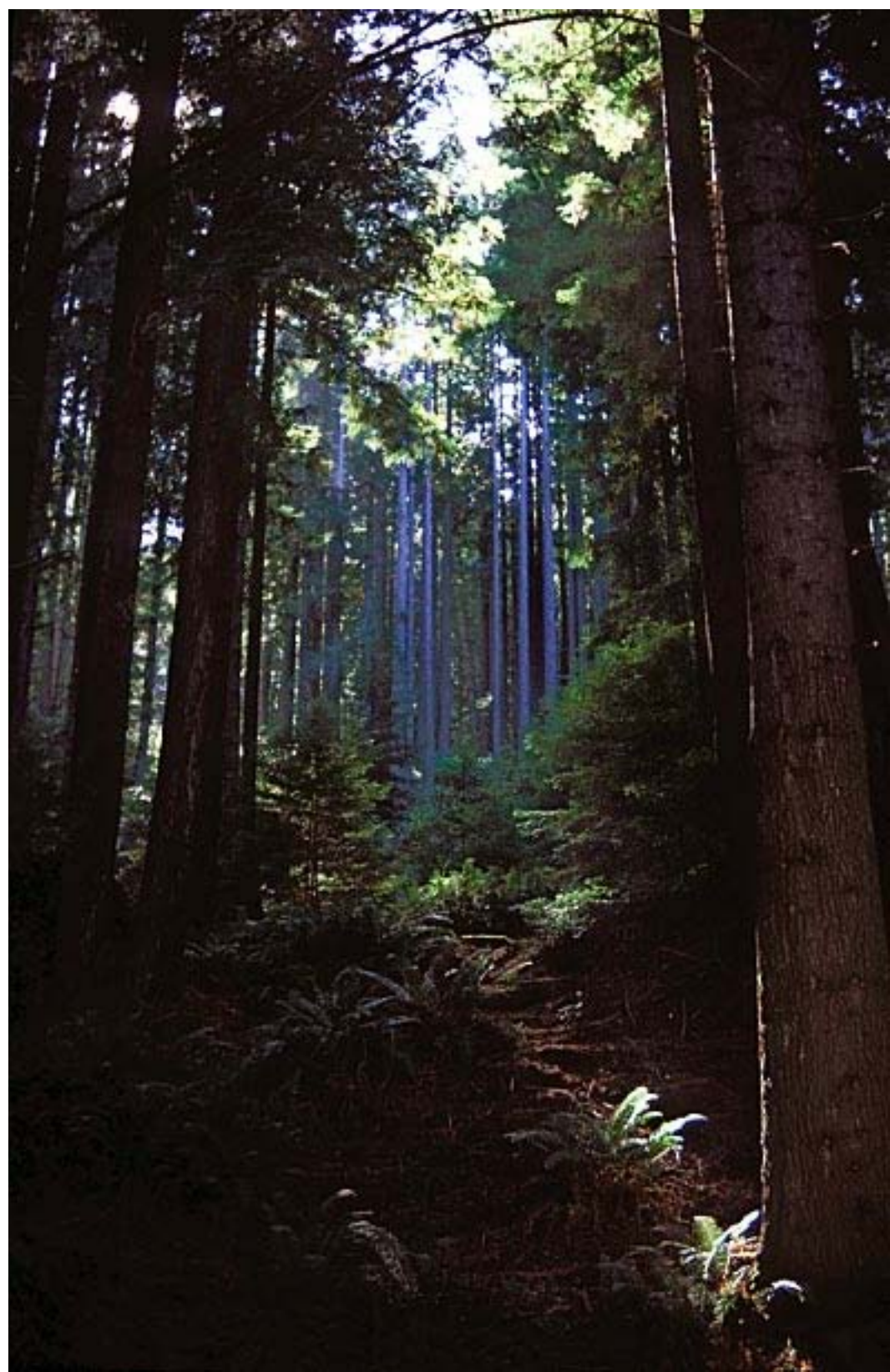


The Sea Ranch: Concept & Covenant





The Sea Ranch

is much more than a place of houses, another coastal development. The Sea Ranch is a vision, inspiring in its beauty; a concept, daring in its invention; a covenant with nature and the land. The Sea Ranch is a work of art, a single idea, a discrete piece of beauty in which successful structures become part of nature's tapestry. The Sea Ranch is a community drawn together by a shared vision and respect for its concept.



“Our most difficult task was to find a way for people to inhabit this magnificent and natural system in numbers without destroying the very reason for people to come here.”

