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Safewashing in the conspicuous commodification of the hazardous aesthetic

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Abstract

In this paper, we introduce the concept of safewashing within the context of the hazardous aesthetic and the attractive view as a new lens through which to research issues relating to widespread, continuing urban property development in unsafe, hazard-prone locations. Recognising that many aesthetically attractive views can be simultaneously hazardous, we suggest that in the process of property development and marketing, unsafe locations may be masked through 'washing out' (i.e. overlooking or covering up) actual and/or potential risk in favour of driving urban growth, capital investment and profit. Underpinned by the concept of aesthetic common sense, we explore the commodification of the aesthetically appealing view and the safewashing of the reality of hazard and potential disaster. Questions are raised about how the practice of safewashing within the context of increasing human impacts and the financial costs of disasters may be challenged and addressed.

KEYWORDS

aesthetic value, disaster risk, hazards, hazardscape, place marketing, real estate

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this theoretical discursive paper, we introduce and begin to develop the concept of safewashing. We adopt a transdisciplinary approach, utilising our combined expertise across natural hazards, disaster geography, urban (re)development, economic geography and visual culture. Bringing these strands together, we begin to explore safewashing in the context of the commodification of the hazardous aesthetic (Main et al., 2021; Speake, 2017). In doing so, we assert that the dominant narrative of neoliberal property markets utilising visual aesthetics for capital extraction warrants challenging and countering, particularly where there is clear evidence of increasing risk including threats to life. In short, through this concept, we seek to illustrate how landscape aesthetics, aesthetics of the view, aesthetic common sense and the hazardscape may combine and in so doing *contribute to* disaster risk in hazardous aesthetic locations. As financial costs of disasters continue to rise (Statista, 2024), we identify that questions must be asked regarding the contribution

of safewashing of the hazardous aesthetic, its concomitant 'illusions of safety', and how the impacts of safewashing can be addressed and avoided. After providing some context to our current paper, we draw out common themes from the predominantly compartmentalised literatures on property and the view, commodification and the aesthetic view, and finally hazardscape and the view. We then introduce and begin to theoretically and exploratively discuss the concept of safewashing, drawing on existing empirical research and global examples.

1.1 | Context

For centuries, people have shaped the land around them to create beautiful landscapes, establishing opportunities for economic activity whilst often not considering the risk and possible consequences of certain choices (Alexander, 1984; Gambi, 1964; Marincioni et al., 2019). Within disaster risk reduction, discussion of aesthetics, often as an analogy for beauty, typically emerges in the consideration of reconstruction following a disaster (e.g. 1693 (Sicily), 1755 (Lisbon), 2011 (L'Aquila) earthquakes) or through nature-based mitigation (Haruna et al., 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2023; Marincioni et al., 2019; Nguyen-Trung, 2022; Villagra Islas & Felsenhardt Rosen, 2015). Elsewhere, landscape aesthetics and an associated desire for prestige and a picturesque view have resulted in attractive and desirable views and property being created, imagined, commodified and marketed by those engaged in property (re-)development (Park et al., 2024; Speake, 2017; Speake & Kennedy, 2019). Yet, despite being highly sought after by property developers and investors alike, the attractive view, including of bluespace and greenspace, is frequently associated with hazardous locations at risk of, for example, fire, flooding, erosion, mass movement and consequently are hazardous places in which to build and live.

As an example, over successive years, capital has been invested in California (USA) to construct infrastructure and idyllic, prestige and much sought-after real estate (Garcia, 2024). However, many of the multi-million-dollar properties along the Californian coast in locations including San Clemente (south of Los Angeles) face (increasing) risk from, for example, coastal hazards and flooding. In February 2024, successive atmospheric rivers[1] led to many of these villas teetering on the cliff edge, with a total damage cost across the State equating to approximately US$87.7 million (Newsom, 2024). Under contemporary sea-level and storm conditions, approximately 65,000 residents and property worth US$25 billion are in areas at risk of flooding (Jones et al., 2017; Thorne et al., 2024). Inland, meanwhile, in the exclusive, up-market localities such as the wooded hills surrounding the Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, Altadena and Malibu (amongst others), the ever-present dangers of wildfires tend to be downplayed or ignored in place marketing in favour of projecting the attractive greenspace landscapes and vistas (Wainwright, 2025). In January 2025, wildfires caused significant economic and property losses across this aesthetic and highly valued landscape, with costs estimated between US$28 and 53.8 billion[2] (Horton et al., 2025) and claiming at least 30 lives.

