture studio based in the Netherlands and specializing in floating structures, to design a more elegant seastead. It has relocated to Panama where it is now building seapods. Ocean Builders is also hoping to build a seapod development in New York’s Lincoln Harbor yacht club. Unlike the Seasteading Institute’s images of floating communities, Ocean Builders’ seapods are presented as stand-alone, fixed structures, symbolizing its advocacy of self-governance, individualism, and the primacy of the sovereign consumer.

Fig. 4 “Rendering of seapods in a proposed upcoming seapod development in New York’s Lincoln Harbor yacht club.” (Ocean Builders)



But seapods do not provide the exit from politics start-up societies enthusiasts are looking for, or at least not yet. The seapods in Panama will be flagged under Panama law. Purchase or rental contracts will be under Panamanian contract law. Still, on its website, Ocean Builders claims that by buying shares of partial ownership of a seapod investors “who cannot afford a full sea home” can “own a piece of the future” by purchasing timeshares (*Ocean Builders*). Thus, Ocean Builders performative construction of freedom, anchored in a narrative of frontier entrepreneurship, also suggests that freedom can be achieved through individual ownership of a piece of the future of human civilization, itself another blank space to be annihilated, territorialized, and stewarded.

Conclusion

Although Ocean Builders’ venture in Thailand ended dramatically, it was nonetheless successful in attracting new investors and followers. It also brought the seasteading movement to the attention of international media by telling a story, one that was carefully crafted to present its protagonists both as heroes of the blue frontier and as innocent victims of an authoritarian state. Elwartowski and Thepdet’s performance of freedom was a complex discursive-material and embodied performance linked to an understanding of personal and social identity. Their project acknowledges that this identity is shaped by social power and its spatial manifestations. It also produced “freedom” and the “future” as products that can be purchased. Seasteading may be a “reflection on the present” rather than “a model for the future” (Steinberg et al. 1545), but it is also an attempt to commercialize the future and to profit from its sale under the guise of advocating for individual freedom and ocean stewardship.

The theory of political performativity “emphasizes the political contingency that necessarily underlies any assertion of legitimate authority” and “views sovereignty as a material-discursive effect of reiterative and citational practices that attempts to call forth the very political ‘realities’ that they claim to merely describe or represent” (Rose-Redwood and Glass 7). The construction and occupation of the Ocean Builders seastead represented just such a claim to sovereignty and legitimacy on the part of Ocean Builders, but one that could only be maintained if repeated in the same political context. In other words, the performance’s success hinged on successfully attracting a community of “freedom-loving people.” Ocean Builders’ project demonstrates how seasteading

reproduces some very old contradictions: between the desire to territorialize and deterritorialize, between the desire to establish a sustainable community and the desire to foster on that requires continual re-creation, and between the desire for pure freedom and the need for organization to achieve it. (Steinberg et al. 1545)

The project also demonstrates how seasteading entails a tension between sameness and difference, between individualism and uniqueness and mimicry and the need for replication, and between individual autonomy and the need for outside recognition. Only through discursive-material repetition of their performance of freedom could Ocean Builders' vision be made real. Paradoxically, one individual's freedom could only be secured by another individual's freedom. The moral of the story, it seems, is that the only way to be free is together.

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