The Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 PREFACE

The Sea Ranch is a unique coastal community that was planned explicitly to harmonize with the natural setting and the building traditions of this region. The goals for development have been to understand the inherent, unique opportunities and limitations of each site, to respond to the forces of the sun and wind and to seek an appropriate fit with the topography and existing vegetation. The Sea Ranch, like nature, is not static: the scale of vegetation has changed; views have been altered; and the meadows are no longer just open grasslands. There has also been a significant change in the environment brought about by the increased density of buildings as The Sea Ranch has matured. An understanding of building-to-building relationships, particularly in terms of size and location, has become increasingly important in maintaining The Sea Ranch character and experience. The Sea Ranch idea is not just about individual houses; it is about 10 miles of a coastal environment. This is not a place for the grand architectural statement; it is a place to explore the subtle nuances of fitting-in – blending buildings into the existing environmental setting and the historical context.

Success presents The Sea Ranch with a challenge. The last decade brought rising real estate prices and an increasing percentage of full-time residents. Neighborhoods are established and new houses must now be in harmony with existing houses as well as the natural environment. Changing life styles and values impact architectural preferences. The challenge is to allow innovation and meet needs and desires without destroying the basic connection between the building and its site that is hallmark of The Sea Ranch.

To ensure continuation of the original design concepts, The Sea Ranch Restrictions (The Restrictions) establish a Design Committee (DC) empowered to review and approve or disapprove all proposed improvements. (As stated in section 3.03(a)):

“...any construction or reconstruction of, or the refinishing or alteration of any part of the exterior of, any improvement upon any private area is absolutely prohibited until and unless the Owner of such private area first obtains the approval therefor from the Design Committee. ...Except to reconstruct or refinish any improvement as set forth in plans approved by the Design Committee.”

To help owners and their designers understand The Sea Ranch design philosophy and standards, the Design Committee prepared a Design Manual, last printed in 1988. Over the last few years, the committee has updated the manual and combined it with Design Rules adopted by the Design Committee from time to time. This new document, called The Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules, has been adopted by the Design Committee as Design Committee Rules in accord with The Restrictions (section 4.04):

“The Design Committee may, from time to time and in its sole discretion, adopt, amend and repeal by unanimous vote, rules and regulations, to be known as “Design Committee Rules,” which among other things, interpret or implement the provisions of sections 3.03, 3.07 and 3.09 and which list species of ground covers, shrubs and trees. A copy of the Design Committee Rules, as they may from time to time be adopted, amended, or repealed, certified by any member of the Design Committee, shall be recorded and shall thereupon have the same force and effect as if they were set forth in and were part of The Restrictions.”

The Sea Ranch Association Board of Directors has also adopted The Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules as operating rules pursuant to California Civil Code, section 4000 et seq. and The Restrictions, (section 5.05 and 5.06).

The Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules is an integration of design philosophy, general concepts, and specific rules that the Design Committee takes into account in determining whether any specific improvement is compatible with The Sea Ranch. The document articulates guidelines for site development and architecture at The Sea Ranch, recognizing that each site is unique and that excellence in design ultimately means consistency with the shared image that is The Sea Ranch.
Ordinary Architecture

“Not an act of ordinariness, but allowing a building to do what it was meant to do by ordinary means with a minimum of strain.”

“You don’t have to engage in structural or shape making gymnastics that require a lot of huffing and puffing and the spending of a lot of the client’s money.”

—Charles W. Moore, Architect
1.2 THE SEA RANCH IDEA – A Shared Image

“Living lightly with the land” is a phrase that has been used to describe the way of life at The Sea Ranch. It also expresses an approach to architectural design that is about respecting the existing character of the place and the unique context of each building site. Living on The Sea Ranch is also about understanding its history and traditions as well as sharing opportunities and responsibilities with those who make up The Sea Ranch community. It is about building in a manner that is appropriate to this special place.

Since its beginning in 1964, The Sea Ranch community has continued to grow and evolve as a unique place based on the concept that people and nature can achieve an harmonious relationship – where buildings can exist in the landscape without overpowering it. This principle of harmony between the built and the natural environment was the guiding force behind the initial buildings at The Sea Ranch. These early structures, Condominium One and the Hedgerow Houses, gave tangible form to this idea and evoked the spirit of the historic barns and sheds of the northern California coast. These buildings responded to the character of the place – its terrain, its climate, its vegetation and its regional traditions. They are simple without being plain, and they have a strong presence without being aggressive. Appropriate architecture is not just an abstraction of form or style; a building is in a specific place to which it must respond. Responding to place has made and continues to make The Sea Ranch experience unique.