On a more localised scale, the Radisson Blu Hotel (St. Julian's, Malta) was built at the height of the mass tourism boom on the city-island-state[3] in the 1990s with prestige views overlooking the attractive, yet often hazardous, coastal littoral of the Mediterranean. However, in October 2016, Medicane[4] Trixie brought strong wind gusts, high waves and substantial damage, which led to flooding of up to 1.5 m in the ballroom, restaurant and spa facilities (Anon, 2016a; Main et al., 2022). Three years later, in February 2019, hurricane-level winds brought high waves that flooded the hotel's ballroom (Main et al., 2022; Watson, 2019). To maximise the view of the Mediterranean bluespace, the hotel is sited *c*. 10 m from the high tide mark with little protection and is therefore also exposed to the low-frequency high-impact events of tsunami—of which a damaging event has not been experienced since 1908 (Main, 2019; Main et al., 2022).

In these, and other, hazard-prone locations, we argue that developers and real estate agents may utilise a practice involving the masking of the hazard, risk and potential for disaster, in favour of driving capital investment, accumulation and short-term capital gain. In so doing, property purchasers and others 'buying into' the allure of the attractive view are encouraged to *not see* or be aware of this potential, and to instead invest in property that has been commodified and marketised in ways that can overlook risk and/or infer safety. For the first time, we term this practice: safewashing. We now turn to explore the literature informing our theorisation of safewashing in the context of the hazardous aesthetic by focusing on property and the view, commodification and the aesthetic view, and hazardscape and the view.

2 | 'LOOK AT THE VIEW!'

The geographical proximity to, access to and effects of an aesthetically pleasing view are widely recognised as playing an important role in the appeal and market price of a property (Benson et al., 1998; Bourassa et al., 2003, 2004; Damigos

& Kaliampakos, 2003; Doss & Taff, 1996; Hansen & Benson, 2013; Hui & Liang, 2016; Jim & Chen, 2009; Lange & Schaeffer, 2001; Luttik, 2000; Park et al., 2024; Speake, 2017; Wang et al., 2016). For example, in the setting of high-rise apartments in Seoul (South Korea), specific preferred views include the 'green view, river view, sea view and city view' (Park et al., 2024, p. 3). However, the view's contribution to a property's price varies according to the method of calculation and what is being considered.

Early research used simple classifications of 'view' versus 'no view' whilst others have considered several subdimensions of the view including scope and distance of and to the view (e.g. Hansen & Benson, 2013). Graves et al. (1988) reported that a beach view in Orange, Riverside and San Bernadino counties (California, USA) added 13% to property value; later, Damigos and Anyfantis (2011) in their study of Athens (Greece) identified that the value of two identical properties in the same district could differ by 5%–45% because of their view with the 'sea-effect' increasing premiums by 34%. Similar findings in Sydney (Australia) and Auckland (New Zealand) considered the effects of distance and view scope, finding a premium of 6.8%–12.7% for properties in the former and 44% in the latter when accounting for properties with the widest scope of water view (Samarasinghe & Sharp, 2008; Wallner, 2012). Irrespective of the level of premiums, people are clearly willing to pay more for the scenic view (Baranzini & Schaerer, 2011; Mittal & Byahut, 2019; Palm & Bolsen, 2023; Suzuki et al., 2023), with properties often being constructed by individuals and property developers in such a way as to maximise the view and hence increase their financial value and associated profit potential (e.g. Fleischer, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2012; Speake, 2017).

2.1 | Aesthetics and the commodification of the view

There is a growing body of literature on aesthetics and on the visual landscape quality having value (Brady & Prior, 2020; Smalley & White, 2023). Notably from the field of psychology focusing on human perception, aesthetic experience is considered the basis of such value, centring on a feeling of pleasure or admiration in response to the perceptual qualities of an 'object' (Gorodeisky, 2021; Levinson, 1996; Mitias, 2022; Riggle, 2024; Shelley, 2013; Stecker, 2006). For example, research has begun to explore the 'look' of given cities as they seek to strengthen their aesthetic identity to promote their chosen 'brand' (Bargenda, 2019; Degen & Rose, 2022; Kokosalakis et al., 2006; Lehtinen, 2021; Melović et al., 2017; Speake & Kennedy, 2019, 2022; Yamagishi & Doering, 2025). Given the focus of the present paper, we consider the 'object' as a 'view' that is purposefully commodified as having a financial as well as aesthetic value. In so doing, we are informed by Speake's (2017) research on how views can be purposely commodified for property and urban development and regeneration.

During the last six decades, global consumer society has placed considerable importance on impressions, values and opinions conditioned by visual culture and media representations, often influenced by emotion and imagination (Dovitskaya, 2005; Ghertner, 2015; Heywood & Sandywell, 2011; Jansson & Lagerkvist, 2009; Speake, 2017; Thompson, 2015). However, the (re)structuring of society along neoliberal capitalist lines has intensified the commodification of resources as a means of capital extraction and increasing the accumulation of capital (Harvey, 2005, 2010; Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Yamagishi & Doering, 2025).