(Lawrence Halprin,
The Sea Ranch – Diary of an Idea)

Setting

Straddling narrow, winding Highway One, The Sea Ranch spans about ten miles of the Pacific's coastal shelf and extends only about a mile inland. A tight, linear form, ill-suited for large-scale resort development, invites clustering of houses at intervals marked by cypress hedgerows that form enclaves of grassy meadows.

What was once barren rangeland is slowly reverting to forest as trees and willows creep down water-courses back to the edge of the sea. Humans, deer, fox, and the occasional mountain lion share wild forests and meadows with mutual respect – or tolerance, in the case of raccoons, skunks and wild turkeys.

The terrain is rugged, the surf treacherous, the ocean cold. Winds have sculpted cypress and pines into rhythmic shapes. The climate ranges from bright sunshine to dense fog, howling winds and pelting rain – sometimes all in a single day. The weather, the season and the time of day all contribute to The Sea Ranch's dramatic beauty.

“The Sea Ranch Concept is not about a ‘nice place to live.’ It’s about a unique place to live, unique in its vision and its intent to build a community dedicated to a common effort, an effort to protect and preserve the natural character of a remarkable beautiful and appealing place.”

(Gordon Beebe,
Soundings, Fall 1998)



Genesis

In 1964, when Oceanic Properties, Inc. decided to build a new town, Al Boeke, architect and Vice President for Community Planning, was sent to California from his Hawaiian headquarters to find the right site. Al fell in love with the barren and grand Rancho Del Mar owned by Ed Ohlson and his family. He recommended Oceanic purchase the entire ranch property.

“The crisis of restoring a natural community, Boeke argued, was its challenge. It would lure a hardy, conservation-minded resident who would find satisfaction in helping to heal the grass-starved terraces, the wind-burned hedgerows, the crumbling cliffs, the tangled, matted forests. The Sea Ranch would become a regenerative country-life colony within a wildlife preserve. The setting was austere and demanding, but it was also inspiring.”

(Island in the Coast)



To give tangible, visible form to the principle of harmony between inhabitants and nature, Boeke assembled a stellar group of architects and design professionals. Lawrence Halprin, landscape architect, studied the topography, weather and vegetation that inspired the original master plan. His vision was based largely on the historical and ecological community. “I realized then that it was this character that I hoped we might achieve at Sea Ranch, a feeling of overall *place*, a feeling of a community, in which the whole was more important and more dominant than its parts. If we could achieve that – if the whole could link buildings and nature into an organized whole rather than just a group of pretty houses – then we could feel we had created something worthwhile which did not destroy, but rather enhanced the natural beauty we had been given.” (*The Sea Ranch – Diary of an Idea*)

For prototype buildings, Oceanic hired the architectural firm of Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull and Whitaker to design Condominium One along the bluffs and architect Joseph Esherick to design a cluster of houses nestled in the hedgerow.

“One of the fundamental tenets of the philosophy that has guided the development of The Sea Ranch is that the landscape of bluffs, meadows and forest creates the special character unique to this community and should dominate all human endeavors. The siting and design of buildings and their accoutrements should be responsive to, and in harmony with, the landscape.”

(Russell Beatty,
Soundings, Fall 2000)



Concept

The original designers evolved a concept of dynamic conservation or “living lightly on the land.” A covenant would enforce stewardship of natural resources through an owners’ association of residents who felt an instinctive relationship with the environment.

Meant to be experienced as much as to be spelled out, the concept of “living lightly on the land” starts with respect for nature. Each landscape element should be recognized and nurtured, reinforcing natural forms and scale. The specific site provides the identity, establishing a “territorial partnership” with any structure placed *within* it, not *upon* it. Building materials should be drawn from nature: rough and simple.

Richard Whitaker, Director of Design Review for The Sea Ranch Association, tells new members, “The concept has to do with an attitude that the environmental setting is more important than the building. The Sea Ranch is not about individual buildings, it’s about ten miles of Pacific Ocean and the land adjacent to it. It has to do with developing a shared image.” (*Soundings*, Summer 2003)

“The Sea Ranch grew out of the vision of a unique community that would understand, respect, and work to protect this remarkable natural environment. Members would share a commitment to ‘live lightly on the land.’ This vision and these shared values became known as The Sea Ranch Concept. It was a grand experiment that attracted worldwide attention.”

(Gordon Beebe,
Soundings, Fall 1998)



With time, the profile of the typical Sea Rancher has changed. The Sea Ranch of the '60s and '70s attracted hardy, self-reliant settlers who were more comfortable in hiking boots and flannel shirts than the trappings of the city. They came to Sea Ranch because they loved the concept.

