

# THE SEA RANCH: DIMENSIONS OF EXPERIENCE

The Sea Ranch is a unique example of landscape development, stretching for ten miles along the northern California coast. Geographic advantage and great natural beauty have been joined here with bold initial planning, place-related architecture, and a process of continuing nurture and evolution. As a managed landscape it draws upon the talents and skills of its stewards: the staff of The Sea Ranch Association, which oversees its comprehensive maintenance and development; the individual owners who invest in its evolution; and the architects and contractors who build here. Together, bound by a legal covenant to care for the land, they have fashioned an exceptional place.

Located on the Sonoma coast, at the western edge of the North American continent, The Sea Ranch is a little over one hundred miles north of the San Francisco Bay Area and three hundred miles south of the California/Oregon border, sitting just south of the Gualala River, the border between Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Gualala, founded in 1858, is immediately north of the river. Once a lumbering community, it is now a busy commercial center. Neighboring The Sea Ranch to the south is Stewart's Point, with a store, farm, and one-time hotel for lumberers dating back to 1868; to the east are a large area of rugged timber land, a small Pomo Indian reservation, and the hamlet of Annapolis, with a region-serving elementary school. Farther afield to the south, on a promontory on the ocean, is Fort Ross, a wooden complex built by Russians in 1812 and now a state park. It was the southernmost of their settlements along the northwest coast of the continent. Highway 1 stretches through The Sea Ranch,

a spectacularly scenic road that proceeds, with sometimes perilous windings, north and south along the California coast.

The Sea Ranch community, founded in 1965, now consists of approximately 1,300 people who are in permanent residence (in 2013) and share ownership of 2,300 acres of common land with about 3,100 other members of The Sea Ranch Association. These own individual property within The Sea Ranch, visit with varying degrees of frequency, and in many cases share their houses with others through a rental program. At the beginning of 2013, there were approximately 1,790 houses, a lodge, several commonly held recreation and community buildings, and three commercial structures in the 4,000-acre development, with some 400 house sites and an expansion of the lodge yet to be developed.

Geologically, the locale lies along the western edge of the San Andreas Fault, an area uplifted by the collision of the Pacific and North American plates. The Sea Ranch boundaries reach to the top of Miller Ridge and nearly all of its land lies on the western face of that ridge. The experience of being here is thus dominated by the fall of the land toward the sea as well as by the constant call of the ocean. The slope of the land is often precipitous in the forests, whereas it is more gentle, undulating but inexorable, in the meadows of the coastal shelf west of Highway 1. Either way the slope leads to the sea, just as certainly as the eye is constantly drawn toward the shimmering horizon.

The joining of land and sea along the bluffs results in a rich and complex landscape of rocks, beaches, and endlessly varied cliffs. Numerous coves, each distinct, provide homes to the abundant wildlife above and below the surface. The shapes and colors of the rocks, which are littered with moss, lichen, or bird droppings; the strings of kelp that thread through the surf and lodge on the land; and the patterns of bird flight above, all combine to produce an astounding intricacy of texture, color, and movement. The coves and promontories give a structure to the land that can be named and remembered. Many of them are distinctly memorable, as their names, such as Black Point, Pebble Beach, Smuggler's Cove, Walk-on Beach, and Del Mar Point, suggest. Hiking trails run for nearly ten miles through land held in common along this ocean edge, with various points of access to the rocks and sand below.

The Sea Ranch is more than an encounter with the sea, however. Above the cliffs, trails lead across wide, open meadows, punctuated by cypress hedgerows, and up into the forests. Here a completely different ecology prevails among steep slopes and twisting ravines, with towering redwoods, fir, and pine; twisting red manzanita and white-barked pin oak; rhododendrons; wild azaleas; and ubiquitous pine needles and ferns, all cast in the shade except when highlighted by shifting pinholes of sun and occasional clearings. Finally, over the ridge and down by the side of the Gualala River lies the Hot Spot, a clearing along the forested shore that used to be a beloved picnicking spot, where children could swim in the shallow river immune from the surging tides and bitter cold of the ocean.

Interlaced through this landscape are clusters and strings of buildings that edge the meadows, recede into the forests, and occasionally stand out along the bluffs. Their weathered and grayed wood-surfaced walls and their



generally dark, sloping roofs soften their presence in the scene, especially when backed up against the vegetation and away from the shore. There are few houses that look just alike, yet many that seem similar, sharing in some semblance of accord.

In parts of The Sea Ranch, houses coalesce into groupings that complement and help to define the distinctive form and character of this landscape; in other parts they spread aimlessly through grassy terrain. At their best, the buildings work with the ecology of the place, interacting with the land and the climate in ways that make it livable, without obliterating its essential character. Nearly always the awareness of nature remains prominent; in some parts just barely, in most parts triumphantly so. In the midst of this extended landscape there are many sites and buildings of real distinction, genuinely creative interpretations of what it can mean to build in this particular place—architecture that rewards close attention.

There is also an extensive social network threaded through these places, including The Sea Ranch Association and its governance and community facilities; association committees that hold forums to examine timely issues, conduct informative walks, and stage community picnics and events; as well as a number of cooperative engagements such as the Posh Squash Community Gardens and The Sea Ranch Thespians, a local drama group. Many of these networks are sustained primarily by permanent residents, but other members also partake in community activities, or organize smaller socializing opportunities of their own, based on common interests or background, or simply on neighboring. These affinity groups find their bonds

strengthened and deepened by their common experience of this place and the chance to be together in a setting that has mutual significance. So, too, do the many groups of short-term renters and guests who come on visits to The Sea Ranch for professional or family gatherings or to celebrate special events. Often their time in this place marks out a memorable space in their lives.

It is the coast, primarily, that brings people here—the touch of the wild that is so vigorously embodied in the shoreline itself: its ceaseless surf, varying in intensity and threat; the traces of unfathomable time revealed in the layers of its bluffs and projecting rocks; the endless process of water eating away at the land from the sea and furrowing down across its surfaces in creeks and swales; and the limitless sky tingeing the earth with its fluctuating colors and floating great cloud forms above it. Within this encompassing frame we see, however fleetingly, the resurgent impulses of life. The clutch of mollusks, the darting and soaring of birds, and the scurry of fauna in neighboring grasslands and forests—each blade of grass and needle of tree recounts the tale of life within. They echo the recurrent and ultimately transient rhythms of our own lives. The Sea Ranch engages and nurtures our attention.





