

T MAGAZINE

Utopia Rules at Sea Ranch, a Community Born of '60s Idealism

By Design

By ALICE GREGORY JULY 19, 2015

With its gentle footprint on the California coast, simple wood houses and almost dictatorial aesthetic strictures, it feels as modern today as it did 50 years ago.

Teenage angst and eye rolls tend to be useful measures of a place's tranquility: By determining their frequency, you can get a good idea of a vacation spot's relaxation quotient. The Sea Ranch, a planned, unincorporated community two and a half hours north of San Francisco, scores high on both counts. The houses are modest in size and open in layout, so although ocean views are optimized, privacy is not. There are no grocery stores, no movie theaters. The beach isn't easily swimmable, and the median age is 69. I have friends from California whose parents own houses in Sea Ranch and who, in high school, regarded it as a kind of torture. One remembers spending an entire week sulking theatrically and calling her boyfriend long-distance. Another recalls sleeping, on New Year's Eve, next to her brother and two dogs on a tatami mat. With fewer than 900 permanent residents living in an area of just over 5,000 acres, Sea Ranch is an acquired taste, one best suited to those inclined toward leisurely strolls and reading books in absolute silence.

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Bay Area landscape architect celebrated for the integration of ecology and aesthetics he brought to projects such as San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square, an early example of adaptive reuse. For Sea Ranch, Halprin was inspired by the Pomo Indians, a tribe native to the area who believed in "living lightly on the land." In 1965, he and four other Bay Area architects drew up a set of rules for the homes' exterior elements, each of which would be constructed of redwood and built according to the same principles.

Unlike the cookie-cutter communities that sprouted across the country in the 1950s and 1960s and which now seem like physical manifestations of 20th-century conformity and ennui, Sea Ranch homes look as though they've always been there — like archaeological relics of some ancient utopia. Buildings do not recede into their surroundings so much as appear to be part of them. Rather than divide the 10 miles of Sonoma County coastline into equally sized lots, Halprin, inspired by time spent in a kibbutz near Haifa, planned his new residences in clusters around shared open spaces. His designs also borrowed from the barns of Sonoma and Mendocino counties' functional elements, such as single-pitch shed roofs — critical in a place where winds can be intolerably high and almost never subside. The first houses were described in promotional materials as "strong without being assertive, simple without being plain, responding to the spirit of the place, its terrain, its climate, its vegetation."

As any visitor to a gated golf community will reluctantly admit, there is something deeply pleasant about spending time in a place where your needs have been anticipated and accommodated for in predictable ways. Over the decades, Sea Ranch's demographics have changed only slightly, the young UC Berkeley academics now left-wing retirees. These residents are brought together not by religion or racket sports or even a practical location but by a shared sense of good taste. Sea Ranch's founders and inhabitants agree upon a communal climate of unobtrusiveness and calm — a collective disappearing. "Hell is other people" is the place's tacit motto.

The Sea Ranch sensibility is an atmospheric product of its architecture and layout. To preserve sea views, nearly all the oceanfront houses have been built more than 100 feet from the cliff and rarely exceed 16 feet in height. There are no streetlights, no mailboxes, and cars are hidden away in private areas. Meanwhile the strictures

that apply to the homes' upkeep are more draconian still: Curtains in anything but muted colors are frowned upon, and residents have occasionally been cited by the Sea Ranch Design Committee for hanging laundry outside to dry. The original guidelines specified that gardens were to be planted with native flora; "conspicuous blooming performance" was off-limits. Lawns still are.

The idea of enforced tastefulness rings all sorts of alarm bells in me — but only, if I'm being honest, when considering it in the abstract. There's a certain luxury in surrendering oneself to absolute niceness. When I drove up there earlier this year, I stayed at the Sea Ranch Lodge, one of the development's first buildings, and for 48 hours did little more than stare at the shore from bed, wander between mostly empty rooms on a slightly elevated catwalk slick with moss, and eat meals from a glass-walled corner of the restaurant. As otherworldly as the place is, it also felt strangely familiar. In many ways, Sea Ranch is the urtext for all that is most coveted today: fresh, local food, minimalist clothes, midcentury interiors. The flotaki rugs, potted fiddle-leaf fig trees and decorative driftwood so omnipresent on Pinterest boards are ornamental givens in a place built by Bay Area iconoclasts in the years following the publication of "Silent Spring."

Like a restaurant that offers diners a prix fixe menu or a boutique that presents shoppers with a tightly edited inventory, Sea Ranch demonstrates the joys of flexible prescription; variations are fine so long as they're of the sort one's neighbor would also indulge. Not someone typically attracted to self-conscious eccentricity, I found myself unexpectedly partial to the houses with the most apparent oddities: external glass atria, faceted turrets, second-story rooms that seem to float like a spaceship's dorsal deck. The interiors also share a sophisticated coziness, an effect of their bay windows, tiny balconies, lofts accessible by ladders, sunken living rooms and recessed storage nooks. The British architectural historian John Summerson once identified the delight of the "miniature shelter, which excludes the elements by only a narrow margin and intensifies the sense of security in a hostile world." This is precisely the appeal of Sea Ranch houses, which contrive to give residents the juvenile thrill of being simultaneously inside and outdoors.

I spent most of my trip relishing this contradictory pleasure, but I also went on a three-hour walk, during which I saw seals swimming in a clear, cold bay but not a

single other person. The shredded cliffs and dark tangles of trees and blinding white glimpses of ocean glare conspired to trigger that electric, almost dangerous exhilaration I had only ever associated with college-era intellectual awakenings. For someone who considers herself immune to nature's supposedly rapturous effects, Sea Ranch provides an almost bullying conversion experience.

A version of this article appears in print on July 19, 2015, on Page M242 of T Magazine with the headline: Utopia Rules.

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