
Tributes to Sea Ranch at 50 look to future as well as past

By John King | December 28, 2016 | Updated: January 2, 2017 5:48pm



Photo: Kathleen Duncan / The Chronicle

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Sea Ranch, off Highway 1 in Sonoma County, is known for its distinctive architecture in a stunning natural setting.

Full disclosure: I've never stayed at Sea Ranch. But like anyone interested in design and steeped in Northern California lore, I know how it influenced everything from the architecture of individual buildings to the landscape values of our coast.

The question now, 51 years since the first buildings went up, is whether the 10-mile stretch of Sonoma County shoreline still influences what might come next. Or if it should be viewed as a piece of history, though history of the most scenic sort.

This either-or is prompted by two very different tributes to the 5,200-acre settlement dotted with 1,800 houses, perhaps a third of them occupied year-round, and a handful of commercial and community buildings.

One tribute is in Washington, D.C., where the National Building Museum is hosting “**The Landscape Architecture of Lawrence Halprin,**” an exhibition organized by the Cultural Landscape Foundation.

Halprin, **a Bay Area treasure** who died in 2009, was hired by developer **Alfred Boeke** in 1963 to craft the master plan for the former sheep ranch along Highway 1. The exhibition runs through April and highlights Sea Ranch as an example of Halprin's role as a pioneer of large-scale environmental design.

The other is “The Sea Ranch Songs” by Kronos Quartet, commissioned by Sea Ranch residents as part of the Sea Ranch Association's 50th anniversary celebrations and composed by Aleksandra Vrebalov.



Photo: Kathleen Duncan / The Chronicle

A blue heron walks along the bluffs at Sea Ranch.

“It felt very, very natural to think about how we might celebrate the community,” said violinist David Harrington, one of the founders of the avant-garde string quartet. “It has always seemed like a very successful marriage of development and the environment, with a beautiful respect for the land and the place.”

Some songs stand on their own as musical pieces, such as “Creatures” with its propulsive rhythms supposedly based on everything at Sea Ranch that doesn’t come with mortgage payments or property taxes. Most, though, are laced with sounds and oral fragments that can’t be separated from their source.

“Numbers” laces prickly strings behind resident Mike Lane’s brisk reading of such statistical minutiae as the longitude and latitude of various local landmarks. In “Ideas: Condominium One,” Kronos’ spare lines emerge as architect Donlyn Lyndon talks about the origins of the first Sea Ranch building to attract national attention.

Lyndon and his wife, Alice Wingwall, live at Sea Ranch for much of the year.



Photo: Kathleen Duncan / The Chronicle

A home on the bluffs overlooking the ocean at Sea Ranch.

“There was some resistance: ‘Who are *they*? What kind of music is *that*?’,” admitted Lyndon, who has designed “eight or nine houses” since Condominium One and its 10 interconnected units put the firm of Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, Whitaker on the map in 1965. “The argument that carried the day was that the 50th anniversary couldn’t be all about looking back to the beginning, but also toward the future. And who better to do that musically than Kronos?”

Vrebalov’s song cycle was performed three times last year at the Knipp-Stengel barn, an 1880 structure restored as a community gathering place. The quartet released a studio recording of the work this September, with an accompanying DVD that includes imagery and animation by Andrew Lyndon.

Donlyn Lyndon remains dedicated to the initial notion of Halprin to “live lightly on the land” — or “*with* the land,” as Lyndon would prefer.

“There remain a number of us passionately committed to what the place is about,” said Lyndon. He chairs the Sea Ranch Commons Landscape Committee, which tends to the rugged weave of natural and crafted terrains. “There’s an extraordinary range of experiences here. It’s not just a place to sit and look at the ocean.”

That’s obvious even to those of us whose encounters are casual: driving through at a relaxed pace, glimpsing the wood houses with their sloped roofs and weathered walls amid clusters of trees and the wind-muffling hedgerows that Halprin played up in his plans. Or navigating the trails along the coast that feel both choreographed and timeless.

What you don’t encounter is the long-ago sense of surprise.

Sea Ranch attracted attention in the 1960s as a place of innovation, environmental planning with a distinct California bent. Houses continue to be added, a dozen or more each year. At this point, though, it’s less a trend-setter than the embodiment of a particular sensibility in our past.

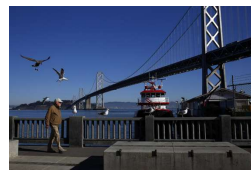
“From my standpoint, Sea Ranch is a point in time,” suggested architect George Homsey, who is stepping down from the property owners association’s design review committee after 15 years. In the 1960s, as part of the firm now known as EHDD, he took part in the creation of Joseph Esherick’s renowned Hedgerow Houses. “Larry (Halprin) and Al Boeke and a whole bunch of people were really caught up in that beautiful landscape.”

The place still casts a spell — but as a landscape being maintained, not reimaged.

And that’s OK.

At its core, the triumph of Sea Ranch is that setting and structures were conceived as something integral, interlocked, with a

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balance to be preserved even as building sites filled in. The environment was something to be enhanced, not simply fenced off or filled in.

For many people today, this might translate to nothing more than a spot for a thunderously romantic or relaxing getaway. Yet the fact that Sea Ranch survives, with its message carried forward on gallery walls and in musical forms as well as the actual place, leaves open the chance that it can spark the inspiration for other triumphs yet to come.

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