

# The Sea Ranch as an Intentional Community

an Interview with Lawrence Halprin by Bill Platt

*LAWRENCE HALPRIN, landscape architect, designer, and planner, has conducted a life-long search for the underlying order of the world. In designing residential and commercial quarters, he has aimed not at imposing change upon the site but rather at enhancing what was given and allowing "natural activities to take place."*

*BILL PLATT formerly with Stanford Research Institute and UNESCO in Paris, now lives at The Sea Ranch, serves as President of the North Coast Institute, and takes part in a multitude of Coast active ties, including – along with his clarinet – the new Redwood Chamber Orchestra.*

*The following conversation took place in late September, 1983, between Sea Ranchers Bill Platt and Lawrence Halprin, the environmental planner whose vision and imagination launched "The Sea Ranch concept" almost 20 years ago. At that time, Castle and Cooke's subsidiary, Oceanic Properties, Inc., retained Halprin to create a community out of the huge Delmar Sheep Ranch it had just acquired on the northern Sonoma Coast. Although developer Oceanic plans to pull out in a few years, it still operates both The Sea Ranch Lodge and Golf Course. It is The Sea Ranch Association, to which all lot and home owners pay dues, that manages the community's affairs, the land they all hold in common, and administers, through its Design Committee, the famous "Restrictions." Through the auspices of the Design Committee a goodly number of Sea Ranchers trekked up to the Horicon School recently for a series of workshops led by Halprin, returning to join them in taking a look at what they had become and to give some earnest thought to where they might be headed. This conversation took place after those workshops were held.*

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## IN THE BEGINNING: THE INTENT

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*BP: Many intentional communities are somewhat utopian. How would you describe the Intent that guided you and the developer in creating The Sea Ranch?*

*LH: Yes, our basic premise was, and still is, utopian. The more it measures up to that utopianism, I feel good about it, and the less it did (which was true for a while), I felt less good about it.*

*The basic idea was simple: there's an incredible landscape here. It's at the same time austere, which I like; adventurous; compelling in the sense that you really are affected by it; harsh*

*BP: Unforgiving?*

*LH: Yes, unforgiving; beautiful in the sense that it is neither decorative nor pretty. Beauty, if it means anything in a poetic sense, means it affects you as a person. I don't think The Sea Ranch is very "pretty," and that's what I like about it. It is sustaining – my feeling was that it would sustain people's emotional feelings, particularly if they got heavily involved in it.*

*For many years before I was asked to plan The Sea Ranch I had been coming to this area with the children. The landscapes here had moved me a great deal – more so than the Big Sur where we also used to go. Unlike The Sea Ranch, Big Sur is "pretty."*

Utopianism for a community of people is possible here because, unlike the High Sierra (which evokes similar reactions in me), people *can* live here. You can't really live in the High Sierra. So I believed that we could make a community in which the interaction between people living here and the natural quality of the environment could be meshed. And it wouldn't be just a park; it would be a place like those in which

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primitive peoples lived in a landscape without destroying it, were sustained by it, and made a life interactively with it.

A key part of the Intent was to establish a sense of community. This is quite different from, say, Timber Cove, where people are living isolated from each other and there is no attempt to make a central community. I remember the developer's Public Relations group at the beginning asking me "Why don't you go the simple way – have each owner take five or ten acres isolated from others, and that's the end of that. Then you wouldn't have to worry about clustering and community road systems and all those complicated things." But that's not how you build a community; rather, it's the suburban idea.

And my thought was the community could be non-elitist. If we had divided into the five- and ten-acre private parcels, we would have automatically established the character of the people who would come here – the economically elite.

There was another dimension to the utopian Intent: there would be a quality of aesthetics in the sense that the community would share an attitude about design. The attitude would be lacking in ego; it would be natural in the sense it would try to blend with, rather than go against, the environment it would be modest; and aesthetics would be a tool for a lot of this to be articulated.

That's why we said no external paint – not because I'm opposed to paint, but it is not natural and is potentially obtrusive. We thought it important to use natural materials so that things would blend. We said structures should be aesthetically powerful as image-makers of how architecture and landscape design could fit the land. This objective has been insufficiently realized.

*BP: In the evolution of this intent, what was your role in relations to that of the developer and of the other early architects?*

LH: I had been working with Al Boeke, Castle and Cooke's architect, on another project a new town. He called me, saying that Castle and Cooke was thinking of buying a big ranch on the Coast, in which he thought the landscape was the dominant element. He wanted to know if I would be interested in helping plan a community there. I was immediately taken with the notion, because I knew the area and had been moved by it.

As for authorship of the intent, I can only say that Al and I (and to a lesser extent Fred Simpich, then President of Oceanic) got into a continuing dialogue of how to link the community into the landscape. So it was jointly thought through. The idea of first doing all the ecological studies – forestry, soils, burning, sources of water, the relationship of roof lines to windscape – those proposals were mine. The idea of clustering in various forms was mutually arrived at.

