

Over the Seawall

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Synopsis

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In March 2011, people in a coastal Japanese city stood atop a seawall watching the approach of the tsunami that would kill them. They believed naïvely that the huge concrete barrier would save them. Instead they perished, betrayed by the very thing built to protect them. Erratic weather, blistering drought, rising seas, and ecosystem collapse now affect every inch of the globe. Increasingly, we no longer look to stop climate change, choosing instead to adapt to it.

Never have so many undertaken such a widespread, hurried attempt to remake the world. Predictably, our hubris has led to unintended and sometimes disastrous consequences. Academics call it maladaptation; in simple terms, it's about solutions that backfire. Over the Seawall tells us the stories behind these unintended consequences and the fixes that can do more harm than good. From seawalls in coastal Japan, to the reengineered waters in the Ganges River Delta, to the artificial ribbon of water supporting both farms and urban centers in parched Arizona, Stephen Robert Miller traces the histories of engineering marvels that were once deemed too smart and too big to fail. In each he takes us into the land and culture, seeking out locals and experts to better understand how complicated, grandiose schemes led instead to failure, and to find answers to the technologic holes we've dug ourselves into.

Reader's comments

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