The forms of the first Sea Ranch buildings and the character of the landscape evolved from the early settlements on the north coast. Those settlements shared an image of simple, understandable building forms, a limited palette of building materials, and an equal partnership between the buildings and their environment. These images have been valuable in helping to shape a rich and appropriate vocabulary for building at The Sea Ranch. This has included clustering houses around large open spaces held in common, limiting building on the coastal bluff and ridge lines, and designing structures that nestle into their sites, accommodate the wind, screen cars, and protect the views and privacy of others.

Landscaping has consisted of reinforcing the character of the site with indigenous planting that flow seamlessly into the Commons, and cars that are screened from view. Private gardens are limited to courtyards and terraces that are screened from view. Sea Ranchers call the results “living lightly with the land.”

The following language from The Restrictions forms the basis of the shared image of The Sea Ranch:

“The purpose of this declaration is to perpetuate . . . the rich variety of this rugged coastal, pastoral, and forested environment for the benefit of all who acquire property within The Sea Ranch . . . in a manner which insures the full enjoyment of the historical traditions and natural advantages of the area for all who acquire property therein and yet which encourages controlled diverse individual expression within the environment . . . and to the extent consistent therewith, will foster maximum individual flexibility and freedom of individual expression.”

“. . . this fundamental concept which underlies the development and use of The Sea Ranch serves both public and private interests by fostering a beneficial land use which retains the unique beauty of the land and creates an atmosphere enriching the spirit of its participants.”

“It must be assumed that all owners of property within The Sea Ranch, by virtue of their purchase of such property, are motivated by the character of the natural environment in which their property is located, and accept, for and among themselves, the principle that the development and use of The Sea Ranch must preserve that character for the present and future enjoyment by other owners.”
“Designing for place at The Sea Ranch means knowing your place and thinking in three dimensions—absorbing into consciousness the slope of the land, the vault of the sky, the reach of the horizon, and the undulations underfoot. It requires building the land’s contours into our fingers (or keyboard) as we draw, feeling the wind as it passes, knowing precisely the course of the sun, and acknowledging the presence of our neighbors—both those who have already built and those yet to come. It means containing the impulse to sprawl—working with the land, not spilling out over it. This is a precious landscape, a landscape that is not accidental but one that has evolved through design and through the investments of many. It depends on continuing care, ingenuity, and discretion.”

—Donlyn Lyndon, The Sea Ranch
Donlyn Lyndon and Jim Alinder, 2004
2.0 The Sea Ranch Environment

The Sea Ranch environment is shaped by both natural forces and human use. Wind, sun, rain, and fog are ever-present and ever-changing. Year-round climatic conditions can range from mild to very harsh. Each part of The Sea Ranch differs in topography, vegetation, and microclimate. It is important to become aware of how year-round climatic conditions affect the site before beginning the design process. In addition to natural forces, each building affects and is affected by neighboring buildings. The preservation of The Sea Ranch environment requires an understanding and respect for the forces of nature, an understanding that buildings should respond to their environment and not seek dominion over it, and an understanding that the combination of buildings and the site development must become a coherent part of the larger landscape.

2.1 CLIMATE

2.1.1 Sun The sun is a major factor in shaping Sea Ranch architecture. Many days along the coast are cool, and a design that captures the sun in interior spaces or in a protected exterior courtyard enhances the possibility for use, particularly in the colder months. At the same time, the sun’s heat builds up quickly in south- and west-facing rooms with large glass areas, and these need adequate ventilation. The south sun is the most desirable throughout the year. In the cool winter months, the sun is at a low angle and can reach well into the interior of a home. In the summer, it is high and shielded on bright days.

The west sun can be disturbing, particularly when amplified by the glare off the ocean, and should lead to judgments about the sizes and positioning of west-facing windows. The morning sun is invariably pleasant, and the east sides of buildings are generally protected from spring and summer winds. Northeast and northwest light provides interest both early and late in the day, casting warm light at a low angle on forms and plants in the landscape. North sides of homes are mostly shady and usually have less utility as comfortable outdoor areas.

2.1.2 Wind In the open grassland sections of The Sea Ranch, summer winds are most frequently from the west and north-west, while winter storm winds are typically from the southeast. The winds are generally cool and at times strong, and the winds along the bluffs can be particularly strong. When shelter is created on the leeward side of structures or landscape, the level of comfort and enjoyment can be greatly enhanced. In the forest areas, the wind at the ridge tops and treetops can be strong but is most often gentle at ground levels. The possibility of damage from falling trees, due to storms or disease, should be assessed on any forested lot, in any location on The Sea Ranch. When there is concern, an analysis by a professional arborist should be obtained.