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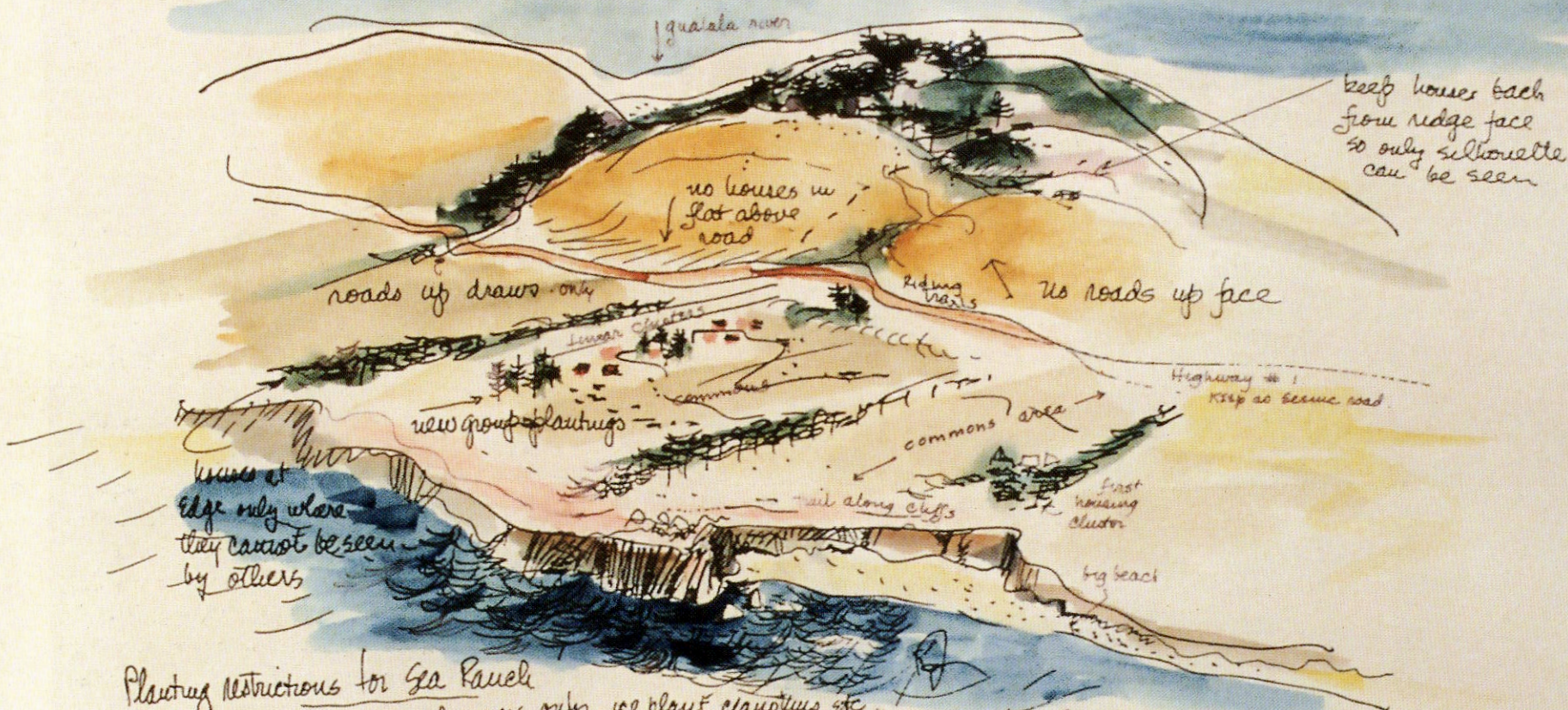




# SEA RANCH

The basic premises...

Dec. 1963



## Planting Restrictions for Sea Ranch

1. No lawns - ground covers only. we plant, claudius etc.
2. Trees only natives or naturalized e: Monterey cypress
3. Shrubs - natives e: Toyon, sweet bay, rhhamnus.
4. Avoid prettiness - maximize rugged character.

## Architectural restrictions.

These are harder to establish:

1. Style of arch'ts? - no neoclass
2. Materials? natural - no paint - pitch roofs 4:12
3. submissions; to arch. Commission.
4. Houses in clusters -- limit heights
5. Avoid sub-urbanization

Kalper

# THE FOUNDING VISION

The preservation and evolution of this coastal terrain have been made possible by the far-sighted initial planning that Oceanic Properties brought to the place when it purchased Rancho Del Mar, 4,000 acres of coastal timber and grazing land, from the Ohlson brothers in 1963; and when Al Boeke, Oceanic's vice president for development, led an intense and innovative planning process with landscape architect Lawrence Halprin.

The specific character of the landscape Oceanic purchased was the result not only of geological forces, which formed the wrinkled mountains along the coastal edge, and the land's subsequent erosion and forestation, but of decades of farming, ranching, and lumbering. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there had been selective clearing for timber, hedgerows had been planted to protect livestock from the wind, and the meandering State Highway 1 was constructed stretching along the base of the range.

Excavation and scientific analysis of the soils have suggested that the ocean shelf was primarily grassland long before any lumbering and ranching took place here. Possibly the meadows were kept from developing into forest by herds of wild animals grazing on the flatter lands. Later, the resident Native Americans, the Pomos, were likely to have set fires to manage the meadow's subsequent growth, and the hills were lumbered extensively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by European and North American settlers. At the time of acquisition, the area was being used as a sheep ranch.

In many respects the land had been abused, overgrazed, and rent by erosion. Yet the sweep of grassland from forest to cliff and the recurrent lines of planted cypress hedgerows marching across the land gave a scope

and structure to the scene that was distinct and engaging. The richly varied surfaces, edges, and patterns of natural growth were interwoven with the bold, linear geometries of human intervention, already expressed here in hedgerows, fences, and roads.

Halprin's plan set out to take advantage of both of these characteristics, using arrangements that matched the ecology and the scope and scale of the landscape better than the conventional patterns of incremental, parcelized development would. Instead of dividing the land up into surveyor's sections, subdivided into private lots, the placement of building sites was to be related to the shape of the land itself and the prospects that could be gained from each position within it. Groups of building sites were placed within the folds of the landscape, almost like sculptures joining the force of the land. The parcels of real estate to be sold, and the roads and infrastructure that would make building possible, were placed not only to make great building sites, but also to form part of a larger physical design. Halprin stated the ambitions of the original vision with characteristic eloquence:

A feeling of overall 'place,' a feeling of community in which the whole was more important than the parts. If we could achieve that—if the whole could link buildings and nature into an organic whole rather than just a group of pretty houses—then we could feel that we had created something worthwhile which did not destroy, but rather enhanced the natural beauty we had been given.<sup>1</sup>

The design gave pride of place to the unique characteristics of the site and to the establishment of large stretches of commons that would preserve the dominance of the natural setting for all who would come to live here. Halprin's drawings of the site and the score for its development eloquently capture the central vision for The Sea Ranch: the land should remain primary; the buildings added to it should complement the essential character of the landscape that they would inhabit. The experience of the coastline was to be shared, not sequestered in separate private ownerships, and there would be large areas of commonly held land that would ensure the perpetuation of the coastal ecology.

Over five decades the initial ideas for the development have been modified and altered (sometimes nearly obliterated) through changes brought about by time, regulatory policy, financial interests, and talent. New insights have been gained, and significant opportunities missed, but The Sea Ranch remains a place of exceptional beauty, with many important lessons to be learned and residents who enjoy an abiding sense of place.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Halprin, *The Sea Ranch...Diary of an Idea* (Berkeley: Spacemaker Press, 2002), 29.





all utilities to be underground

keep houses back of trees

acquire this property for swimming

in forest natural drainageways to be preserved & used as green fingers to the SEA

develop 3000' runway airport

corporation yard in this area

keep new roads in draws

NO houses this face

Condominium here

keep coast open for riding, hiking, access to water and for visual easement.

major Public Beach - develop stair access

Area for lodge & inn

keep flat area open as visual easement

Preserve Black Point as permanent open space

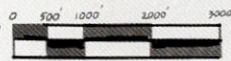
SEA RANCH

Lawrence Halprin & Associates

ocean

north

• 5000 ACRES •



LOCATIONAL SCORE

c



# ORIGINS, EVOLUTIONS, AND IRONIES

Donald Canty (2003)

Over nearly four decades the evolution of this unique place has witnessed certain ironies. The Sea Ranch was born in the 1960s of environmental concerns, yet the environmental movement of the late 1970s almost killed it, and in the end the struggle resulted in landmark environmental law.