More recent focus on financialisation of property development typifies the current financialisation phase of neoliberal capitalism (e.g. Aalbers, 2022). In this phase, neoliberalism has been underpinned by speculative profit making and private real estate, with the state playing a minor role (Speake & Kennedy, 2022). The interplay between neoliberal capitalism, processes of political structure, the aesthetics of the powerful affluent elite and the creators of styled for status, upscale property development dominates. In explaining this interaction, we adopt the Gramscian-informed conceptualisation of aesthetic common sense (Speake et al., 2023; Speake & Kennedy, 2019, 2022). In short, what is considered 'attractive' is determined by the aesthetic preferences and values of the affluent elite, which are then scripted and incorporated into property development and cityscapes by planners, architects and other agents of change. In subsequent commodification and their media promotion to the less affluent, these preferences and values are usualised, that is, they become the 'aesthetic norm' of the wider viewing public/subject (Ghertner, 2015; Speake, 2017). Through such processes, a raft of environmental and other amenities, for example, attractive aesthetics, are used as resources through which the power and values of the affluent elite are reinforced (Speake, 2017; Speake & Kennedy, 2022).

An aesthetically attractive view has been shown to be a commodifiable resource that can be harnessed as a component of investment strategies by real-estate companies through deliberate valuation and marketing strategies (Fields & Uffer, 2014; Halbert & Attuyer, 2016; Lange & Schaeffer, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991, p. 291; Lippert & Steckle, 2016; Speake, 2017; Speake & Kennedy, 2019; Weber, 2010). As Speake (2017, pp. 2923–2924, our emphasis) identifies, at the core of this rests

the moments and elements of the view: the act of view*ing*, types of viewing, the view and *what* is being viewed—all of which are related to the concept of the gaze (Foucault, 1977, 1990; Jansson & Lagerkvist, 2009; Urry & Larsen, 2011). In short, to view something is to see something in a *single* moment whether that 'thing' is a panorama, vista or prospect through a specific framing (e.g. a window-frame; Friedberg, 2006; Isenstadt, 1999, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2012). To date, the literature exploring such aesthetically pleasing views has largely focused on the objects of view such as those associated with bluescapes (i.e. lakes, oceans and rivers) and greenscapes (i.e. parks, fields, hills/mountains/valleys and woodland/forest) that 'catch the eye' and are projected and presented to people as appealing, alluring and desirable. In this paper, we move this discussion forward by exploring the supply and marketing of the aesthetic view, through our concept of safewashing in hazardous aesthetic environments, and its implications for policies on urban growth, resilience, hazard communication and ultimately the ethics of place marketing.

2.2 | Hazardscape and the view

For millennia societies have lived in mountainous, volcanic, coastal and fluvial environments, relying on proximity to natural resources for their livelihoods yet simultaneously being exposed to their known and unknown associated risks: the early Incan settlements; the Aztec cities; civilisations and settlements in Mesopotamia and around the Mediterranean Sea; the settlements and kingdoms of Indonesia, and the towns and cities around volcanoes (e.g. Chester et al., 2000; Combey et al., 2020; Liritzis et al., 2019; Malawani et al., 2022; Sosa-Rodriguez, 2010; Walker, 2013). Perhaps the clearest example of such a juxtaposition is the environments associated with marine and fluvial bodies which bring the potential for flooding, with coastal sites possessing the additional threat of coastal erosion and storm surge.

A possible unexpected water-based hazard is a seiche[5] as they can occur on lakes, reservoirs and ponds as well as bays and seas (Giese & Chapman, 1993; Main, 2019; NOAA, 2018), all features that are frequently commodified for their value premium (e.g. Bin et al., 2008; Dahal et al., 2019; Damigos & Anyfantis, 2011; Doss & Taff, 1996; Goetgeluk et al., 2005; Luttik, 2000; Shi et al., 2022). These events are recognised at inland lakes around the world including Lake Wakatipu (New Zealand), Lake Geneva (Switzerland and France), Lake Chapala (Mexico) and the Laurentian Great Lakes (Canada/USA) (Cueva et al., 2019; Heath, 1975; Lemmin et al., 2005). In the latter, up to 0.9 m per day of Lake Erie's northeastern shore was eroding in February 2020, exacerbated by the seiche events that can have up to a 4.8 m difference between opposing shores (Siman et al., 2022). In October 1844, a 6.7 m seiche on the lake killed up to 78 people and caused significant damage to lakeside properties (Malloy, 2010; NOAA, 2018); more recently in November 2019, strong winds across the lake 'pushed' a powerful seiche with waves of up to 3.6 m into Buffalo causing coastal flooding and erosion, including damage to sea walls and breakwater systems (Capital Weather Gang, 2019; Farhadzadeh & Atkinson, 2021; NOAA, 2018). Hence, aesthetically alluring landscapes can be, and quite often are, simultaneously hazardous, linking to the concept of hazardscape.