2.1.3 Rain November through March is the rainy season, but there are occasional showers in October and April. The average rainfall is about 45 inches and can reach 80 inches at higher elevations. An average storm can drop two to three inches of wind-driven rain in an hour, with up to 15 inches during the duration of a storm. Clear weather and winds typically follow the storms. The impact of rainfall on a site requires an understanding of the shape of the land and the existing and future drainage patterns. Ineffective management of surface water can lead to severe damage from saturation and erosion.

2.1.4 Coastal Fog Coastal fog is a characteristic of the entire northern California coast, but The Sea Ranch has less than the areas immediately to its north and south. Fog can occur at any time of the year but is most prevalent in late spring and early summer. The early spring and fall months are typically the least foggy, but fog, like other weather patterns at The Sea Ranch, can be unpredictable. Usually the first areas to become foggy (and the last to clear) are areas where cool dense air flows into wind-protected low spots. Fog often occurs in the evening and continues through the morning, clearing by midday.
2.2 LANDFORM AND LANDSCAPE

Proceeding from west to east, The Sea Ranch consists of four identifiable environmental zones primarily relating to the topography, each consisting of several sub-zones. While the features of these zones overlap, each has unique characteristics that influence site planning and building design.

2.2.1 Ocean Bluffs 
The bluffs at the edge of the ocean are dramatic and fragile. They are battered by the sea and wind and held together by cypress and other native plants. They are continually threatened by increased runoff and erosion. Poor drainage management can exacerbate erosion problems, particularly at the bluff edges. Views are often dramatic, ranging from intimate coves and rock outcroppings to sweeping vistas up and down the coast. Owners of lots located near the bluffs have a special responsibility because buildings located here are highly visible from the meadows above and from the bluff trails.

2.2.2 Meadows 
The meadows, just inland from the bluffs, are former grazing lands that are subdivided by the dramatic cypress hedgerows. The landscape between the hedgerows is generally low, with occasional trees and shrubs. Uncontrolled tree and shrub growth can be a management problem. The land gently undulates, so there is considerable visual variety and, like the bluff area, the homes are generally quite visible. Riparian corridors and seasonal streams, some lined with willows, pass through the meadows and are important landscape features that cannot be disturbed. Wetlands act as sponges that absorb runoff from higher elevations. Because vegetation is less dense and landforms are relatively flat, the relationship between houses is most noticeable in the meadows. Therefore, it requires sensitive design work to integrate the structures into the landscape. Ocean views are often limited, but there are dramatic views across meadows of hedgerows and of distant, forested hills.
2.2.3 Transitional Zone In the transitional zone, on either side of Highway One, the land form is irregular and often shaped by stream channels. The landscape is varied, with more trees and masses of large native shrubs such as coffee berry, wax myrtle, ceanothus, and western azalea. The topography is often steeper, providing the opportunity for multilevel houses that respond to the grade changes. It also requires more attention to drainage and grading. Views of the ocean from this zone are intermittent, although landscape views can be dramatic.

2.2.4 Hilltop Forest The hilltop forest zone consists of the hillside ridge as well as forestlands east of the ridge that are not visible from the lower elevations. Some home sites on the ridge have extensive ocean and coastal views. In the reverse view, ridge-top homes are often prominently visible from the lower zones. The coniferous forest areas vary in vegetation density with sites that are open and others that are heavily forested and dark. In some of the densely forested areas, the stream channels are deep and dramatic with a mix of riparian vegetation. Like the Transitional Zone, the topography is varied and provides both opportunities and additional responsibilities. Views in the forest areas are mostly inward to the forest environment.

2.2.5 Landscape Dynamics Each environmental zone has distinctive plant communities. All of The Sea Ranch plant communities are in a constant state of change. The landscape should be considered as a process rather than as a composite of static conditions. Some views, in particular from hillside parcels, may be slowly blocked by the natural growth of the forest. While ocean views and tree preservation are highly desirable, other needs, such as erosion control, habitat protection, fuel management, reforestation, and actions taken to respond to forest dynamics, may take priority over maintaining existing vegetation or creating corridors for ocean views.
2.3 NEIGHBORHOODS

The Sea Ranch is defined by its community of neighborhoods rather than by individual buildings. “Neighborhood” implies cooperation, understanding, and a desire to share in something greater than the expression of individual buildings. The goal is to ensure a cohesive visual order rather than a collection of unique, individual houses that stand out as different because of size, color, form, or detailing. The Sea Ranch is not an appropriate place for the grand architectural statement.

