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Utopia by the Sea

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Hovering gluttonously over the ocean, the condo was Mr. Moore's salon-by-the-sea, filled with students and a blizzard of manuscripts. Today, it is a powerful argument for the afterlife, an indoor fairy tale with a four-poster bedroom loft held up by logs, creating a cozy shelter underneath. For Gabe and his friends, Pete and Gabe D., a cadre of teenage Coppolas equipped with a digital movie camera who had resoundingly rejected Mr. Moore's leftover jigsaw puzzles of Queen Elizabeth in Parliament and the Tokyo subway system, it was the perfect place to plot a literal cliffhanger.

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My most vivid memory of Mr. Moore, whom I interviewed six years before his death, involved the spectacle of the architect as human periscope, swimming in the pool around midnight at his compound in Austin, Tex., and clutching a flashlight aimed at the water so that he'd be able to spot wayward tarantulas.

Puttering around the kitchen the morning of my visit, admiring Mr. Moore's global tchotchkes, I realized things were getting weird. "Where does Charles keep the vacuum cleaner?" I muttered to myself. "I wonder if Charles has a steamer."

I knew Mr. Moore had worked his magic when I found Gabe sprawled on the turquoise cushions of the saddlebag — a trademark Moore feature in which windows project out of the main space — gazing at the horizon. "Hey, Mom," he wondered. "If you went straight across the ocean, where would you be?"

Daydreaming is the emotional agenda at Sea Ranch. It's a place to watch a hummingbird with your coffee or to observe a deer grazing improbably on a sloping grass-covered green roof.

It is a place to drink too much wine while being transfixed by harbor seals with your college roommate

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planning that, for better and worse, spawned suburban wannabes across the country. The founding ideal, shaped by Mr. Halprin and his all-star cast, was that 10 stupendous miles of California coast were something to be shared rather than subdivided.

The early architecture was communal and modest, with houses clustered perpendicular to the ocean so that everyone would have a view, leaving the meadows open and held in common. Houses were sited to settle into the landscape, like quail nesting. "This wasn't a place to show off your architecture," said Mr. Whitaker, now a 79-year-old renegade. "Buildings were meant to be like geodes, ordinary rocks on the outside with the inside going gangbusters."

Too much of that philosophy has bitten the proverbial dust, a long, bloody tale of politics, real estate, public access to the coast and the sad disconnect between taste and money. Today there are essentially two Sea Ranches: The southern portion, planned by Mr. Halprin et al.; and the later more suburbanized north, with cul-de-sacs and palazzos along the bluffs.

But plenty of the genuine item survives, including the Moonraker Athletic Center, one of three recreation centers with pool, tennis court and family sauna (this is California after all). Along with miles of [hiking](#), [biking](#) and horse trails and a Scottish-style [golf](#) course, the centers are major perks for renters, who must dangle passes from their rearview mirrors. Moonraker is a stark, weathered cathedral of chlorine, all but buried in an earthen berm.

AT the Obie Bowman Walk-in Cabin I rented, the first challenge was finding the door. Spatial organization has never been my forte. Anxiety mounting, I finally spied a padlock attached to a sliding barn wall. Eventually, I realized it was the door. Architects! I cursed.

The conceit of the Walk-in Cabins, a remote gathering of 15 troll-like dwellings in a kingdom of redwoods in the hills above Highway 1, is that no cars are allowed. They are left about a quarter-mile down a dirt road, which sounds romantic until you realize that your garbage has to walk out the same way.

Make no mistake. Sea Ranch is not pussyfooter terrain. I was reminded of this fact when, traveling solo this time and relieved at having found the front door, I perused the welcoming material: a form to fill out should I spot a mountain lion, with blank spaces for size, color, tail and attitude.

Mr. Bowman, who still works in [Healdsburg](#), was a [shopping](#) center designer in [Los Angeles](#) when he took a trip up the coast and discovered Sea Ranch. After the Walk-ins were completed in 1972, he remarked that the spartan cabins, recipients of umpteen design awards, were about the size of the restrooms in his shopping centers.

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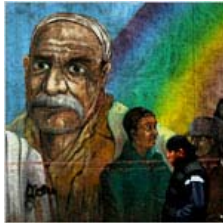
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