When we had established the basic premise of what we were trying to do here I told Al we needed to find architects who were sympathetic with this concept. He asked who could help. I recommended Joe Eshrick for his knowledge of and sensitivity to the environment and to the use of natural materials. I also got in touch with a young promising architect I didn't know as well, but who had just won an award from *Sunset Magazine* in a contest in which I had served as a juror. This was Charles Moore. Both architects were, and are, exemplary. After they came aboard we operated as a team.

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#### RELATIONSHIP WITH GREATER COASTAL COMMUNITY

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*BP: What did you and Al Boeke have in mind for the relationship of The Sea Ranch to neighboring communities Annapolis, Stewart's Point, Gualala, Point Arena?*

LH: I think we didn't give that enough attention. In that realm our thinking and planning were inadequate. Now Anna and I *did* relate to the Pomo Indians in Kashia. We used to go there often. Anna is an honorary dancer there.

*BP: Is that why the Association and the developer have always employed a number of people from Kashia, and I think with mutual benefit?*

LH: I suppose so. Al and I talked about establishing relations with neighboring communities, but we didn't make a determined effort. It didn't seem possible. But it is now more important than ever that we not become a self-contained enclave. And the rental program and resortism work against healthy links with our neighbors.

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#### THE COMMUNITY AS SECOND HOMES AND RENTALS

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*BP: Did you expect residents to be second home part-timers or permanent?*

LH: I visualized it as both. I knew that when we started out it would be mainly second home, but Al and I hoped gradually it would shift over to predominantly permanent, full-time residents. We weren't sure how. One of the ways we visualized making that transition didn't work out. We explored creating a commercial village within the Ranch, at the north end. Gualala had very little then. Employment for the commercial village would have speeded the transition to permanent residents. But that part of the development was dropped.

*BP: Now the "community" also includes weekend and other short-term renters, as well as some owners who have become absentee landlords. What effect has this had upon realizing the Intent?*

LH: I'm ambivalent about what has turned out to be a large scale rental program. I'm at the same time resentful and grateful: resentful because many renters are transients and too "resort" oriented; grateful because it does help us to avoid elitism – it does get young people here and others who can't afford to become owners.

*BP: And rents here are quite a bargain. Owners look to appreciation – capital gains – for profits and return on investment. So rents are artificially low.*

LH: Yes, a terrific bargain. Of course it would be better if we had a mixed group of people living here seven days a week, but what the rental program gives us is something we don't have otherwise: a better socio-economic and age balance.

*BP: In fairness, the rental agencies do try to convey to potential renters what they will be coming into –*

*something of the Intent – insofar as this can be done in a short statement. But it's a big job because there's a lot of turnover. Also some of the owners of rental property are becoming absentee landlords who*

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*may be losing hold of The Sea Ranch myth – the Intent – if indeed they ever shared it.*

LH: I don't know what we can do about this. You can't prevent people from renting out their houses. But we did not at the outset anticipate this problem.

BP: *Perhaps the extreme of the renter or part-time owner would be those who might come in on a time-share basis.*

LH: I think preventing time-sharing here is a good idea. The Sea Ranch is not really a resort community. The difference between a resort and The Sea Ranch is that the former implies you have no responsibility – you are just there for fun – to escape responsibility. Responsibility, particularly to the environment and to the rest of the community, is inherent in The Sea Ranch concept.

BP: *When Oceanic completes its development here it will be selling its remaining properties – the Lodge, Golf Course, water system, and timber preserve to someone, perhaps even to a resort-oriented firm. How can we then keep the faith?*

LH: That bothers me a great deal. I didn't anticipate that was going to happen. But it might. When we were planning The Sea Ranch I don't know what we could have done about it.

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#### THE RESTRICTIONS: "THOU SHALT NOTS"

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BP: *How was the Intent to be perpetuated? Clearly the Restrictions and the Design Committee's review for conformity with them are means of institutionalizing the Intent's values, but these are primarily negative: "Thou shalt not..." What positive means did you have in mind?*

LH: You are right about the Restrictions and much of the impact of the Design Committee. The reasoning was this: the mechanism for achieving what AI and I talked about is both positive and negative: negative like zoning or like disciplining children in order to establish a value system. You establish a value system positively by models, whether physical or behavioral. If you say one thing and act another way, children resonate to what you do, not to what you say.

So we tried to do two things. One, we established models of behavior so people would say "Gee, if we

want to live there, that is the way we should operate," and two, we built models at the beginning. In building them we tried to select some exemplars, all of them based on clustering in various forms as ways of blending the community with the land. One model was a condominium, which allows privacy but not by spreading out. The first condominium did that and still ranks as a world-class piece of architecture. Another model exemplified the clustering of individual houses – the Eshrick hedgerow houses.