While The Sea Ranch was originally designed as a second-home, vacation community, in recent years more and more people are choosing to make it their primary home. This new reality affects the concept, in that some owners build houses that fail to acknowledge the design principles in their size, siting and architectural character.

By the late 1990s, home and land prices had narrowed the mix of people who could afford Sea Ranch property. Turnover at The Sea Ranch has increased to ten percent yearly, creating a steady influx of new owners. Based on whatever information they have received, each generation brings its own understanding of the concept and what it means to share the vision.

While most Sea Ranchers are fiercely protective of The Sea Ranch Concept, recent demographic changes have contributed to its gradual erosion. Confronted by on-the-ground evidence of houses that neither honored nor reflected the original concept, the Association Board, the Design Committee and Association members committed to reversing the trend of creeping suburbanism. The Board of Directors commissioned the Vision Interpretive Program Committee to undertake an educational program to discuss the concept and the responsibility of members to uphold it. This guide is one part of that effort.

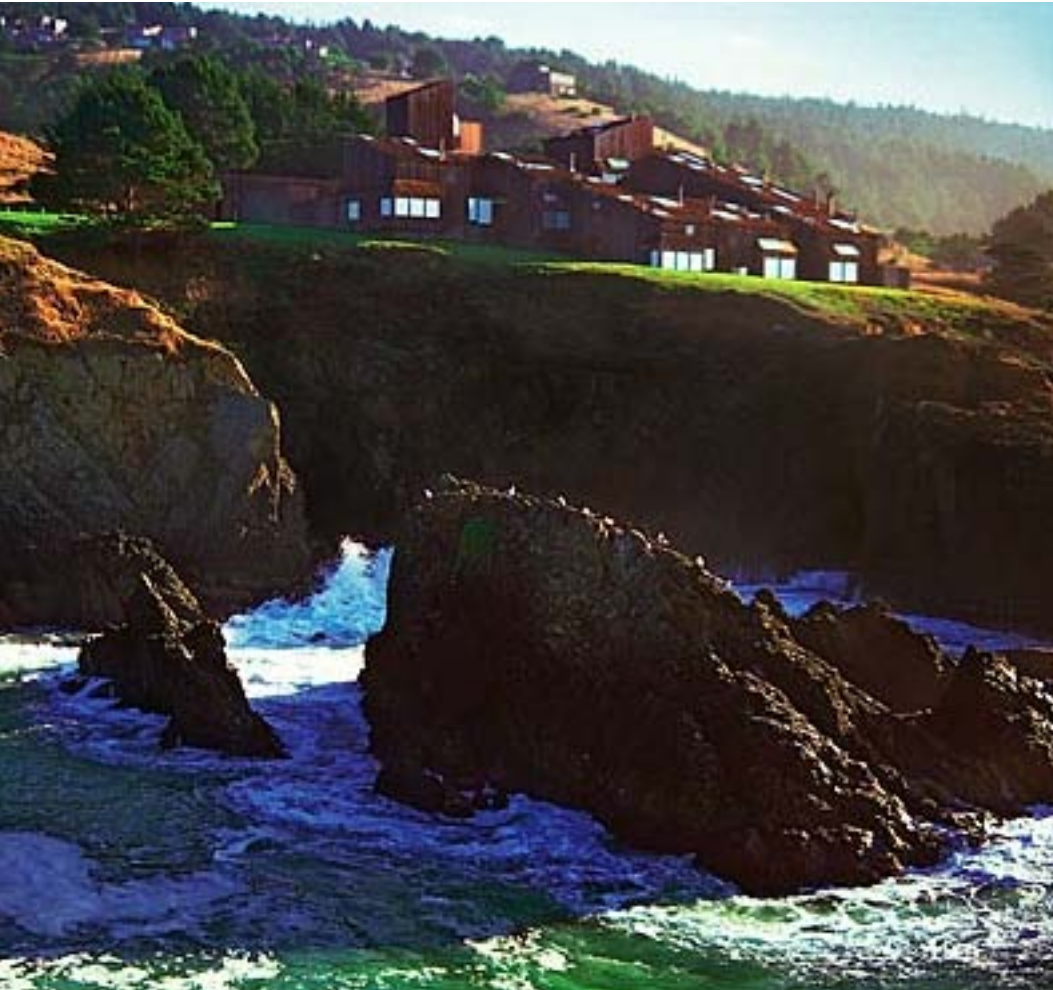


Principles

At Lawrence Halprin’s “Taking Part” Workshops in 1983, 1993, and 2003, Sea Ranchers spelled out principles that supported the concept. None were legally mandated, but all were agreed on by common consent.