Whilst the hazardscape is oft-taken to depict 'hazards at a place' and used interchangeably with riskscape(s) (Colten, 2006, 2010; Corson, 1999; Cutter, 2002; Cutter et al., 2000; Khan & Crozier, 2009; Walton & Shaw, 2017), here we consider it in the context of cultural and hazard geographies through the suffix 'scape', associating it with the landscape tradition: notably the landscape as social space and apocryphal landscape discourses (Henderson, 2003; Mustafa, 2005; Saguin, 2017). The latter concerns 'landscape as a way of seeing, especially a way of seeing that relishes the gaze, that asserts power by privileging perspectival vision, which, far from being a mere way of seeing, informs the actual, material making of places' (Henderson, 2003, p. 192). Saguin (2017, p. 1972, our emphasis) considers this in the context of 'a constructed vision of landscape that is contested at the level of ideological representation'. Thus, how hazardous landscapes are viewed, constructed (Mustafa, 2005) and gazed upon. Ultimately, we consider this as relating to the radical school within hazard geography, to the imaginaries of risk and to the materially- and socially constructed visions of nature (e.g. Castree & Braun, 2001; Hewitt, 1983; Swyngedouw, 1999; Youngs, 2020). This collectively recognises the role of contemporary capitalism in producing risk and hazards in situations governed by opportunities for capitalist production and accumulation of new wealth with emphasis on exchange, rather than use, value (Oulahen, 2021; Stanley, 2013). This is similarly recognised in consideration of the material construction of hazardous environments and the dual negative–positive externality of environmental hazards, the latter particularly clear in the material inseparability of hazard sources (e.g. bluescapes, unstable slopes) and rewards (i.e. aesthetically attractive views) (e.g. Collins, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Davis, 1998; Jung & Yoon, 2018; Khan et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017; Pelling, 1999; Seo et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021).

Hazard and the view have long been considered in the context of landscape aesthetics. The work of Leveson (1988, p. 86, our emphasis), for example, considered a 'sense of hazard' as being necessary if landscape, and views thereof, were

to work aesthetically. However, Leveson considers hazard as not necessarily involving physical danger per se, but rather involving 'a feeling [...that the viewer] is exposed to the power of nature, a sense of the infinite, something far larger, older than oneself' (1988, p. 86). Dolan et al. (1980) were arguably amongst the first to make a connection between urban (re) development, urban growth, view desire and hazardous features. Focusing on barrier island dynamics along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of the United States, they illustrated the significant construction taking place along the shore-zone despite significant damage wrought by hurricane storm surges and 'nor' easters'. In so doing, they related the cause of the development to the desire to be near the water's edge (Dolan et al., 1980, p. 16; see also Rasid & Hufferd, 1988). However, they stopped short of relating this to the view and landscape tradition present within the hazardscape concept. We argue that such landscapes possess a hazardous aesthetic, that is, an aesthetically attractive view that is hazardous (Main et al., 2021, p. 277; Speake, 2017). We deliberately extend the conversation on this concept beyond that of recent studies in the field focused on the visuality of hazardous waste sites (e.g. Balayannis, 2019, 2020; Rosenfeld et al., 2018) and in the context of security and biopolitics (e.g. Ghertner et al., 2020) to encompass all aesthetically attractive landscapes that are simultaneously hazardous.

3 | SAFEWASHING

Since the 1970s, in the context of neoliberalism and hazard and risk production, it has been recognised that the growth elite (i.e. the local network of builders, developers, investors and real estate interests) in cities and elsewhere continuously demands growth in hazardous locations, doing so by means including emphasising the environmental amenities present (e.g. the view) (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976; Tierney, 2014, p. 127–128). Often, this can include state-led policies and financial incentives to encourage building and construction/property development in places susceptible to hazards including slopes, river channels, fault lines and low-lying coastal areas (Brody et al., 2013; Coates & Nygren, 2020; Nicholls & Crompton, 2017; Ramseyer, 2012). However, whilst some scholars (e.g. Haney, 2022; Oulahen, 2021) have focused on the state power as promoting such development, we take this further and contend that hegemonic political and economic elites can utilise a process in unsafe locations involving the *deliberate* emphasis of the aesthetically appealing view over the reality of potential disaster. For the first time, we term this process safewashing; in essence, 'washing out' the danger in favour of driving urban and economic development and growth in which the *single* moment of a constructed, commodified panorama, vista or prospect (i.e. the view) (Speake, 2017) is one of safety and aesthetic beauty, created with the deliberate aim of attracting capital investment and accumulation.