The site before development began was (and remains) compelling—a landscape of wild beauty and intimidating power, more challenging than comforting: hillsides thick with fir and redwoods; grassy meadows, mowed and mauled by sheep over the years; cypress hedgerows punctuated laterally up and down the long site; and, finally, the blue-green sea, surging against huge sculpted rock formations and steep bluffs, carving irregular inlets.

Lawrence Halprin, who was to become principal author of The Sea Ranch plan, tells of his early impressions of the area:

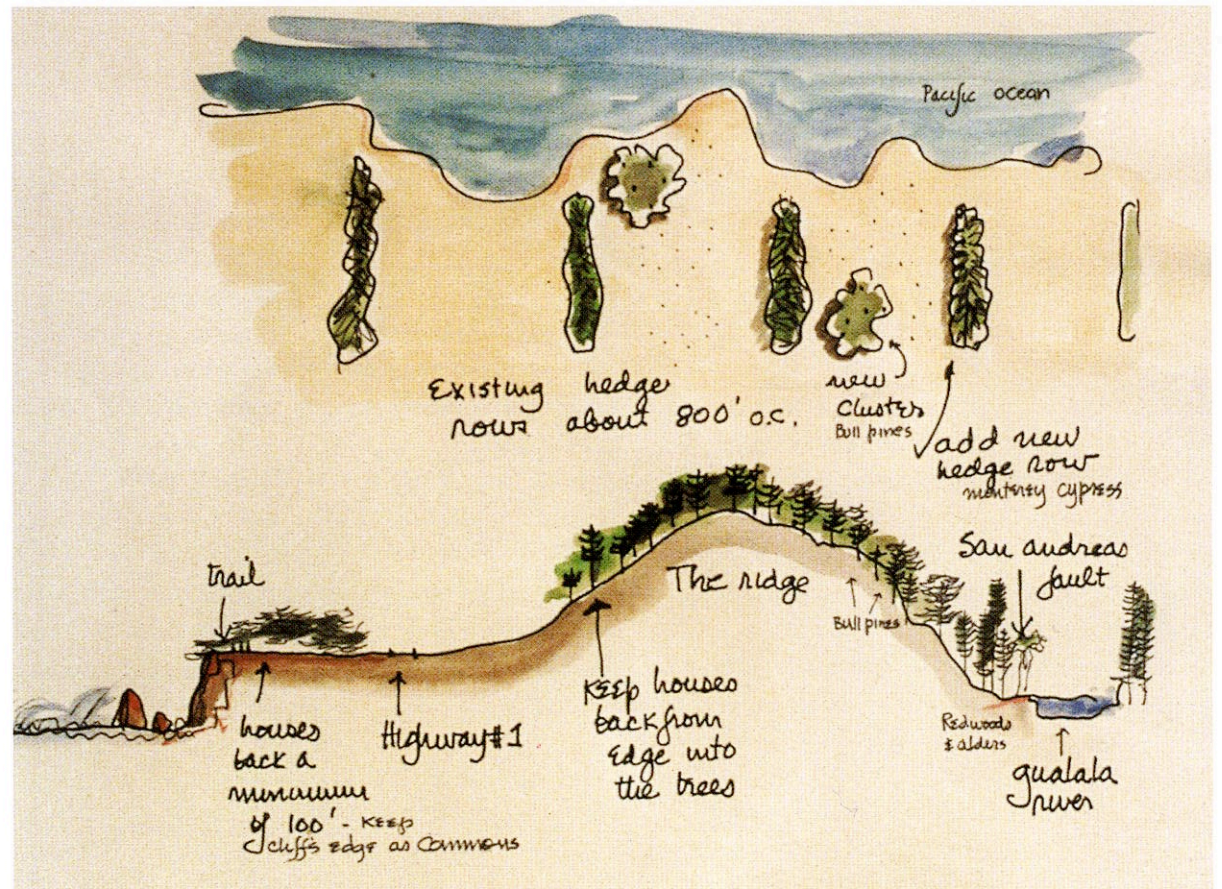
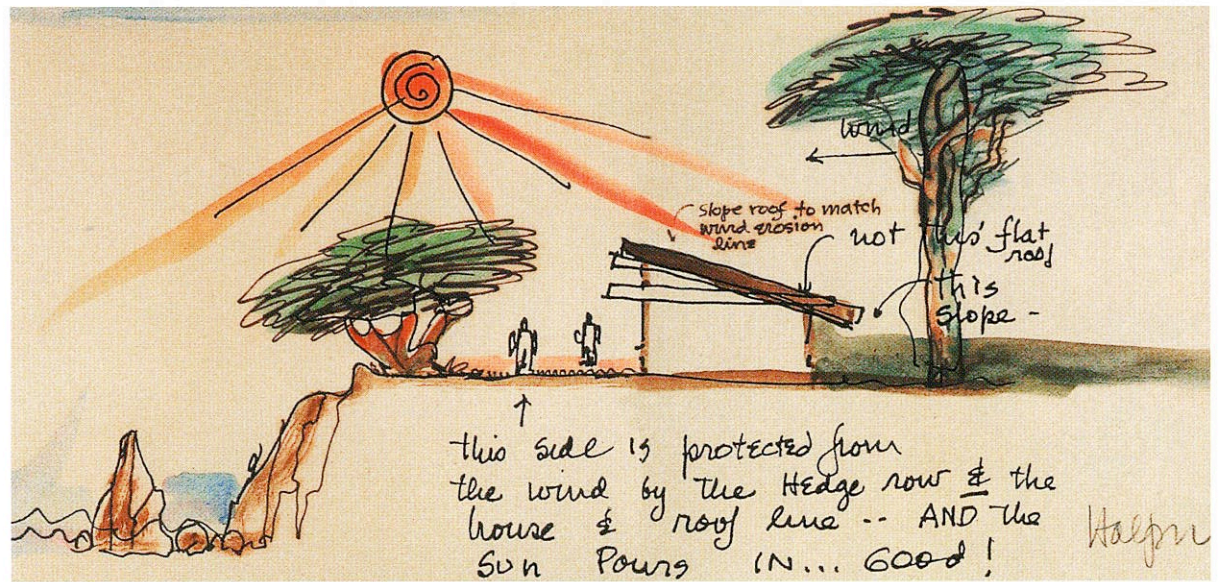
In those days the North Coast was wild, unfriendly, mostly uninhabited and sometimes belligerent. The residents were oriented to forestry, logging, and commercial fishing. In the hills Pomo Indians still lived on their reservations. In many ways it had changed little in the 100 years or so since the early settlers arrived. The occasional barn and sheep sheds had strength of character and inhabited the landscape like rocks and landforms. Great sandstone cliffs stood against the battering surf and diving cormorants nested in the crevices. Seal colonies inhabited the rock outcrops and in the spring gray whales migrated north from the birthing grounds of Baja, California. The constant presence of the Pacific was dominant. It was magical.<sup>1</sup>

## THE PLAN

By the 1960s, Oceanic Properties, a subsidiary of the Hawaiian developer Castle & Cooke specializing in planned communities, was looking for a site on the California coast to develop a new town. The search for suitable land was handled by Al Boeke, who was an architect by training and had a personal interest in new towns—then a fad internationally; he had also spearheaded the building of Oceanic's largest master-planned community of Mililani, Hawaii. Rancho Del Mar, as The Sea Ranch area was then called, captured Boeke's attention during a flying tour over California's north coast, yet he realized it was too isolated to be developed as a town of full-time residents; instead he persuaded Oceanic that a second-home community on the site would fit well into its real estate portfolio. Oceanic bought the land from the Ohlson brothers for \$2.3 million in 1963, and Boeke managed to convince Oceanic and Castle & Cooke that the place—the Spartan beauty of the meadows, the wildness of the sea, and the contrasts of forest and inland river—required a special kind of planning that would bring minimal disruption to the natural landscape.