The Lodge, by the way, was designed to be a model statement about an attitude toward a *public* facility that blends with the land, thus different from the *private* models just referred to. For the Lodge we said it should not be cheap or trendy, or a "schlock" motel, loud and garish with visible parking. The Lodge is our symbol more than we think. It's where we and the outside world interface. In most respects I'm satisfied with it. But I'm very resentful that the developer chose to locate his real estate operation in the Lodge.

In addition to the models, we realized that our team of designers would leave and that the place would get weaned. Therefore we needed negative or zoning restraints: you can't go high, you have to have a fence around your service yard, you can't plant palm trees that will be offensive to your neighbors – a whole series. I gather there is now primary attention only to these negatives, which is too bad because we tried through models to foster positive values as well.

BP: *Should the covenants themselves have been more enabling as distinguished from restricting?*

LH: Yes. Sure. We were naive. We thought people who would come here would be inducted into the Intent and theory. And we also expected those selling the land to communicate to prospects the Intent and theory. We also expected the Design Committee to convey the intent positively. However, since the Coastal Commission lifted the building moratorium, so many owners are trying to get plans approved, that the Design Committee probably has neither time nor staff to work with owners face-to-face in an enabling and nurturing mode, so it falls back on negative restraints. "Restrictions" is probably a bad title for our Covenants. They were supposed to promote, as well as to defend the value system here, but things haven't happened quite that way.

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#### THE WORKSHOPS: A SOURCE OF RENEWAL

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BP: *The two recent Design Workshops which you and Jack Cosner (Chairman of the Association 91s Design Committee) put together turned out to be remarkably effective in renewing and updating The Sea Ranchers' commitments to a utopian Intent. Would you comment on the Workshops and other means of renewal, of making mid-course corrections?*

LH: I'm delighted with the quantity and quality of participation of Association members in the Workshops. I think it's important to do more of them, because not only are they a form of renewal, they also are actively democratic and interactive. And of course they are more fun than meetings, which are often boring to everyone but those residents most heavily involved.

As to other means of renewal, I don't think it can be done through legislation. I think we went as far as we could in that respect through the Restrictions. Instead we should use inducement and modeling, as discussed before.

A positive device in renewal would be for the Association itself to put out a little booklet – a brochure – and a related slide show stressing the Intent affirmatively, with illustrations of good models. The big question is how the Association could get tapped into prospective or not-yet-sensitized owners. Would those who are selling property, whether Oceanic or some other real estate agent handling a re-sale, give out, and promote, the Association's brochure and slide show? The Design Committee and the Association's Bulletin could promote these devices, saying that owners who study them would save themselves a lot of trouble when they get around to planning construction.

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#### THE KIBBUTZ CONNECTION

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*BP: What were the roots of your vision of The Sea Ranch Intent?*

LH: I've never revealed before where important parts of my concept came from. When I was 16 I went to Israel and helped found a kibbutz. I spent three years there. It was one of the great experiences of my life – still is. I'm still a member of the kibbutz and I revisit Israel about once a year to attend meetings, even though I'm not a live-in member.

In contrast with kibbutzim, American utopian communities, for example the Shaker villages and others, never really lasted. Many of them were based on the idea of a single, often charismatic person. Guruism doesn't work. The kibbutz movement has transcended that.

In talking about the kibbutz, I don't want to sound as though I hoped to establish at The Sea Ranch a socialist utopia. Rather the concepts that I did draw from my kibbutz experience were the appreciation of the land, the sense of community, and the quality of how the community and land are integrated in a holistic approach.

*BP: Isn't the kibbutz to a considerable extent the metaphor, the myth, of the entire Israeli society? As such perhaps it commands allegiance as a protector and defender of that society. We don't have that equivalent here, although you might say, 'our struggles*

*with COASST and the Coastal commission also caused us to "circle the wagons."*

LH: Yes. But I felt we could establish our myth of the community's relationship to the landscape and that that myth would hold us together. What is happening here is significantly American and not European in origin.

*BP: In what other ways did you draw on kibbutz concepts?*

LH: Planting trees in Israel is important. It seemed to me that parts of the pretty well denuded sheep ranch that Oceanic bought needed trees. We planted over a million.

*BP: Didn't you over-plant?*

LH: I suppose so. If I had it to do over again I would be more selective in where we planted and would have planted fewer. But the reason for the high density was that the forestry experts on my staff and the advisors from U.C. Davis all said we could expect one in five trees to survive. Instead all did.

*BP More like six out of five survived!*

LH: Right and our experts turned out to be wrong.

