

Honest Truth

River deep to mountain high, humans have known few bounds when it comes to reshaping parts of our planet. The geography surrounding us is far less set in stone than we think. Here, Professor Maxim Samson tells Sally McDonald about “Earth shapers” and their effect on us all.



What are “Earth shapers”?

My concept of earth shaping describes our perpetual human desire to mould

and remould the world around us so that it becomes more interconnective: a particularly renowned example is the Panama Canal. In time, connections such as this seem so familiar, so normal, that we can forget that they were made by people. Yet Earth shaping isn't the preserve of officials and elites: in one way or another, we are all Earth shapers. At the micro scale, consider “desire paths”, those trails of erosion that we collectively create whenever we seek a shortcut across the grass.

Why is cultural geography important, especially now?

Cultural geography helps us appreciate the sheer diversity of our planet and the different ways in which we create meaning in the world. It allows us to learn about places both local and distant and motivates us to become empathetic global citizens who understand that we live in a profoundly interconnected world. Through cultural geography, we become better equipped to challenge stereotypes and preconceptions and encouraged to acknowledge humans' agency in responding to issues, rather than viewing them as somehow inevitable.

Why was it important to write a book about it?

I wanted to challenge the view that humans and human actions are largely or primarily determined by our surroundings. In reality, we all have the power to refashion the world as we see fit – something that's important to bear in mind whenever we feel hopeless about climate change or environmental degradation. The Great Green Wall initiative in sub-Saharan Africa shows that humans can respond to their gravest challenges by forging geographical connections. We're not simply passive victims.

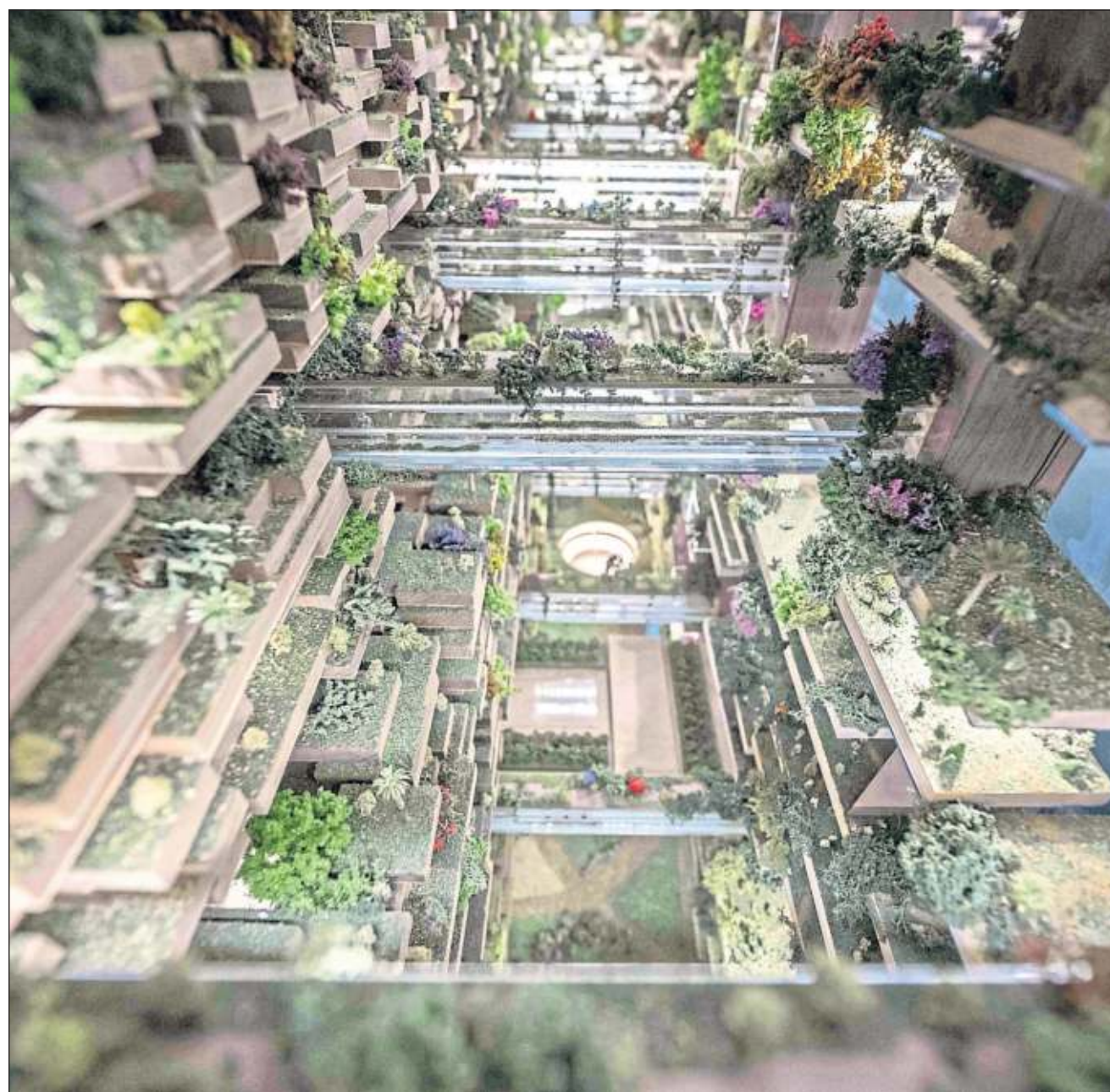
What was your most surprising research find?