Boeke's first step in planning The Sea Ranch was to engage Halprin, who was to become one of the country's foremost landscape architects. Halprin had studied at Harvard University under Walter Gropius and Christopher Tunnard, and worked with Thomas Church before opening his own firm in 1949. He and Boeke had worked together successfully on Oceanic's Hawaiian town, although they were quite different people. Halprin has a ferocious love of nature that animates everything he does. He is a thoroughgoing romantic. Boeke was a pragmatist, a builder, and, as we have seen, a persuader. He set about a two-year process of interviewing prospective members of The Sea Ranch design and planning team. On Halprin's recommendation he chose as architects the dean of Bay Area architects, Joseph Esherick, and the emerging Berkeley firm of Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker (MLTW). The latter was an adventurous choice. Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, and William Turnbull had met while architecture students at Princeton University. When they returned to California, Moore and Lyndon taught architecture at the University of California, and Turnbull worked in the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. They began moonlighting small projects, joined by Richard Whitaker, also on the architecture faculty, and soon coalesced into a firm. When brought to Boeke's attention, they had only designed a few modest houses, though, and some larger unbuilt projects. Moore, of course, went on to become one of the profession's most honored practitioners, head of three prestigious architectural schools and recipient of the American Institute of Architects' gold medal. The other partners also went on to notable careers in education and practice.

They were joined on the planning team by people from a then unprecedented wide range of disciplines: foresters, grassland advisors, engineers, attorneys, hydrologists, climatologists, geologists, geographers, and public relations and marketing people. There was, however, no one from the social sciences. At about the same time across the country a quite different kind of large-scale development planning was going on. Baltimore developer James Rouse was creating a new town, Columbia, in the Maryland countryside. Before his physical planners' pencils touched paper, a work group of



**left/top:** Early aerial view of open fields and hedgerows, circa 1964

**left/bottom:** Kite view showing forest, meadow, and houses set back from ocean front, 2002

**right/top:** Halprin sketch of building form and vegetation creating wind-sheltered sun pockets

**right/bottom:** Halprin diagram of hedgerows and section from coast to Gualala River

educators, health care professionals, sociologists, and others was formed to plan the community's basic institutions.

Halprin now says The Sea Ranch "was not intended for just a few people who would use this area as a retreat, with no relationship to each other, but rather as an opportunity for people to form a community."<sup>2</sup> His thinking about The Sea Ranch was influenced by his experience in an Israeli kibbutz. He had something in mind much like what is now called cohousing, with residents having their own dwellings but doing a great deal, including having some meals, in common. The Sea Ranch as it evolved is almost an exact converse of the concept. Boeke is unapologetic about the design team's focus. "Our emphasis was on ecology," he says. "The Sea Ranch never was intended to be a town."<sup>3</sup> A "village" of shops and other community facilities was in the original plan, but since it was not a high priority with Oceanic, it did not materialize. To this day The Sea Ranch does not have a market, a bank, a school, a hospital, or a parish church.

The team spent an intensive year planning the new community, with a great deal of cross-fertilization among disciplines. As Halprin recalls, the notion of making a community here seemed a great challenge. I felt that this could be a wonderful experiment in ecological planning. I was convinced that Sea Ranch could become a place where nature and human habitation could intersect in the kind of intense symbiosis that would allow people to become part of the ecosystem.<sup>4</sup>

Toward this end he brought in Richard Reynolds, a cultural geographer and an ecologist, to do exhaustive studies of the site. Reynolds analyzed the location of different types of soils, their water capacity, natural fertility, and permeability. He mapped the velocity and direction of the often heavy winds (Halprin and Boeke had to crouch behind their car on an early site visit to avoid being blown over) and also studied the extent of wind protection provided by the hedgerows. He offered some advice that was to prove prophetic: To preserve the hedgerows additional plantings are needed; to preserve the open fields from brush and erosion mowing, grazing, or controlled burning need to be done at regular intervals, and the forest needs regular clearing.<sup>5</sup> (He and Turnbull advocated keeping some of the sheep to control overgrowth of the meadows but the idea got nowhere.)

The plan that emerged was strongly based on the characteristics of the site and protection of these resources. Halprin did not produce a conventional planning document; his only drawings were individualistic freehand sketches. The plan called for an average density of one house per acre, but not with each house sitting in the midst of its own acre. Instead houses would be clustered together on the meadows, and some development would take the form of condominiums; in all, half the land would remain open space in common ownership of all The Sea Ranch residents. This was a radical departure in real estate development, and the inclusion of condominiums in particular raised eyebrows.

The hedgerows in the meadows would be densified and new ones added to create a series of "outdoor rooms," in Halprin's phrase.<sup>6</sup> Housing clusters would hug the hedgerows leaving the center of each "room" an open meadow to be used and enjoyed by all. The hedgerows would also help shelter the houses from the wind, as they had the sheep.

Houses would be kept at least one hundred feet behind the ocean bluffs so as not to wall off views. Roads in the meadows would parallel the hedgerows and thus be perpendicular to the shoreline, giving the houses diagonal views of the ocean. The roads would follow the natural contours of the land as closely as possible, and would not have curbs or sidewalks so as not to interrupt the visual flow of the meadows. Sonoma County officials at first objected to this aspect of the plan but acquiesced when Oceanic agreed to add the curbs and sidewalks if their absence caused problems. (It did not.) Above the highway, roads would follow natural draws and would not be built up the faces of hillsides. There would be no development below the forest line on this side. Houses would be tucked into the woods as unobtrusively as possible.

The original plan provided sites for a store and inn, two recreation centers, and a golf course. Even the golf course was to have an ecological bent, its design emphasizing native rock outcroppings and vegetation. Halprin's plan was widely praised and published, and won a national environmental award. *House & Garden* magazine recognized The Sea Ranch as "an unparalleled melding of architecture and landscape" and "the preeminent planned community of our era."<sup>7</sup>

Ground was broken in 1964 for three demonstration projects: a ten-unit condominium by MLTW, who prepared a plan for eleven more to be strung along the south shore of the site; a set of six Hedgerow Houses by Esherick in a meadow; and a store near the condominium, also by Esherick. The architects, while all individualists, shared a belief in the basic precepts of the Bay Area school, one of the nation's strongest regional traditions. These precepts included a close relationship to nature and use of natural materials, windows placed to maximize light and views rather than create an artful exterior composition (although they often achieved that too), relaxed forms, and a general emphasis on buildings as human habitation rather than objects. The mainstream architectural world, however, was firmly in the hands of modernists who rejected regionalism and naturalistic design. As an editor of *Architectural Forum* at the time, I was watching this world closely, and my chief editor dismissed the works of Esherick and his ilk as "stick architecture."