*BP: A kibbutz attracts a wide variety of people with varying interests. How does it maintain and renew the commitment?*

LH: The main way is that you become a member of the kibbutz. This is attitudinal. You don't become a permanent member until you've been there a year or two and basically subscribe to the attitude. While they don't vote on membership, nor "blackball" candidates as in fraternity recruitment, the process is pretty self-regulating. The kibbutz is a more intensive community in the sense of doing things together than ours is, perhaps because of its fully socialized ownership. The latter I would not want here, in fact that degree of socialism doesn't fit my personal preferences and is probably why I didn't become a permanent resident in Israel.

*BP: I have known some kibbutz members and was always curious about an apparent contradiction: many are strongly individualistic, and yet they seem comfortable with and dedicated to the high degree of collectivism of the kibbutz.*

LH: Many kibbutz members are the most individualistic people I know. One had been a freedom fighter in World War II. A personality like John Wayne, but there he was in my kibbutz. And he loved it.

*BP: I think I can understand the apparent contradiction better by having been a part of The Sea Ranch community vegetable garden. Garden members are a cross section of individualistic Sea Ranchers, no doubt center-right in political persuasion. Yet as garden participants they operate effectively, and with joy, in the collectivized mode of the garden.*

LH: I'm glad you brought up the vegetable garden. I too am impressed with it. It has very unobtrusive

organization – it works – no one complains about anyone else. It's exemplary.

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#### ECONOMIC ELITISM: A DISAPPOINTMENT

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*BP: In our discussion you've already referred to some of your disappointments in how The Sea Ranch has evolved in the roughly 20 years since you did the initial planning. Do you want to mention other concerns?*

LH: Yes, another comment about the unfortunate economic elitism as it has worked out. Al and I visualized multiple areas that people could live in and at a variety of prices. That didn't happen. Perhaps because the real estate people couldn't make enough money with modest sites and homes. I consider losing track of this aspect of the Intent a disaster.

*BP: Another influence escalating prices here was the building moratorium imposed by the Coastal Commission. That created a scarcity and a consequent inflation of home values.*

LH: That's right. Unfortunately now it is very difficult for young people to buy in. That bothers the hell out of me. We wanted there to be some home sites available for as low as two or three thousand dollars, and places to live as modest as cabins or even a tent. And we started out that way. I remember at the outset prices for condominium units started at \$25,000.

I'm also concerned that we don't have much of an ethnic mix, perhaps for the same reasons. I've mentioned the Lodge. In a funny way the

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Lodge replaces what we in the Association ought to be doing ourselves. We ought to have our own post office, bar, movie house, concerts, store, etc.

*BP: One of the first workshop recommendations the Association Board seems inclined to implement would extend the Activities Center to be able to do some of these things.*

LH: Good. I would also like to say that there are probably a lot of wonderful people tucked away in the Association that Anna and I haven't had a chance to know. It's our fault, because as you know we use The Sea Ranch as a retreat – to work and reflect. But the many clues I pick up about the quality and diversity of people attracted here suggests that the myth of The Sea Ranch is real – that it works!

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#### THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

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*BP: Finally, would you comment as a professional practicing nationally and internationally on how The*

*Sea Ranch and its development have influenced the field of environmental planning and design?*

LH: The impact of The Sea Ranch on the field of environmental planning and design embarrasses me. I travel and lecture all over the world. What people believe The Sea Ranch stands for far exceeds what The Sea Ranch is.

Outside, The Sea Ranch is a shining emblem of what a community can become, from the viewpoint of most people in the profession, and indeed, of people who aren't in the profession. Everywhere I go, whether it be to Australia, Japan, Italy, Israel, or elsewhere, people want to know about The Sea Ranch, what I did there, why we did it, and how it is working out. Every architectural journal in the world has pictures of the Ranch. I was just in Rome, where perhaps the leading architectural critic in the world has an exhibition of what he calls "Environmental Architecture at its Best," a good part of which is devoted to The Sea Ranch.

What bothers me is that we only partially live up to the image people in the outside world have of us. For example, we have departed too much from various forms of clustering; part of The Sea Ranch looks like a suburb; some of the architecture is undistinguished. Fortunately there *are* enclaves of distinction. For example I think the walk-in cabins are among the best stuff up here. And there are unique houses. A lot of people don't see these. I wish a lot of people could see how the vegetable garden operates.

*BP: Would you say that environmental planning and design is different because The Sea Ranch exists?*

LH: There's no question about it. All over the world the fact of The Sea Ranch has changed the attitude and the vision of how you can design and build a community in which people can live and be nurtured by a landscape. In addition, architecture itself has been changed by design here. The whole attitude about signing and about the use of super-graphics – as exemplified by the Lodge – changed because of what was done here. Despite my frustrations over shortcomings, the message far exceeds anyone's anticipations.