

Taking the Waters & Choreography of the Landscape: Tourism Architecture as Depiction in Strathpeffer:

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Abstract

This paper draws on Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel's Critical Zones agenda to reflect on the role of tourism architecture in shaping how landscapes are encountered, taking Strathpeffer as a case study. Strathpeffer is a small spa village in the Scottish Highlands, developed in the nineteenth century around sulphur and chalybeate springs which were widely promoted for their medical benefits in contemporary accounts (Hill, 1884). The paper understands tourism architecture as a device of depiction and a choreographic tool, shaping how landscapes are seen, how bodies move through them, and how ideas of nature, health and value take form over time.

Latour's Critical Zones framework shifts attention away from "the environment" as a distant backdrop towards the specific conditions that sustain life - air, water, soil, climate, and their interdependencies (Latour, 2017). Strathpeffer's spa culture is grounded in material conditions rather than symbolism alone. The waters depend on geology and hydrology; the promise of cure relies on climate, access and ongoing maintenance of infrastructure.

In Strathpeffer, the tourism architecture is not simply representational but operational; it does more than accommodate visitors. Pump rooms, hotels, pavilions, promenades, paths, viewpoints and transport form a connected spa infrastructure that organises encounters between visitors and environmental processes, translating geology, hydrology and microclimate into everyday routines, spaces and experiences. In doing so, it contributes to the production of socio-environmental imaginaries through which nature is framed as restorative, consumable and valuable (Mostafanezhad and Norum, 2019).

Taking the Critical Zones as both a conceptual framework and a way of reading sites, the paper considers tourism architecture as a mediator between bodies, landscapes and environmental processes. It examines how water is encountered, timed and narrated; how landscapes are walked, breathed and regulated; and how comfort is produced through infrastructures that often remain backgrounded. From this perspective, the commercialisation of tourism appears less as a single historical moment than as a gradual process in which architecture helps stabilise particular ways of seeing, sensing and inhabiting place.

The paper argues that revisiting tourism architecture, through its depictive role, helps reposition it as a site of ecological responsibility rather than scenic consumption. Historically, Strathpeffer shows how architecture trained visitors to recognise the landscape as therapeutic. In the context of climate change, the question becomes more pressing: what kinds of architectural depictions might now help tourism sites acknowledge dependence, limits and care, how we might learn to "land on Earth" differently?

References

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Pump Room and Highland Hotel, Strathpeffer, Highland Libraries' Postcard Collection, ambaile.org.uk

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