Modernism had taken the offensive against tradition in the 1930s, scored a clear victory after World War II, and was consolidating its gains in the 1960s. Modernism was about rigid, abstract forms, about industrial materials and buildings as objects of pure art. It was about brutalism and rough concrete. Instead, what Oceanic got from its architects at The Sea Ranch was an original, even idiosyncratic architecture that sought, in a formulation agreed to by both Moore and Esherick, "not to be married to the site but to enter into a limited partnership with it."<sup>8</sup>

Working separately, Esherick and MLTW came up with a common design vocabulary for The Sea Ranch: shed roofs to deflect the wind, with no overhangs for the wind to flutter; and cladding of vertical redwood boards with large windows punched through them. But there were differences in emphasis: Esherick's houses snuggled in against the hedgerow self-effacingly, while the MLTW condominium interacted more dynamically with the landscape. These demonstration buildings were influential also

because they came at a time when ecology and the environment were becoming national obsessions. Architecture was seeking ways to deal with these concerns, and the first Sea Ranch buildings offered an exceptional approach.

Oceanic described the Hedgerow Houses, condominium, and the store as “strong without being assertive, simple without being plain, responding to the spirit of the place, its terrain, its climate, its vegetation. . . . It is the spirit, not the forms, of the structures and their response to natural conditions that make the Sea Ranch experience unforgettable.”<sup>9</sup> The developer took firm steps in the form of written covenants to see that owners would find for their own houses the same sensitive response that the first buildings showed. In fact, The Sea Ranch dates its birthday as May 10, 1965, when attorney Reverdy Johnson delivered to a Sonoma County title company in Santa Rosa a finely crafted 111-page “declaration of covenants, conditions, and restrictions” (CC&Rs) for development of The Sea Ranch. The CC&Rs became the guiding principles of The Sea Ranch and are incorporated into every deed.

The Sea Ranch Association, to which all property owners automatically belong, also dates from this day in 1965. It is the closest thing at The Sea Ranch to a local government—a nonprofit corporation formed “to be responsible for commons properties, to maintain the ranch, protect members and enforce the CC&Rs.” The restrictions included a ban on hunting and wildfowl shooting, and a stricture that all structures, utilities, and vehicles blend into nature. The most interesting restrictions concerned specifics of design and landscaping.

These were to be implemented by a three-person design committee, which always included at least one architect and was appointed by the association board. The committee initially was dominated by Oceanic and in particular by the strong-minded and decisive Boeke. The CC&Rs gave it autonomy; its decisions were not subject to review by the association board. In 1980 the committee was expanded to five members including well-regarded design professionals and the association’s staff director of design and planning.

The explicit restrictions on building in the CC&Rs were not too tight. A height limit of sixteen feet was imposed on ocean-fronting homes, and of twenty-four feet on homes on the meadows; roof overhangs were discouraged but not forbidden; and redwood or shingle exterior walls were mandated in muted colors, whereas reflective surfaces were forbidden except for hardware. Cars were to be screened from view. Interior design was unrestricted but brightly colored or white curtains were frowned upon as “disturbing the overall harmony and serenity of the ranch.” Over time the CC&Rs were supplemented by design committee “rules.” Boeke prepared a map prescribing the proper roof slope on every piece of property, more for the sake of “unity” than response to wind and sun conditions.

The restrictions on landscaping were tighter. Most importantly, the meadows were to flow around the houses with as little interruption as possible. The list of restrictions is formidable, such as: “Eye-catching design solutions using showy non-indigenous plant materials; excessive plantings which detract from the natural surroundings such as masses of one species

with conspicuous blooming performance.” Also forbidden are “contrived walkways, defined bed and formal borders, fine lawns, conspicuous specimen plants,” and “obvious geometric shapes created with plant materials.”

Boeke’s team used covenants and the demonstration buildings, as well as peer professional review, as means to influence design undertaken by individuals—with uneven success. The demonstration buildings invited imitation and, in some cases, a sameness in what has been built. Many other houses, as Lyndon has observed, reflect an unwillingness of subsequent architects to design buildings that are integral parts of a coherent whole.