2.3.3 Neighborhood Planning

As groups of homes evolve, neighbors are encouraged to work together to explore the possibilities for enhancing views, achieving harmony through the location of the buildings on the site, developing continuity in the forms, size and scale of individual buildings and landscape planting.

2.3.1 Groupings/Connections/Views

The first step in the design process must be a thorough assessment of the site and context. This includes documenting landscape elements to be maintained and/or modified and views, whether of the ocean, meadows, or distant trees and ridges, to be preserved and/or enhanced. It also includes considering the various possibilities of organizing the building elements (houses, garages, guest houses, fences, and landscape planting) in ways that enhance their use as well as contribute to the neighborhood continuity. It is not possible for everyone to have unobstructed views or total privacy, particularly on meadow sites. But with a thorough site analysis, including consideration for existing and future neighbors and a thoughtful building program, it is possible to develop a solution that will allow everyone to share in the richness of the place. View preservation is only one of the benefits of a shared neighborhood plan.

2.3.2 Location, Orientation and Design

A successful house at The Sea Ranch transcends the emphasis on the individual building to consider design issues in terms of the neighborhood and the larger community. Among these issues are the size and form of the building; the building’s location on the site and its relation to existing landscape features, both in the immediate and distant environment; the form, scale, materials, and color of building elements; the building’s relationship to adjacent and nearby buildings; and the selection and massing of landscape elements. While all of these are normal components of individual building design, they become even more important when considered in relationship to The Sea Ranch as a whole.
3.0 The Design Process

3.1 SITE ANALYSIS

3.1.1 Sensory Awareness  Exploring the sensory perception of a site is the first step in understanding the character of the place. This consists of documenting experiences that affect personal impressions as well as factual information: the influences of the wind, rain, sun, and fog; the close and distant views of meadows, trees, and the ocean; the sounds; the shape of the land; and the activity of wildlife. It helps to develop a narrative statement as to the most important aspects of the place, both positive and negative. This documentation is most useful if it results from observations made at different times of the day and night, in different seasons, and in different weather conditions.

3.1.2 Existing Conditions  An accurate topographic map of the site, prepared by a licensed surveyor or civil engineer, is the starting point for an analysis of the site and its context. The analysis should include an assessment of the visual character of the area, including the land forms, vegetation types and patterns, both on the site and in the adjacent area; an accurate analysis of drainage patterns on the site, adjacent roadways, and offsite drainage patterns including swales and streams; and the types of soils and soil conditions such as rocky, wet, In forested areas, the site should be assessed in terms of the potential building locations that will have the least impact on existing vegetation, as well as trees that may have to be removed because of disease or the potential for windthrow danger. This evaluation will guide the placement of buildings, driveways, and the location of drainage and septic fields. The objectives are to minimize site disturbance and avoid future site-related difficulties.
3.1.3 Character of the Neighborhood  It is important to assess the scale, apparent size and location of nearby homes and landscape; document materials and colors; understand how the neighborhood functions by locating neighbors’ entrances, outdoor use spaces, and service areas; and determining how to preserve views, sunlight, and privacy of existing and future neighbors. Consider how a building complex on the site will affect the views from other houses, from the roads and trails, and how it will contribute to the evolving landscape. The site analysis must include a photographic documentation of the site and its context, including adjacent homes.
3.2 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The Sea Ranch design philosophy is based on the idea that building forms should evolve from an understanding of the three-dimensional relationship of the building to its specific site. This goes beyond a two-dimensional plan view to consider all the senses that provide our experience of the environment. Successful building projects at The Sea Ranch have developed from an understanding of the vocabulary of indigenous rural structures of the north coast, including the early buildings at The Sea Ranch, the particular characteristics of the landform and the plant materials, and from a detailed architectural and landscape program identifying the needs and desires of the users. This section identifies the principles that have guided the form and siting of buildings at The Sea Ranch.

3.2.1 Historic Form  The traditional barns and rural buildings of the north coast were often simple, direct, and well-proportioned, with windows and doors scaled to the size and function of the buildings. The vocabulary of materials and details was restrained and appropriate for its use. Such buildings fit comfortably in the landscape and inspired the forms and vocabulary of the early Sea Ranch buildings.

3.2.2 Relationship to the Sun and the Wind  On the cool north coast, sunny and wind-protected places within and adjacent to the house provide opportunities for a more complete enjoyment of the site. Interior spaces that provide a sunny place for breakfast or a shaded place to read in the afternoon will enhance potential enjoyment, just as the form and orientation of the building can create sunny outdoor courtyards and terraces, protected from the wind, for year-round use. Solutions that integrate active and passive solar energy techniques are highly encouraged.