In introducing our concept of safewashing, we draw upon previous works considering various '-washing's', all of which consider the suffix 'washing' as the hiding, masking and concealing of some*thing* (e.g. Budinsky & Bryant, 2013; Keresztúri et al., 2025; Ninan & Clegg, 2024; Paul, 1997; Pritchard, 2020; Williams, 2024; Yılmaz & Baybars, 2022). Greenwashing, for example, refers to the use of false or misleading claims and symbolism to give an *impression* of an organisation's/product's environmental sustainability (Williams, 2024, our emphasis) through which the obscuring processes occur in the 'eye of the beholder' and are considered central to the functioning of contemporary capitalism (Gunderson, 2014; Santos et al., 2024; Seele & Gatti, 2017; Williams, 2024, p. 9). Artwashing meanwhile concentrates focus within the visual domain and is considered by Mould (2017) and Pritchard (2020) to be a process involving the use of artistic practices in the service of private capital, thereby making a locale more attractive for investment and the processes of gentrification. In short, it involves masking some*thing* (i.e. environmental harm, unattractive locations) for the purpose of capital accumulation.

In safewashing a view, the some*thing* being hidden or concealed is the hazardousness and disaster-potential of a given commodified vista. In the case of properties designed to maximise a view, the word 'overlook' (i.e. overlooking the sea/lake/river/forest) is frequently used. We argue that the synonym 'overlook' can be seen through a duality: (1) to gaze over, that is, overlook, the commodified aesthetically appealing view of a landscape from the residential or touristic property, and (2) to overlook, that is, disregard, ignore, glossover, the potential hazardous consequences of, for example, coastal erosion and severe weather impacts. Here we draw parallels to the strategy of executional greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Parguel et al., 2014, 2015). This refers to the (un)intentional process by which organisations use elements such as images or sounds that evoke nature/natural landscapes to trigger inferences in the audience that the product is environmentally sustainable (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2024; Nemes et al., 2022). In a similar guise, we adopt the term executional safewashing to suggest that members of the growth elite may not use any outward claim of safe-ness but rather they may *suggest* safe-ness through the visual aesthetic elements of the preferred view of, for example, calm seas and blue skies. We also build on two characteristics of greenwashing: the hidden trade-off (TerraChoice, 2010)

and hazardous consequences (Scanlan, 2017). In our context, the former concerns those neoliberal marketing strategies suggesting that a product, that is, the view, is safe based only on certain, deliberately selected, narrow time-limited attributes (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) in which it is gazed upon through a chosen *single* moment portraying it as 'safe'. This is achieved without attention to the other important attributes of the product, that, the presence of hazard, risk and potential for disaster. The connection between safewashing and the hazardous consequences factor of greenwashing is most apparent in their distraction of the public from the reality of the dangers present in an aesthetically appealing locale. In sum, whilst there are clear connections between safewashing and the other '-washing's, the major difference is that in safewashing, the some*thing* being masked is the actual and/or potential risk to life and the potential devastating consequences to life and property.

Whilst this may infer that no regulations exist, there is a long history of regulations, laws and practices designed to mitigate the impacts of hazards on life and property (Hu & Wang, 2021; Moeini & Memari, 2023; Proverbs & Lamond, 2017; Shahjalal et al., 2024). This includes: building codes and standards for earthquakes (e.g. ASCE 7, Eurocode 8 (EN 1998–1 [Europe]), NZS 1170 (New Zealand), ACI 318, and ISO 3010:2017), urban wildfire (e.g. IWUIC 2021) and wind events (e.g. ASCE 7–22, AS/NZS 1170.2:2011 (Australia/New Zealand), ISO 16932:2016); minimum building requirements in flood-prone areas through policy and/or guidance (e.g. PPS25, BS85500, PAS 1188–1:2014 [United Kingdom], ASCE 24 [United States]), and land-use zoning designed to regulate development in at-risk areas (Aerts & Botzen, 2011; Hudson & Botzen, 2019; ICC, 2021; Ishchuk, 2024; Mejorin et al., 2018; Moeini & Memari, 2023; Proverbs & Lamond, 2017). Despite the recognised societal and financial value of these for hazard mitigation and disaster risk reduction (Shreve & Kelman, 2014; Simmons et al., 2020), challenges to their use and enforcement remain, including from members of the growth elite. For instance, risk perception, lack of political support, the practices of real estate stakeholders and the continuous neoliberal drive for profit are recognised as barriers to earthquake mitigation (Egbelakin et al., 2017; Shahjalal et al., 2024; Solberg et al., 2010). Within these, it is recognised that many development projects prioritise short-term savings over long-term resilience, despite the relatively small cost of doing so (East et al., 2024; Porter, 2021, pp. 528–529). Elsewhere, and related directly to our concept of safewashing, it is local governments who typically possess the legal authority to make land-use decisions and enforce them whilst simultaneously often being incentivised to support policies that promote new development for capital gain (Aerts & Botzen, 2011; Williams et al., 2025). In the following section, we begin to discursively explore how safewashing of the hazardous aesthetic may manifest in different contexts, and in so doing, we identify opportunities for detailed empirical research that is beyond the scope of our current paper.