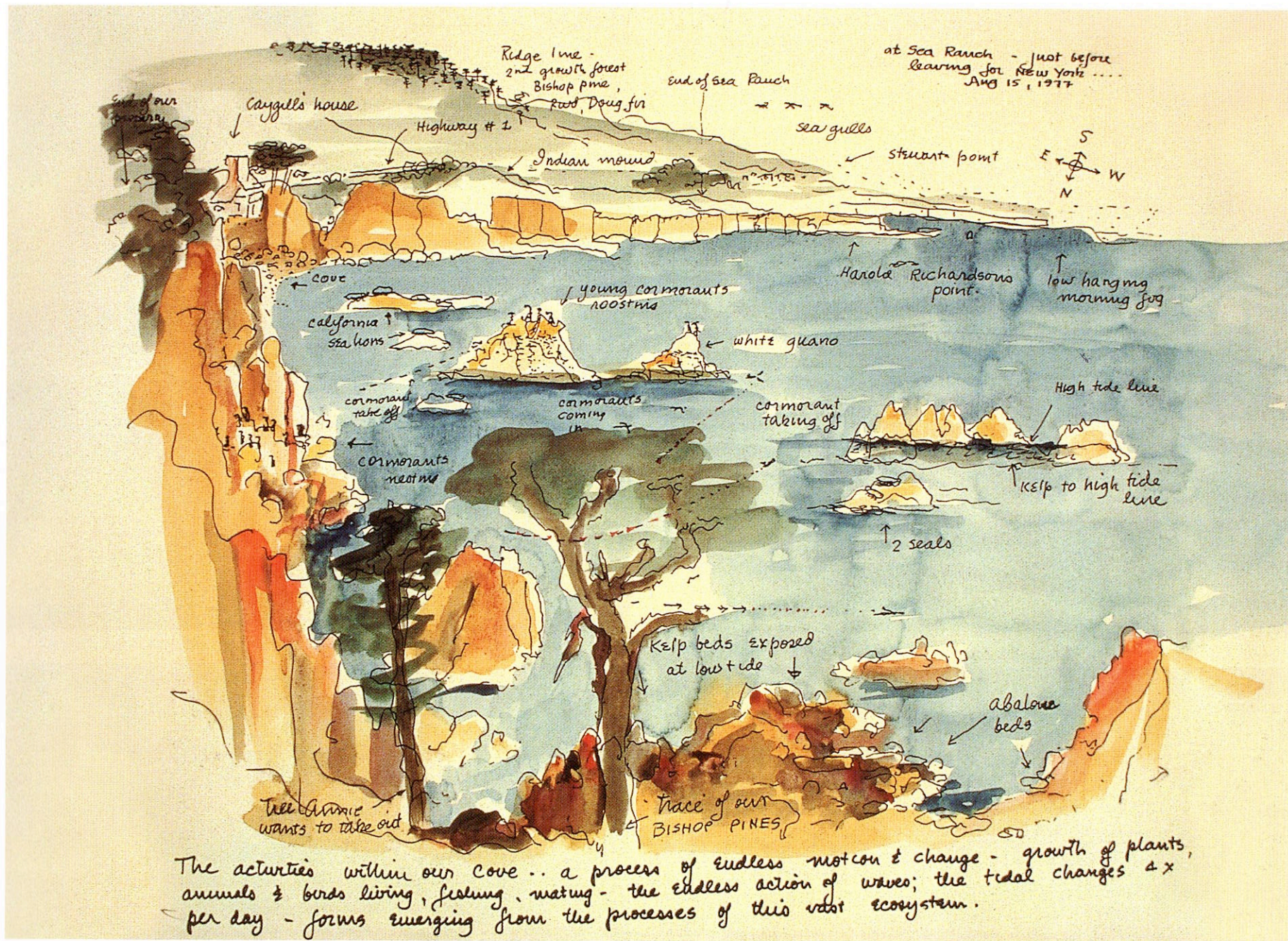
#### EARLY PROGRESS AND TROUBLES

Early on, the real estate sales agents feared that the restrictions would slow sales but Oceanic faced a far larger obstacle in selling The Sea Ranch lots. The primary buyer market was to be found in the San Francisco Bay Area, linked to The Sea Ranch by the spectacularly beautiful but famously difficult Highway 1, seven miles of the most challenging road stretch between the town of Jenner, at the mouth of the Russian River, and Fort Ross, an early, picturesque Russian settlement. Steep, narrow, and continuously curving, Highway 1 had been carved out of a sheer cliff hundreds of feet straight up from the ocean. Blinding fog was common. The road was a perceived barrier to buyers and a real challenge for the seller.

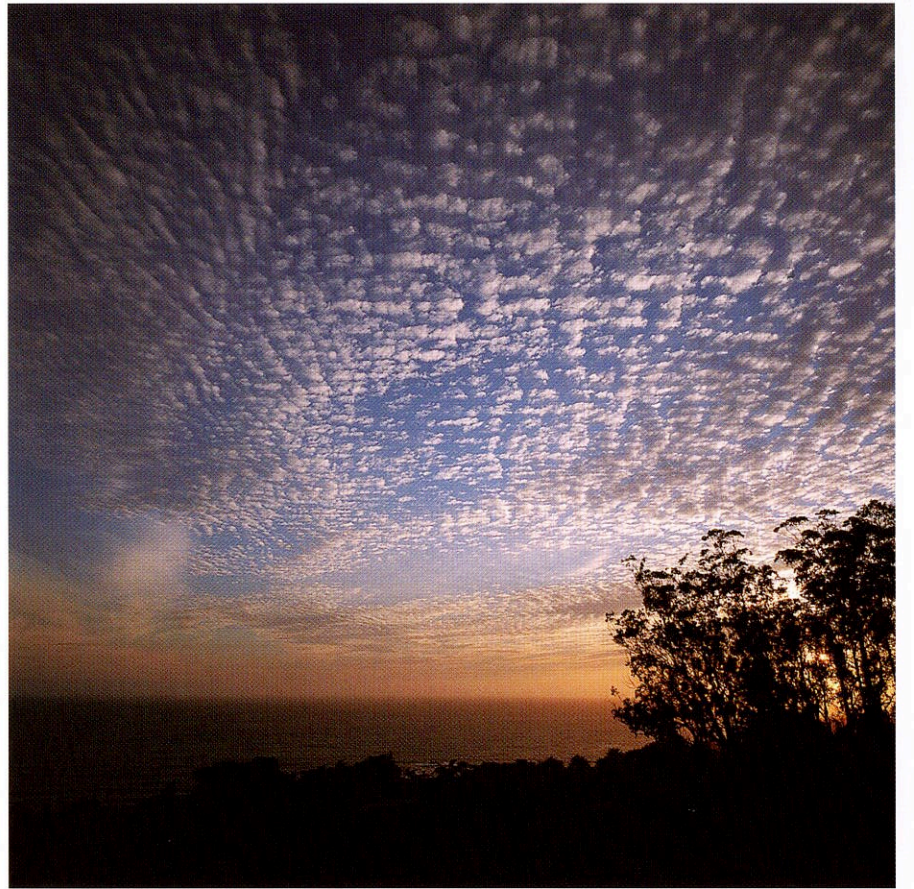
After the first model buildings were constructed, Oceanic launched a sales campaign, including full-page advertisements and multipage inserts in Bay Area newspapers. Prospects were offered free trips to The Sea Ranch, including overnight stays and tours around the rugged site in jeeps and dune buggies. Once in the hands of the salespeople, prospects were offered lots for no money down and at bargain prices: \$8,500 for a lot on the meadows, \$4,500 in the forest. And if they agreed to build within a year, there was an additional ten percent discount. Some buyers were drawn by the beauty and isolation of the place. Others were impressed with the publicity and architectural awards given the demonstration buildings. For a surprising number of the pioneer buyers, it was a case of seduction at first sight. They would come with no intention of buying, often with friends who were serious prospects, and simply fall in love with the place and buy a lot.

In 1994 The Sea Ranch Association’s newspaper, *Soundings*, conducted a survey of the remaining pioneers, asking them, among other things, what had drawn them to The Sea Ranch. One responded, “the beauty, sea, remoteness and friendly people.” For another couple it was “the unique ambiance, spectacular natural beauty, serenity, large open spaces to be left untouched, and privacy.” Recalls another, “we were taken by the elemental and rugged beauty of rocks and sea, the serene stretches of grassy meadows, and the verdant hilltops of lofty redwoods and other conifers. We loved the rural aspects of the area, the grazing sheep and cattle, the old farm buildings and tiny historic towns.” More than one respondent cited as an enticement the protection against despoliation provided by the design and landscape restrictions, contrary to the sales agents’ fears.

Many of the early housebuilders respected the lessons of the demonstration buildings and The Sea Ranch design philosophy, and hired architects who would live up to them. In addition to the original architects it became de



Sketch and notation of coastal conditions,  
Lawrence Halprin, 1977



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rigueur for every Bay Area practitioner of note to have a project at The Sea Ranch, and many did. The entire development became a kind of laboratory and museum of Bay Area architecture, and the overall quality level was remarkably high. Thanks to the efforts of Marion Conrad, Oceanic's publications consultant, the awards given to the early houses and the Halprin plan attracted magazine and newspaper writers from around the country. Bay Area columnists carried numerous items about popular local figures week-ending at The Sea Ranch. The place took on a special cachet. Oceanic had hoped to sell one hundred lots the first year but met its goal in just over eight months.

In some respects the growing pains of success proved a challenge. The original planning principles proved surprisingly fragile. After just five years of construction, Halprin complained that houses going up in 1969 were being "scattered" on the meadows rather than clustered along the hedgerows. Moreover, houses were being built in the "front rows" of shoreline and forest, areas where they were forbidden by the plan. The Sea Ranch's Pebble Beach was the precise place where the principles began to change. Above and to the left of the bluff, the early houses that conform to the original plan are held well back from the shore, nestled in the trees. To the right, however, the next generation of houses is lined up in a row along the shore. On a narrow strip, Halprin had placed a road parallel to the shore. Boeke's planners compounded the damage on the next phase to the north when they laid out two roads parallel to the shore, inviting construction of a double row of houses against the sea.