While the sun provides great benefits, potential heat gain on south and west building elevations must also be considered. Understanding the cyclical patterns of the sun, wind, and rain will aid in determining the shape of the building, the location of interior and exterior functions, and the size and locations of openings. Respect for the solar access of neighbors is also important.

The form and orientation of the building can create sunny outdoor courtyards and terraces protected from the wind for year-around use.
3.2.3 Relationship to Views  Every site on The Sea Ranch has a view, but not every site has an ocean view. While ocean views can be dramatic, views of meadows, hedgerows, forests, and distant ridges can be equally rewarding. The organization of a building for a close-up landscape view may be different than for a distant view and will affect the form of the spaces and the placement of windows. A design based on existing views should take into consideration the factors that will affect those views in the future. Views that are present today may be affected by new building construction and by the natural growth of trees and shrubs. In addition, each owner has a responsibility to consider any negative impact the project may have on the views of current and future neighbors.

3.2.4 Relationship to the Land  A building must respond to its specific location. Each site is unique, and building forms must develop from a thorough understanding of the particular place. A successful design can reduce the impact of the building on the site and create a harmonious relationship with the neighborhood. Grading and vegetation removal should be minimized and existing natural features and topographic patterns should be preserved. Building forms should relate to the existing terrain and follow the natural slope of the ground. Stepping the floor levels to conform to the natural grade helps ground the building and creates a more appropriate relationship between the building and the site.
3.2.5 Physical Form  The various elements of the project—structures, landscaping, and fencing—should be seen as an integrated whole. The roof forms, whether single or multiple elements, should be used to simplify and organize the structure and not appear to be a “hat” sitting on the walls. The building should be shaped to deflect the predominant wind flow, to create sheltered places, and to have roof slopes that blend with those of neighboring buildings.

Building materials and detailing should be simple and reserved and continue the spirit of the traditional vocabulary of Sea Ranch buildings. Many of the sites on the bluffs and in the meadows are highly visible and are seen from all sides. This is also true of some hillside and ridge-top sites that are often viewed as a form silhouetted against the backdrop of sky or ocean. The development of these sensitive sites poses a special responsibility for the owner and the designer. Building forms can merge with the landscape and/or reinforce an edge or boundary, but, in general, they should not call attention to themselves. Simple, indigenous building forms that respond to the specific conditions of a site can provide the most appropriate fit with the immediate landscape, as well as the larger Sea Ranch community.

3.2.6 Landscape Elements  Landscape elements include fences, walls, fences, walls, and minor structures as well as vegetation. Each of these elements, including proposed and possible future alterations or expansions, is an important part of the project. They should be considered at the time of the development of the design concept and integrated into the overall site plan—not treated as a cosmetic addition. Property boundaries should not be emphasized.

Planted elements—trees and shrubs—grow. Therefore, consideration must be given to their potential for blocking views and their need for pruning in the future. The spaces adjacent to the buildings should flow from the site to the Commons, minimizing the sense of separation. The existing landscape of most of The Sea Ranch already provides a “natural garden” setting. Planting can help connect the building to the site, but should not materially change the character of the existing setting. The Design Committee must approve any new planting. Plant materials must be selected from the TSRA-approved plant list, except within enclosed courtyards where non-native plants are allowed, provided that they are, and remain, screened from public view.
3.2.7 Building Size  It is necessary to consider both the actual size and the apparent (or visual) size of a building to properly integrate the building with its environment, making it subordinate to the landscape and in harmony with the neighborhood. The actual and apparent size of houses and additions must be considered in relation to the character of the site and the neighborhood context. If a building appears to overpower its surroundings and lacks cohesiveness with its neighborhood, a comparative bulk study will be required. Buildings should blend with and not overwhelm their immediate surroundings. Failure to achieve this may result in denial of the project.

The problem of size and fit within a neighborhood is as much an issue of apparent size as it is the actual square footage of the building. Among the elements that often contribute to a visual appearance of excessive size are:

- Exaggerated and over-scaled details and entries
- Buildings that appear “top-heavy” and unrelated to the ground
- Large, unbroken expanses of high or long wall surfaces
- Continuous, unbroken roof forms
- Formal, symmetrical plans and elevations
- Setback-to-setback siting
- Inefficient circulation and layout

It is possible to reduce the apparent size or bulk of a building by breaking up the mass of the building into several elements and/or increasing the integration of the building forms with the topography and landscape. Through careful planning and design, the apparent size of a house can be reduced without sacrificing its function or character.