Some of the principles listed:

- Nature predominates *not* buildings
- Rural setting *not* suburban
- Home size modest *not* enormous
- Exteriors simple *not* showy
- Design guidelines *not* “anything goes”
- Sense of community *not* “statement” houses
- Aesthetics valued *not* disregarded



Covenant

The Sea Ranch Declaration of Restrictions, Covenants and Conditions (CC&Rs), in its third paragraph, indicates the original intent and guiding principle of the developers.

“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 its present and future enjoyment by other owners.”

Each owner signs his or her name to that covenant when buying property at The Sea Ranch. The CC&Rs are the bridge between The Sea Ranch concept and reality.

“Your ownership of property at The Sea Ranch indicates a strong awareness of the special qualities of the place. After all, you didn’t have to come; you chose to come. For each owner this is a challenge and an opportunity.”

(Early Design Brochure)



As The Sea Ranch’s “constitution,” the CC&Rs establish an owners’ association to administer the business of the community and a design committee with authority over the review and approval of house designs. Rights, duties, privileges and obligations of all owners are spelled out in the CC&Rs. One of those obligations is to develop and maintain their property in adherence with the Sea Ranch concept as embodied in the covenant.

The restrictions and rules are, after all, protections – instruments for safeguarding quality and character – the very reasons for coming to The Sea Ranch. As tools of good design, which they were devised to be, the restrictions and rules are steps toward the harmonious relationship between landowner and nature – which is the foundation of The Sea Ranch concept.

Another aspect of the concept has surfaced as Sea Ranch has matured. As the number of homes has increased, building-to-building relationships have become as important as building-to-landscape relationships. “Natural forces will continue to guide building design, but responding to the character, size and location of neighboring homes is an equally important consideration. Harmony of the neighborhood must be given equal weight to harmony with nature. This is not a place for the grand architectural statement; it’s a place to explore the subtle nuances of fitting in – to the natural setting and to the neighborhood setting.” (*The Sea Ranch Design Manual*)



Design Process

This land that first appears to be so rugged can be easily harmed. Sun, wind, rain, fog and topography make stringent demands on people and structures. What may be appropriate in one setting may not be in another as each building site is unique.

A Design Committee made up of three professionals in the field of architecture or landscape architecture encourages design consistent with the concept and discourages inappropriate design. The Committee operates under the provisions of the CC&Rs, but has the final word about design.

The Design Committee cannot guarantee good design. That is the responsibility of Sea Ranch owners and their architect or designer. The Design Committee advises owners to engage an architect with great care. The owner's active participation with the architect is key to achieving a design that both fits the site and meets the owner's needs.

*“A designer/architect
can help you sort out your
priorities,
but can never be a
satisfactory surrogate
inhabitant without you.”*
(Parallel Utopias)



To help property owners find the potential of their site, the CCRs set up a design review process with four steps as follows:

PRELIMINARY SITE REVIEW – This first step gives the owner a chance to explore the unique qualities of his or her site with a member of the design review staff. Taking advantage of the preliminary site review as early as possible can avoid costly plan changes later in the design process.

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN REVIEW – At this stage, the owner submits to the Design Committee a general idea of the overall concept, including the house's floor plan and elevations, its siting on the property and its relationship to nearby natural features and other houses.

PRELIMINARY DESIGN REVIEW – The owner then submits the preliminary design plan – a comprehensive architectural plan which indicates all major aspects of the building design and use of the site. Neighbors are given the chance to review and comment as part of the process.

FINAL DESIGN REVIEW – The final step in the approval process consists of all the construction documents required by Sonoma County. This submittal must also address any conditions that were part of the Design Committee approval of the Preliminary Design Review.

When the Design Committee approves the Final Design Review submittal, the owner is ready to apply for a Sonoma County building permit. Once the building permit is issued, The Sea Ranch design staff monitors the construction to be sure the house is being built according to plan.

An early Sea Rancher said, “When I first moved to The Sea Ranch I asked this question and I continue to ask it: What is the least impact I need to make on the land? When I first saw The Sea Ranch, I knew others had also asked this.” If you are asking the same question, Sea Ranch is for you.







This booklet has been prepared by the Vision Interpretive Program Committee of The Sea Ranch Association as a resource for prospective and current members.

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TSRA Archives

Additional resources:

- *The Sea Ranch Design Manual*
- The Sea Ranch Department of Design, Compliance and Environmental Management at The Sea Ranch Association Office, 975 Annapolis Road, 707-785-2316
- For online information, including the *Design Manual* and a comprehensive bibliography of the literature available on The Sea Ranch concept, please see The Sea Ranch web site at www.tsra.org.



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(The Sea Ranch CC&Rs)

