

Opinion: Ocean may solve Calif.'s housing problem

By Joe Mathews

Why can't we solve California's devastating housing shortage?

Perhaps it's because the proposed solutions—sprawling construction, denser construction, granny flats, affordable housing mandates, and regulation exemptions—are all built on the same flawed premise: that housing must exist solely on land. And California's combination of strict regulation and anti-density NIMBYism makes it impossible to build enough housing on land to serve our population.



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So, what if we build our housing future at sea?

If you haven't heard yet of seasteading—that's the ocean form of homesteading—you soon will.

Because where else does California have to go?

Floating cities are an ancient idea; Consider Plato's dialogues on the lost city of Atlantis. And communities at sea are a durable cultural trope, from the Kevin Costner film "Waterworld" to the "BioShock" video games. In this season of joy, it's worth noting that the world's hardest seasteader is Santa Claus himself, laboring tirelessly among the Arctic ice floes of the North Pole. Less mythically, a half-century ago,

L. Ron Hubbard and other leaders of the Church of Scientology created the Sea Organization, or Sea Org, a training compound of ships that mostly stayed at sea, away from the prying eyes of the authorities.

More recently, seasteading has gained ground among libertarians, particularly those who drink from Silicon Valley's dream-inducing waters. For a time, techies contemplated how to build cities far out to sea, in international waters, so they could live by their own laws.

At the forefront now is the non-profit Seasteading Institute, which envisions such communities enabling "the next generation of pioneers to peacefully test new ideas for how to live together." In 2008, the institute received high-profile backing from PayPal founder Peter Thiel, who preached for ocean communities as an "escape from politics in all its forms." More recently, the venture capitalist has publicly soured on the idea, and sought to escape political reality by backing Donald Trump.

In some sense, Thiel's newfound skepticism is justified. Such experiments have yet to realize the vision of urban ocean realities—it's costly and complicated to build a city on the sea. Among the Seasteading Institute's findings: the open ocean may be too rough to support a city, but protected coastal waters look promising.

For California, that's good news: we have 840 miles of coast. While seasteading may sound like science fiction, it's no less Star Trekian than median housing prices that exceed seven figures in San Francisco, Marin and San Mateo counties, and approach \$1 million for new homes in Orange County.

While previous visions of sea cities have incorporated futuristic aquafarms or novel modes of energy production, more modest cities—with the straightforward goal of providing housing for Californians—might be more viable. One might start

with boats providing badly needed housing for the state's homeless population. This idea recently got a boost when former San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos suggested turning the decommissioned USS Peleliu into a shelter for his city's homeless.

Of course, California's many land-based regulators and environmentalists would quickly raise objections to people living in coastal waters. So it's vital to sell the idea not merely as a response to housing (since the housing crisis demonstrably doesn't move Californians to action or reform) but as a far-sighted answer to the two problems our state's leaders care most about: climate change and the drought.

A proponent of seasteading recently suggested to me that offshore housing could provide a financing base to change the economics of desalination. Plans to turn ocean water into drinking water have long been considered costly and inefficient. But manmade islands with desalination plants financed with the proceeds from off-shore housing sales on those same islands might change the economics; the reclaimed water could supply these sea cities, thus offering a live experiment for a more sustainable water future.

Seasteading also could mitigate climate change. Sea-based cities would provide a dry run—OK, a wet run—for the not-so-distant future, when rising sea levels inundate California's greatest coastal cities, forcing millions of us to learn how to live on the ocean. In this way, cities on the sea would ease today's housing problems—while furthering our climate change leadership and preparations for a watery future.

It's hard to overstate how much the ocean can teach us. There's a great Golden State story from 1965 that I've always loved, about a California-born teenager named Robin Lee Graham who embarked on a five-year sailing voyage around the world, eventually publishing a book called "Dove" and becoming a celebrity.

“At sea,” Graham wrote, “I learned how little a person needs, not how much.”

That’s a lesson all of California could learn, if we’re willing to build a future just off the coast.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.