4 | SAFEWASHING OF THE HAZARDOUS AESTHETIC

Attractive, desirable views and property may be created, imagined, commodified and marketed by those engaged in design and development, with the result that those 'buying into' the scripted allure may not be aware, or indeed made aware, of (hidden) risks and potential danger. Through safewashing, the growth elites engaged in property (re)development may mask unsafe hazard-prone locations, washing out (i.e. covering up) actual and/or potential risk in favour of short-term capital investment, accumulation and profit. We begin to explore this through two related lenses: the linguistic and visual imagery, and knowledge and information.

Whether new-build or redevelopment, the growth elite may capitalise on the commodification of the actual and promised view, despite the clear and/or hidden risk and potential for disaster. Through property and place marketing, developers, real estate agents and other members of the growth elite may appear to use a strategy of executional safewashing to encourage the affluent elite and others via aesthetic common sense to invest in the environmental amenities present (i.e. the view). Often presented and conveyed through carefully chosen linguistic and visual imagery, places and properties are presented as exclusive and luxurious. For example, offering 'unmatched vistas [that are] yours to enjoy' (AX Group, 2023, p. 16–17) whether these are 'sweeping panoramic views of [the] glistening waters', 'unforgettable views of the open bay' (realtor.com) or 'privileged front row seats to some of the most breathtaking scenery' (AX Group, 2023, p. 13). Such language is frequently accompanied by visual imagery of such views, placing the environmental amenities at the heart of the imaging and marketisation of a given property. For example, in the promotion of the Verdala Terraces (Ir-Rabat, Malta), sited on a precarious complex geology susceptible to seismic wave amplification[6] and rock fall (Main, 2019), images directly relating to the residential property feature the outward-facing 'exceptional views' within AX Group's (2023) presentation through techniques including coding through window-shaping and expansive green-blue panoramas (Isenstadt, 1999, 2007). In Tampa Bay (Florida, United States) meanwhile, an area prone to hurricane activity (Anon., 2023a, 2023b; Friedman, 2022; Palm & Bolsen, 2023), offers of the 'sweeping panoramic views' in

properties worth up to US$4 million (realtor.com) are accompanied by images of blue skies and calm seas. Similarly, the construction and marketing of Tigné Point (Tas-Sliema, Malta) is purposefully oriented to maximise the extensive and uninterrupted gaze 'over the scintillating Mediterranean' (fortressgardens.com, 2025), whilst the potential for disaster from tsunami, seiche, extreme weather, storm breakers and coastal erosion (e.g. Anon, 2016b; Debono, 2019; Jones, 2018; Main, 2019, pp. 109–117; Main et al., 2022) seems to be overlooked or masked through safewashing.

Elsewhere, and within the specific context of reconstruction post-disaster, it is the *suggestion* of an aesthetically attractive view that members of the growth elite may be commodifying and using to encourage capital investment within desirable at-risk locations, despite the visible presence of recent disaster. For example, in July 2025, (plots of) properties damaged and/or destroyed in the Pacific Palisades (California) during the January 2025 fires were found to be advertised on realtor.com for up to US$2 million with the possibility for owners to 'enjoy ocean views and ocean breezes'. In some cases, these are accompanied by imagery of the burnt shells of former properties, representative of the clear and visible threat of wildfire (Davis, 1998).

It is recognised within landscape perception, and by extension 'view' and aesthetic view research, that seasonality and the type of weather within an image can alter preferences for a view. For example, sunny landscapes, as opposed to those of inclement weather phenomena, are more positively perceived, with the position and nature of the horizon also shown to have an influence on perception and, therefore, desire for the view (Lin et al., 2018; Półrolniczak and Kolendowicz, 2023; Smalley & White, 2023; Stamps, 2002; Svobodova et al., 2014; White et al., 2014; Tasser et al., 2023). However, when such imagery and language are viewed through our lens of executional safewashing, and recognising that to view is to see some*thing* (i.e. a view) in a *single* moment, we identify that the narrow time-limited attributes of safety and calm (e.g. white sand, blue skies, calm seas) may be *suggested* by the respective members of the growth elite in order to encourage short-term investment and capital accumulation. The impact of this imaging and marketing, in the specific context of executional safewashing, is worthy of detailed empirical investigation within economic geography, landscape perception, urban geography and hazard perception disciplines.

Once predominantly marketed to the capital-rich elite, through neoliberal financialisation and aesthetic common sense the desire for such alluring hazardous aesthetic views is becoming usualised with the less affluent (and more economically precarious) being encouraged to 'buy into' the environmental aesthetic value (i.e. the view) and the associated status and prestige (Ghertner, 2015; Speake, 2017). Through safewashing, property purchasers and others 'buying into' the scripted allure may not be aware, or indeed be made aware, of hidden risks and potential dangers. Some, such as seiche, tsunami and the threats of seismic activity, are not always apparent and may occur very rarely with varied impact. Others, meanwhile, such as unstable slopes, river channels and coastal areas, are often in plain sight but may be masked through such purposive marketing for the advancement of capital accumulation and profit for property developers, real estate agents, and others actively engaged in property (re)development. Yet, as such hazardous aesthetic locations are increasingly becoming developed, and with financial costs of disasters increasing, an important question emerges to which we now begin to explore: Could providing hazard-salient information to those 'buying into' the allure be a solution?

