

Are we destined to abandon the land and live in floating cities? Pamela Buxton dons her lifejacket and discovers ambitious plans to take to the water.

# SINK OR SWIM



*The Venus Project proposes self-sufficient floating cities*  
Image courtesy of The Venus Project

**Self-sufficient and sustainable, these cities would be a chance for humanity to leave behind the overcrowded, polluted land and start afresh, building communities**

Perhaps it's nostalgic memories of the exciting marine world of Thunderbirds, or maybe just too much science fiction as a child, but the idea of a floating city has an eternal appeal – at least to those who don't suffer from seasickness.

Instead of being tied to one location, you could explore new parts of the world as the city migrates around the oceans, going ashore to observe different cultures and landscapes. Self-sufficient and sustainable, these cities would be a chance for humanity to leave behind the overcrowded, polluted land and start afresh, building communities.

To most of us such ideas are fanciful – and possibly rather cringe-inducing. But for others they are deadly serious, either as Utopian concepts or commercial propositions. Fixed firmly in the former camp is the Venus Project – a vision for a new way of living involving thousands of floating cities. It is the long-nurtured brainchild of Florida-based futurist Jacques Fresco. Now 84, Fresco has spent years developing the idea, which centres on the search for a sustainable new world civilisation based on a resource-driven rather than monetary economy. The latter, he argues, has failed to benefit either humanity or the environment.

He envisages floating cities with populations ranging from the hundreds to the many thousands. Some would be anchored, some moving with the seasons, some underwater and some high-rise. All

would be fully equipped with work, leisure and residential facilities and controlled, managed and operated by automated systems.

'The land is crowded today. We have population pressures that are unbelievable in New York, Hong Kong. If we move offshore, cities can be used to research and maintain the ocean,' says Fresco. His website shows a range of his designs for futuristic cities as part of a series of solutions to improve how we live.



*How the mile-long Freedom Ship would look*

Far more commercially minded is the Freedom Ship, a proposal for a part-business community, part-residential vessel that would spend 25% of its time in motion, taking two years to sail around the world. Planned to be a mile long and topped

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by a 25-storey steel-framed building, the ship was conceived by US engineer Norman Nixon, and would include 200 acres of parks, plus hospitals, schools and leisure facilities. 'This is a business. It's not a Utopian place to go and meditate,' says Nixon, who envisages businesses working from the ship and a large flow of people making use of the frequent ferries to visit the coast to buy and sell. He hopes it'll be home to thousands, with apartments ranging from £81,000 to £2.2 million. Leasing agreements are already downloadable from the Freedom Ship website.

Nixon, who plans to spend much of his retirement on the ship, says life aboard the Freedom Ship will be considerably less stressful than urban living.

'There won't be nearly as much tension as living in a condominium in London. Every 20 minutes you can get on a boat and go ashore to visit somewhere new.'

On a lesser but perhaps more realistic scale is Offshore, which is being promoted as the first-ever floating leisure centre, and is set for launch in London's Canary Wharf in 2001. Designed by architect Koetter, Kim & Associates (UK) for a consortium of investment bankers, Offshore is more viable on water than land, dwarfed as it is by its Docklands neighbours.

Offshore is being built in situ, and poor site access will push total project costs to around £10 million, but some prefabricated parts will be flown

It won't be going anywhere – it will have all the marine systems of a boat but no engine



*Offshore's structure will sit low in the water with two storeys above the waterline and one below*  
Image courtesy of Koetter, Kim & Associates (UK)

in. The architect plans 40,000 square feet of facilities including a two-level gym, aerobics room, pool, jacuzzi, sauna, restaurant and bar. But unlike the Freedom Ship, it won't be going anywhere – it will have all the marine systems of a boat but no engine.

Both architect and client expect the gym's floating nature to be a big selling point. 'Most gyms get shoved in a poor area of buildings like basements. There's intense land pressure at Canary Wharf, so to put something on water helps. We can get a better quality environment,' says project architect, Neil Tuson.

The 130 metre x 20 metre structure will sit low in the water, with two storeys above the waterline and one below. It will be clad in cedar slats and made as transparent as possible to maximise views through to the dock. But once you're aboard, the idea is not to be too much like a boat. The architects opted for a twin-hulled structure for maximum stability and are avoiding twee maritime references.

'It is designed as a very open, airy structure so people don't feel like they're going into the hold when they're going downstairs,' says Offshore director, Tim Issaia.

Cold water from the dock will be used in the gym's cooling system, and the presently somewhat murky waters will be enlivened with fountains and lights around the structure, which will be in the centre of the dock and reached by a bridge.

So what is the appeal of a watery life? Dr Slawa Shumowski, a futurologist at Wolff Olins, links it to the notion of a broader nomadic lifestyle. Author Bruce Chatwin has explored the same theme, considering it healthier and saner than a settled lifestyle, because exposure to uncertainty improves our ability to adapt.

'You can no longer be a nomad on land. It's just too populated,' says Shumowski, adding that floating and roaming communities also have the appeal of escapism, particularly popular in these days of increasing globalisation and standardisation.

Pamela Charlick, an architect at the practice Urban Futures, says that with the will, such initiatives could give more opportunities for environmentally sustainable communities than existing cities. She also sees floating structures as potentially useful at a time of rising sea levels which might otherwise cause huge, politically disruptive dispersals of population.

'The idea would be interesting where there is an imperative to do something,' she says. So could a floating approach really be a viable option for the future? Sir Peter Hall, professor of planning at University College London, is definitely not impressed with the idea of giant boats and floating cities as a feasible alternative to land-based communities. 'The idea is blue-sky and off-the-wall, frankly. There have been cases where people have lived on water, like

in Hong Kong in the 1950s due to a housing crisis, but in general in the UK and Europe there is no pressure,' he says. 'Only 12% of land so far is built up, and future land projections are for only a few per cent more ... it's not viable.'

So, reality bites. Perhaps for the moment at least, life in a floating city will remain just a dream. But at least it's portfolio fodder for another generation of idealistic architectural students with Utopian visions.

#### Further information

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