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Utopia by the Sea



Eros Hoagland for The New York Times

Set on a coastal bluff, Sea Ranch assimilates with the elements rather than confronting them.

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN Published: December 14, 2008

IN the early mornings, when the ocean is enveloped in fog and the scent of wild iris hangs in the air, the possibility for solitude can be found on a wind-tossed path. Deer eyes stare from slender meadow grasses, and a curve in the trail along the headlands can unexpectedly yield a squadron of pelicans zooming skyward on ocean thermals.

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At Sea Ranch — even the name has an aura — it is possible at once to lose and to find yourself on a path, following it past tumbledown picket fences to a driftwood throne on a secluded beach. When the architects Charles W. Moore, Joseph Esherick, William Turnbull, Donlyn Lyndon, and Richard Whitaker and the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin conceived this place along a mystical 10-mile stretch of California coast in the early 1960s, they courted the wind. They measured it, observed the way its salty gusts sculptured the cypress trees.

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slanted towers of the original building, Condominium One, an austere Shaker-like ode to nature's power and the first of many groundbreaking structures at Sea Ranch.

The wind still holds sway at this once-idealistic second-home community, where man and nature are engaged in an intricate dance. Sea Ranch has achieved a sort of a cult status among architecture mavens, who house-gawk rather than [bird-watch](#), bearing a glossy tome by Mr. Lyndon, a spiritual dean of Sea Ranch, as a guide. They come to see a style forged by A-list architects (shed roofs to deflect the wind, windows punched through

redwood boards) but perhaps more than that, to pay tribute to a big idea: the then-radical notion, influenced by Mr. Halprin's experience on a kibbutz, of open land held in common and houses designed in deference to nature.

Since moving to the Bay Area nine years ago, my family and I have rented numerous houses at Sea Ranch, a place that for me has become the psychic equivalent of a tubercular Victorian's healing in a sanitarium. Over the years, I have gotten to know Mr. Halprin's landscape intimately, savoring the way the trails lead to salty cliffs alive with nesting cormorants and into dark, enchanted forests straight out of the Brothers Grimm.

Like many, I fantasized about what it might be like to experience some of Sea Ranch's most iconic houses, the ones designed by the guys who dreamed up the place before the sad arrival of what might be called Sea Ranch sprawl. This past summer, I finally got my wish, indulging in architectural promiscuity by renting Mr. Moore's fabled Unit 9 in Condominium One, a complex now on the National Register of Historic Places; an Obie Bowman-designed Walk-in Cabin; a Binker Barn designed by Mr. Turnbull; and, as the drum-rolling crescendo, or so I thought, one of the original Esherick houses tucked into a now-fetishized cypress hedgerow.

The timing was fortuitous: the Sea Ranch Lodge, the community's dated, killer-view hotel, is about to be Post Ranch-ified, as Passport Resorts, whose principals created the Post Ranch Inn in [Big Sur](#) and other high-end lodges, proceeds with an expansion. The company envisions a luxurious watering hole with 15 or so house-size cottages serviced by motorized carts spilling down 52 acres of now-pristine meadow.

They will by necessity be marketing seclusion. Just getting to Sea Ranch, about two and a half hours from [San Francisco](#), requires negotiating a stomach-churning, acrophobia-inducing sliver of Highway 1. The payoff is a relatively undiscovered, unspoiled swath of California coast — bordering Sonoma and [Mendocino](#) Counties and nicknamed Mendonoma — that mercifully has yet to be mythologized à la Mendocino village or Big Sur.

CHARLES MOORE called Sea Ranch his "Mother Earth." All I could think of when I stepped into Unit 9 was that the little rat had kept the best place for himself.

I had this revelation while sipping coffee from a vintage Vignelli-designed mug in Mr. Moore's kitchen — a riot of painted checkerboards overseen by a textile of frisky Indian goddesses. A misty cauldron of waves was churning madly against the cliffs that Condominium One, widely considered to be one of the most influential buildings of the 1960s, seems precariously perched upon. My teenage son, Gabe, and his two pals were still asleep, white iPod wires in their ears, visions of a winged cow, a wooden dinosaur, a shadow puppet, toy blocks spelling out M-O-O-R-E and a fragment of a Corinthian column dancing on wooden beams over their heads.

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Moore, who died in 1993, possessed an infinite capacity for joy that was expressed in his architecture. "I think that fairy tales have a great deal to teach us architects," he once wrote. The way that most magical adventures, he observed, "end in time for tea seems to me worth careful looking into."

His twinkly view of the universe lives on in Unit 9, which has been delightfully frozen in amber by his family, who still own it, down to the papier-mâché ponies and abalone shells inserted into the 14th-century tile ceiling fragment on the wall. It thus has become a shrine for architects, whose rhapsodies fill the guest register.

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PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN writes for The Times and Architectural Digest from San Francisco.

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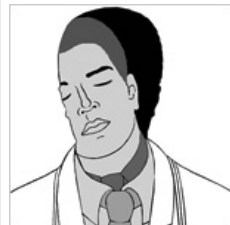
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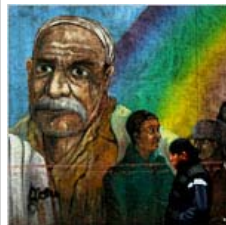
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