For over four decades, it has been recognised that development continues to take place within hazardous aesthetic locations. In many locations, sellers of properties are required to reveal relevant information pertaining to the purchase of a given property, which may include the disclosure of natural hazard risks (Englin, 2006; Lefcoe, 2004). For example, California (USA) law (*1998 Natural Hazard Disclosure Law* (AB 1195)) requires sellers of properties within a statutorily designated natural hazard zone to provide prospective property purchasers with a Natural Hazard Disclosure Statement prior to closing a sale (Anshuka et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2024; nolo.com, n.d.; Troy & Romm, 2004; cf. Natural Resources Defensive Council, 2023); of note is that this law protects sellers and real estate agents from liability exposure due to error, omission or disclosure inaccuracy (Troy & Romm, 2004), of which may include the practice of safewashing. In New South Wales and Queensland (Australia) meanwhile, sellers of residential properties are not 'generally required' to disclose natural hazard risk to buyers despite the significant economic impact (Brown et al., 2023, p. 3–4). In the UK meanwhile, Ludy and Kondolf's (2012) study found that few respondents received any mention of flood risk from estate agents when purchasing properties in a flood risk zone. Whilst this may be illustrative of caveat emptor (buyer beware) practices, it may also be suggestive of safewashing.

There is extensive discussion within the literature on the impact of providing this information on property value with the majority reporting a decline in value where natural hazard risks are disclosed (Anshuka et al., 2025; Bélanger et al., 2018; Filippova et al., 2019; Hino & Burke, 2021; Inoue & Hatori, 2021; Lyle et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2024; Meldrum, 2016; Pollack et al., 2023; Shr & Zipp, 2019; Troy & Romm, 2004; Zhang, 2016). However, in the case of hurricanes, properties have been found to sell at a premium before and during a period of inactivity even within high flood hazard zones and areas of evidenced impact (Bin & Polasky, 2004; Fang et al., 2023; Morgan, 2007). Recognising the aesthetic as an amenity,

properties located in aesthetically pleasing locations or with views thereof, have been found to recover more quickly (Beltrán et al., 2019); however, the pattern of systemic growth in hazard zones despite the disclosure of information should be a cause for concern and is worthy of future detailed empirical investigation. What is clear, however, is that the simple disclosure of information is having little impact on place marketing, and thus property purchasing, within hazardous aesthetic locations.

In the case of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and along the North Atlantic coast of the United States, for example, some recent work has considered the reason for continued development and desire for ownership despite the availability and use of relevant hazard and risk information and visualisations (Fu & Nijman, 2020; Haney, 2022; Palm & Bolsen, 2023). In their work, Palm and Bolsen (2023, p. 921) find that potential buyers are not avoiding low-elevation flood-prone properties in Florida due to flooding in the area being a 'way of life', coastal and waterfront properties being 'luxury in demand items', with people 'willing to take the risk' for the recreational opportunities offered (see also, Brown et al., 2023). This is also identified in Brisbane (Australia), with the desire to live close to areas of greenspace despite the clear identification of wildfire risk (Athukorala et al., 2019). This may, at least in part, explain why properties in the burnt Pacific Palisades (California) highlighted earlier are attracting a high market value despite evidence of fire. Considering this, Palm and Bolsen (2023), p. 922 our emphasis) argue that people 'are simply continuing to purchase homes in what *they* have decided is a desirable environment'. However, within our concept of safewashing, we suggest that it is not the home-buyers per se who determine what a desirable environment is, but rather it is the growth elites who create, portray and marketise the calm, safe view as a means of presenting property as desirable through the practices of neoliberal commodification of the hazardous aesthetic and, ultimately, aesthetic common sense.

Alongside place marketing, safewashing may also be identified in the context of hazard communication to prospective property purchasers, including residential and touristic, and within policy. As consideration of potential safewashing within hazard communication is a topic worthy of future detailed empirical investigation from various angles, here we explore in brief the possible presence of safewashing within policy and associated practice. As we have established, there are many examples of laws, regulations and practices designed to mitigate the impacts of hazards on life and property (Section 3). However, where damaging events may be relatively *in*frequent the question of the potential presence of safewashing becomes an interesting one. For example, with the construction and real estate sectors of Malta having a pivotal role in the macro-economy, development is continuing a pace including in areas vulnerable to flooding, seismic activity, geomorphological and coastal hazards including seiche, tsunami, storm wave and erosion. Some development policies exist (e.g. *Building Regulations Act 2012*, *Tall Building Policy, 2014* and *Strategic Plan for Environment and Development 2015*), yet concerns have been raised with their effectiveness in wording and enforcement (e.g. Grech, 2009; Main, 2019; Scicluna, 2012). It is only recently, for example, that national seismic design regulations were reported as being considered by national government (Balzan, 2023; Debono, 2022) with geologists warning of dangers to life (e.g. Anon, 2016b) given their exclusion (before July 2025) from the Building and Construction Consultative Council (Anon, 2025; Mifsud, 2025). This poses an obvious question that is worthy of future detailed empirical investigation: Why, despite concerns in many locations about the actual and/or potential hazardous environments, do developments still go ahead? We posit that the economic and societal value ascribed to the view may supersede these potential risks because, regardless of the risk, the development of such properties, with said views, is financially lucrative to the growth elite.