In part, such departures from the plan resulted from a virtual revolt by the real estate agents of Castle & Cooke. They objected to not being able to market the most desirable home sites and claimed that condominium units and cluster housing were difficult to sell. Oceanic quickly backed off on the last point. The celebrated Condominium One turned out to be the only one that Oceanic built, and houses in a second cluster already designed by Turnbull were pulled apart.

Oceanic dismissed Halprin and the original architects in the late 1960s, and Boeke established his own staff of planners in the firm's Honolulu offices. This shift to staff designers, according to Boeke, stemmed from the fact that the basic planning work had been done, and Oceanic did not want to continue to pay the high fees that consultants expected. Boeke himself left at year's end 1969, and one of Oceanic's real estate agents took his place. His departure marked the beginning of the end of the heralded Sea Ranch plan. There was a change in Oceanic's leadership in Hawaii too. The risk takers, Oceanic President Fred Simpich and Castle & Cooke Chairman Malcolm McNaughton, had been replaced. Few were left in the company who cared about The Sea Ranch, and an agent was sent over to arrange Oceanic's phased withdrawal from the project.

#### ENVIRONMENTALISTS AGAINST THE PLAN

The Sea Ranch was born in the era of Rachel Carson and Ralph Nader, the rise of the nation's awareness of environmental concerns, the introduction of the term *ecology*. In the mid-1960s, Congress passed legislation encouraging states to manage their coastlines, and California was one of the first to

respond. California had come to the realization that only 100 miles of the state's 1,300-mile coastline were accessible to the public. Resorts, fast-food stands, and private property consumed more than 90 percent. The idea that with the development of The Sea Ranch ten of the most beautiful and publicly accessible miles of the northern coastline would become a private "colony of nature lovers" was intolerable to many in Sonoma County and such increasingly powerful environmental organizations as the Sierra Club.

As recounted by one San Francisco newspaper reporter, the opponents saw The Sea Ranch as an example of coastal misuse, a symbol of privilege, locking out the public from access to the shoreline, reserving a spectacular area at the edge of the continent for the few able to afford it. There is fear that growth will severely alter the character of an unpeopled land... there is fear that more homes will lead to the overloading of Highway 1, bringing pressure to turn it into a freeway.<sup>10</sup>

Oceanic took its plan for 5,200 housing units to the Sonoma County supervisors. Public access to the beaches (tidelands were state property, guaranteed for use by all) was becoming a significant issue, and Oceanic sought to meet it by giving the county one hundred acres (later forty more were added) as a public park at the north end of its property. It was a beautiful point where the Gualala River met the sea. The supervisors agreed that this was sufficient public access and no more would be cut through The Sea Ranch.

Divers' clubs and other abalone lovers, however, formed an organization called Californians Organized to Acquire Access to State Tidelands (COAST), led by a veterinarian from the tiny inland town of Cotati named William Kortum. In 1968 it put an initiative on the county ballot to cut public access trails through almost every mile of The Sea Ranch. The initiative failed but gave rise to a statewide movement called the Coastal Alliance, which put a similar initiative covering the entire California coast on the statewide ballot in 1972. It called for the creation of regional coastal commissions, backed by one statewide that would plan for the use of coastal lands with emphasis on public access and give the commissions the significant power to issue or deny building permits on the coast.

The planning of The Sea Ranch had been informed and inspired by the environmental movement, but now the movement seemed poised to reject it. Many of The Sea Ranch pioneers were staunch environmentalists and supported the initiative, labeled Proposition 20. Proposition 20 passed easily, and the first blow against The Sea Ranch was struck in 1973 when the North Central Coast Commission denied a new lot owner a building permit on the grounds that his house would impede views of the ocean from Highway 1. Other rejections quickly followed. Attorneys for Oceanic and The Sea Ranch Association objected that actions were being taken against individual owners instead of dealing with the commission's problems with The Sea Ranch on an overall basis. The North Central Coast Commission responded with a set of conditions on which it would begin approving construction of The Sea Ranch houses. At the time some 300 houses had been built and 1,400 lots sold.

Proposition 20's principal conditions were that The Sea Ranch create public access paths with parking along the entire length of the site and

remove 2,000 trees along the highway (which did not happen, however). Ironically, at Salt Point State Park on Highway 1 just south of The Sea Ranch and about the same length, there are just two points of public access to the beaches and solid walls of trees along the highway. Oceanic and the association resisted the regional commission's set of conditions, but the statewide commission upheld them. It also raised another significant issue: the sheer size of The Sea Ranch as projected. The building of 5,200 houses could result in a population of 15,000, the commission staff contended, straining the water supply and septic system capability and clogging Highway 1 to the point where the entire north coast would become inaccessible from the Bay Area.

The Sea Ranch was badly divided over how to deal with the virtual moratorium on development. Many who had already built their houses were not too sorry to see further construction halted, yet other residents were among the leaders of the efforts to see The Sea Ranch completed. "There were as many opinions as there were Sea Ranchers," says one pioneer. "It was like families being split by the Civil War." With the court cases still dragging on, Oceanic and the association sought legislative relief and hired a lobbyist who discovered that the local legislators found The Sea Ranch dispute too hot to handle; but a Southern California senator, Tom Bane, was willing to submit a compromise bill.

The bill, passed by the legislature in 1980, gave the North Central Coast Commission and state commission virtually everything they wanted; in return, the commissions' permitting powers over The Sea Ranch ended. According to the bill, The Sea Ranch would create five public access trails from the highway to the ocean, each with roadside parking; it would create "scenic view corridors" by tree removal and special height limits; and the number of houses at build-out would be more than halved, from 5,200 to 2,300. The bill required the association to grant the state easements for the five public access points by April 1981. If the association complied, the state would compensate it \$500,000. In January 1981, with the deadline approaching, the association board voted to hold a binding referendum of the membership on whether to accept the legislation's provisions, or try to amend them, or continue to fight the case in court. A large majority (83 percent) of the membership voted, rejecting the legislation's provisions by a vote of 1,043 to 418. But immediately thereafter a three-judge district court upheld virtually all of the coastal commission's conditions for completion of The Sea Ranch. The battered association board voted to accept the legislative compromise.

The protracted controversy affected the communal nature of the place. Having started as a colony of like-minded nature lovers dedicated to maintaining its beauty, The Sea Ranch was now fractious and factionalized. The physical impact of the legislation was minimal; public access points are minor incidents along the highway. The economic impact of the moratorium, on the other hand, was huge. As coastal land became ever scarcer, price inflation skyrocketed. A Sea Ranch house lot that had sold for \$30,000 in 1968, then at the top of the price range, sold in 1996 for \$700,000. Houses were built larger and larger.

As the physical character of The Sea Ranch changed in the 1980s, so did the nature of the population. While the pioneers had been largely

academics and professionals, now came many retired executives and others of wealth. Land speculation, present at The Sea Ranch from the beginning, became a major industry as values soared. Houses were bought, left empty, and sold again within a matter of months.

The impact of the environmental legislation on the state was unarguably beneficial. California was left with one of the strongest coastal conservation mechanisms in the nation, and even most of the early opponents of The Sea Ranch seemed happy. But the impact of the moratorium on Oceanic was disastrous. At the beginning Oceanic had put an estimated \$30 million into the development. Utilities were underground, the roads were of high quality, the landscape enriched by extensive planting, and the trail system created. Yet with all of this expensive infrastructure in place, Oceanic had sold only 1,400 lots (out of an originally planned 5,200), and now had fewer to sell (2,300). Moreover, the second-homes market was weak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time of recession and oil shortages.