A Nicaraguan postage stamp depicting a fuming volcano proved to be a particularly compelling reason why US decision makers chose to build their iconic canal in Panama instead. The Panama team knew what they were doing when they sent each congressman a letter featuring this ominous stamp!

Which others were eye-opening?

While researching THE LINE megadevelopment in Saudi Arabia – a \$500 billion planned smart city to be housed in a single long building without cars, streets, or carbon emissions – I became fascinated by a mid-20th-Century plan to rebuild London

Outside the box: How we learned to change shape of things to come



A model for THE LINE, a planned smart city in Saudi Arabia.

in a herringbone shape, as well as by the actual choice to design Brasilia like an airplane. I was also intrigued by the evolution of the El Dorado myth from gilded man to golden city and the combined spiritual-nationalistic reasons why many South Koreans oppose building wind turbines on mountains.

What can you tell us about Scotland's cultural geography?

There's so much I could highlight, from the historical distinction between Highlands and Lowlands to the emergence of alternative Scottish cultural landscapes, such as the idealistic 'Balmorality' of Royal Deeside, the

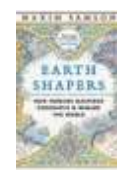
working-class urban tenements as depicted in The Sunday Post's cartoon The Broons, and Aberdeenshire's modern association with the oil industry. In terms of how geographical connections have helped shape Scottish landscapes and cultural identities, I think of the multiple legacies of the Highland Clearances, the transatlantic slave trade's impacts on Glasgow's growth and collective memory, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands' links to the Norse world. Meanwhile, the cultural geography of The Royal Mile in Edinburgh tells us a lot about society's changing priorities, having transformed from being

the Scottish capital's symbolic spine and centre of political and religious power into a tourist-oriented landscape of gift shops selling tartanry, whisky and fudge.

Who are the most significant earth shapers and why?

It's hard to look past the developers of the Panama Canal. Not only did the American-led team literally move mountains in order to create this waterway, but their accomplishment in 1914 also launched a new era of intricate international connectivity, which positioned (and continues to position) the United States as the world's foremost economic, technological and military

superpower. Between its utter audacity as an engineering project and its enduring economic and geopolitical significance across both the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Panama Canal is the planet's most extraordinary example of Earth shaping. THE LINE may eventually contend for this accolade, as it strives to redefine what a city means and to place Saudi at the heart of affairs.



Earth Shapers: How Humans Mastered Geography and Remade the World, by Maxim Samson, is published by Profile Books, out August 7.