5 | CONCLUSION

To conclude, in this discursive theoretical paper, we offer safewashing as a new lens through which to explore issues in the field of disaster risk reduction relating to widespread and continuing urban growth and property development in unsafe, hazard prone locations. The use of the concept safewashing in this context has immediacy as the some*thing* being washed out can be a direct risk to people with potential devastating consequences to property and life. In the case of safewashing the hazardous aesthetic, we assert that the dominant narrative of neoliberal property markets using visual aesthetics, including the view, for capital extraction warrants challenging and countering, especially where there is clear evidence of hazard risk and potential threat to life. As the human and financial cost of disasters globally continues to rise, questions may be asked about the contribution of the safewashing of the hazardous aesthetic and its incumbent 'illusions of safety', and how the impacts of such safewashing can be addressed and avoided. Whilst it has not been the purpose of this paper with its focus on developing the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of safewashing, our concept of safewashing and the hazardous aesthetic when viewed through aesthetic common sense, offers several opportunities for

further empirical research within disaster risk reduction and place marketing to enable people to make better informed and more accurate decisions about a location's actual and potential risk and safety.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Atmospheric rivers (ARs) are long, narrow corridors in the lower atmosphere that are responsible for c. 90% of total poleward water vapour transport through the mid-latitudes (NOAA, 2023; Ralph & Dettinger, 2011; Zhu & Newell, 1998). ARs are a main agent of water resource provision in many coastal regions, yet there is a growing understanding of their hazardous aspects with links to flooding and heavy precipitation events around the globe (e.g. Eiras-Barca et al., 2018; Gimeno et al., 2014; Hegdahl et al., 2020; Ionita et al., 2020; Lavers et al., 2011; Reid et al., 2021). For example, a study in the United States found that between 1978 and 2017, ARs accounted for 84% of total flood damages (US$42.6 billion; US$1.1 billion a year) (Corringham et al., 2019).

[2] Estimates for the economic impact from the Los Angeles fires of January 2025 differ markedly with estimates from AccuWeather (reported by ABC News (2025) and Clayton (2025)) quoting between US$250 and 275 billion. The figures we cite here are quoted in a report by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation (Horton et al., 2025).

[3] The city-island-state concept recognises the complex multi-scalar interconnectivity between 'city' and 'state' and the multiple ways in which they are embedded in 'islandness' when considering advanced sovereign islands in the context of urbanisation (see Main et al., 2021 for a detailed discussion).

[4] A medicane, otherwise referred to as a Mediterranean hurricane, is a low-pressure cyclonic system that is morphologically and physically similar to hurricanes and tropical cyclones (Cavicchia et al., 2014; Romero & Emanuel, 2013; Tous & Romero, 2013). Medicanes have been reported in the Mediterranean with wave heights of up to 4.8 ± 0.1 m and storm surges; for example, the storm surge from Medicane Zorbas (September 2018) was reported as reaching 0.8–1.2 m above mean sea level (Scicchitano et al., 2021).

[5] Seiches are long-period oscillations in an enclosed or locally isolated part of a basin and are generated by air pressure gradients or wind effects (Metzner et al., 2000; Rabinovich, 2009; Wilson, 1972). When occurring in a partially enclosed basin (e.g. harbours, bays, inlets and fjords), they may be referred to as 'coastal seiches' or harbour oscillations (Giese & Chapman, 1993; Rabinovich, 2009). During a seiche event, water is 'pushed' from one end of the water body to the other, with oscillations for hours to days and wave periods typically exceeding 3 h (NOAA, 2018). NOAA (2018) identify that seiches are often linked/referred to as meteotsunamis; however, the latter are considered progressive waves in the tsunami wave period frequency of 2 min-2 h with a potential influence over a large coastline area.

[6] It is recognised that shaking intensity in an earthquake is influenced by the local topographic and geological conditions of a site with areas of soft sediment experiencing more intense shaking than surrounding bedrock (Bowden & Tsai, 2016; USGS, 2014, n.d.; Yeats, 2004, p. 234). For example, the late Martin Degg and colleagues found that the clay deposits in the lakebed of Mexico City amplified the earthquake waves by a factor of 6 compared to solid rock during the 1985 Mexican earthquake (Degg, 1986).

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