#### RENEWAL AND NEW DEVELOPMENT

As the 1980s began and development resumed, Oceanic, which had suffered losses estimated as high as \$70 million during the moratorium, began concentrating its sales efforts on premium lots. Whatever shreds were left of the basic concepts of the Halprin plan were unceremoniously dropped to develop the northern portion of the property.

A civil engineering firm was engaged to subdivide the northern section. Lots were laid out in typical suburban fashion, side by side along curving streets and cul-de-sacs. "Planning at the north end has been financial planning, not land planning," said a design committee member at the time, "carried out by accountants." In effect, there are today two Sea Ranches, each markedly different in character. The southern sectors, which were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, have an air of restraint and respect, their houses indeed in partnership with the land. In the northern meadows, houses put up after the early 1980s line up rigidly along the streets and form solid, view-blocking walls along the bluffs. Others protrude, exposed, from the forest above.

The relationship to nature in the post-moratorium subdivision plans is less respectful and more competitive. Even as the houses were getting bigger, the lots were becoming smaller, partly because of a change from septic tanks, which require large lots for leach fields, to sewers at the southern end, which benefit from close packing. Parcels earmarked initially for condominiums were resubdivided for single-family houses, contrary to The Sea Ranch plan. While the freestanding houses were easier to sell, they used up more land than did the originally planned condominium buildings. Along with this abandonment of the original planning principles has come a decline in the quality of The Sea Ranch architecture. This naturally raised questions about the role (and effectiveness) of the association's design committee.

Contrary to the hopes of the original architects, design elements of the demonstration buildings became clichés out of context, imitated around the world and repeated nowhere more relentlessly than on The Sea Ranch itself. The result was an obvious sameness spreading through The Sea Ranch. This



monotony has been lamented by critics and residents alike from the beginning, but becomes more stifling as build-out nears. Some of this might have been obviated by an early idea of dividing The Sea Ranch into precincts and varying the design regulations for each, particularly those on color.

Ted Smith, a former director of planning and design for the association, defended the design committee on the basis that it could only deal with work that was brought before it. He estimated that 10 percent of the houses that the committee reviews are wonderful, 10 percent awful, and the rest middling. The committee has generally been successful in keeping out the awful, less so in encouraging the wonderful, and the middling has taken over The Sea Ranch. About 70 percent of the design submissions are approved. Smith saw staying out of litigation the key part of his job.

Yet there is a set of qualities that define a wonderful work of architecture: a pleasing overall form; consistency in use of materials; care in details; sensible scale and proportions; an overall coherence; and, above all, habitability. The first buildings had these qualities, plus the spark of originality. Smith pointed out, correctly, that much of the battle for design quality is won or lost with the election of the designer, over which the committee has no influence. A small group of self-chosen Realtors that has clustered around The Sea Ranch and Gualala, on the other hand, frequently does influence the choice of designer. Often they recommend one of the architects drawn to The Sea Ranch's reputation and market. Realistically, real estate agents are the buyers' hosts and principal sources of information. When Oceanic had its own sales force, its agents conveyed the principles of the original plan. Since the real estate operation split off in 1985, independent firms have taken over sales. While some still emphasize the history and aspiration of The Sea Ranch, others are more inclined not to complicate a sale with notions of architectural standards.

Many design committee members have argued that it should be the association's task to inform new owners about The Sea Ranch design heritage. A comprehensive environmental plan drafted in the 1990s advocates a "proactive program" of educating Realtors and prospective buyers by providing them with packages of design information, including a video on Sea Ranch architecture. The plan also intends for a "design library" of more extensive information and an awards program to spotlight architectural success at The Sea Ranch. Some of this has begun.

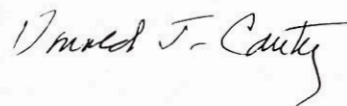
Even if the place has been overwhelmed by middling work built in the last two decades, it remains a success. The Sea Ranch is still a special place. Boeke credited the autonomy of the design committee with preserving some of The Sea Ranch character even in the northern sectors, while Halprin believes that the saving grace has less to do with the architecture restrictions than the landscaping rules. Allowing only native plant materials has preserved the primacy of nature in the meadows by placing the houses on a continuous grassy carpet. And even in the north there is still a great deal of open space, although it is cut up by the rigid rows of houses. William Turnbull observed in 1996: "you can stand a lot of mediocrity if the landscape is wonderful."<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s, Oceanic completed development of the land along ten miles of coast; sold its remaining property and interest in the lodge and the

golf course to The Sea Ranch Village Inc., a new entity led mainly by residents; and transferred common lands and stewardship responsibility to The Sea Ranch Association, which constitutes the residents' principal vehicle. It is an unusual entity: part local government, part community club, and part outlet for its members' energies and frustrations. It manages a maintenance staff, a security force, a planning staff and design review process, and a number of membership committees. There are also a volunteer fire department, a community garden, and a number of special-interest committees that sponsor activities.

When Oceanic withdrew as developer in the 1980s, the association took on multiple roles. Oceanic and the association had been virtual partners in the management of The Sea Ranch since the beginning. As Oceanic's tenure ended, they engaged each other in a round of suits and countersuits about issues such as water quality, septic tank performance, and restrictions on the undeveloped land. In the end, the association, with only a minuscule staff, found itself responsible for the daily maintenance and longer-term future of The Sea Ranch. Under these pressures, and with its new powers, the association board changed from a self-selective group of public-spirited citizens who ran for office out of a sense of civic responsibility to one that was intensely politicized. Issues today center on money (assessments), nature (views and privacy), and design (larger houses and monotonous architecture). Differences tend to stem from disparities in tenure, income, and age. While most of the older pioneers were, for instance, happy with quiet, grassy walking paths, younger Sea Ranchers, whose number is increasing, wanted improved facilities such as continuous bicycle trails. Even though some feared loss of privacy to peering cyclists, the bicycle paths were eventually approved. The young remain drastically outnumbered, though: over three-quarters of residents in 1997 were over fifty years old.

The landscape at The Sea Ranch remains wonderful, remarkably undisturbed by construction of more than a thousand houses and other buildings. And the best of these, the first exemplary structures, remain one of the most compelling ensembles of environmentally sensitive architecture anywhere.



- 1 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch...Diary of an Idea*, 4.
- 2 Lawrence Halprin, "Sea Ranch: Halprin's Recollections," *Progressive Architecture* (February 1993): 92.
- 3 Al Boeke, interview with the author at The Sea Ranch (1996).
- 4 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch...Diary of an Idea*, 17.
- 5 Editors, "Ecological Architecture: Planning the Organic Environment," *Progressive Architecture* (May 1966): 122.
- 6 Halprin, "Sea Ranch: Halprin's Recollections": 93.
- 7 Christopher Gray, "The Sea Ranch," *House & Garden* (September 1985): 62, 74.
- 8 Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, and Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 32.
- 9 Oceanic public relations brochure from the early 1960s.
- 10 Author's interview with Joseph Bodowitz, first executive of California Coastal Commission.
- 11 William Turnbull, interview with the author at The Sea Ranch (1996).



**top:** The Sea Ranch Marker Building, Condominium One,  
and the Sea Ranch Store, 1965

**bottom:** The Sea Ranch Marker Building and  
Condominium One, 2003