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Author

Phelps, Barton

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Barton Phelps, FAIA

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Design Where Place
Takes the Lead

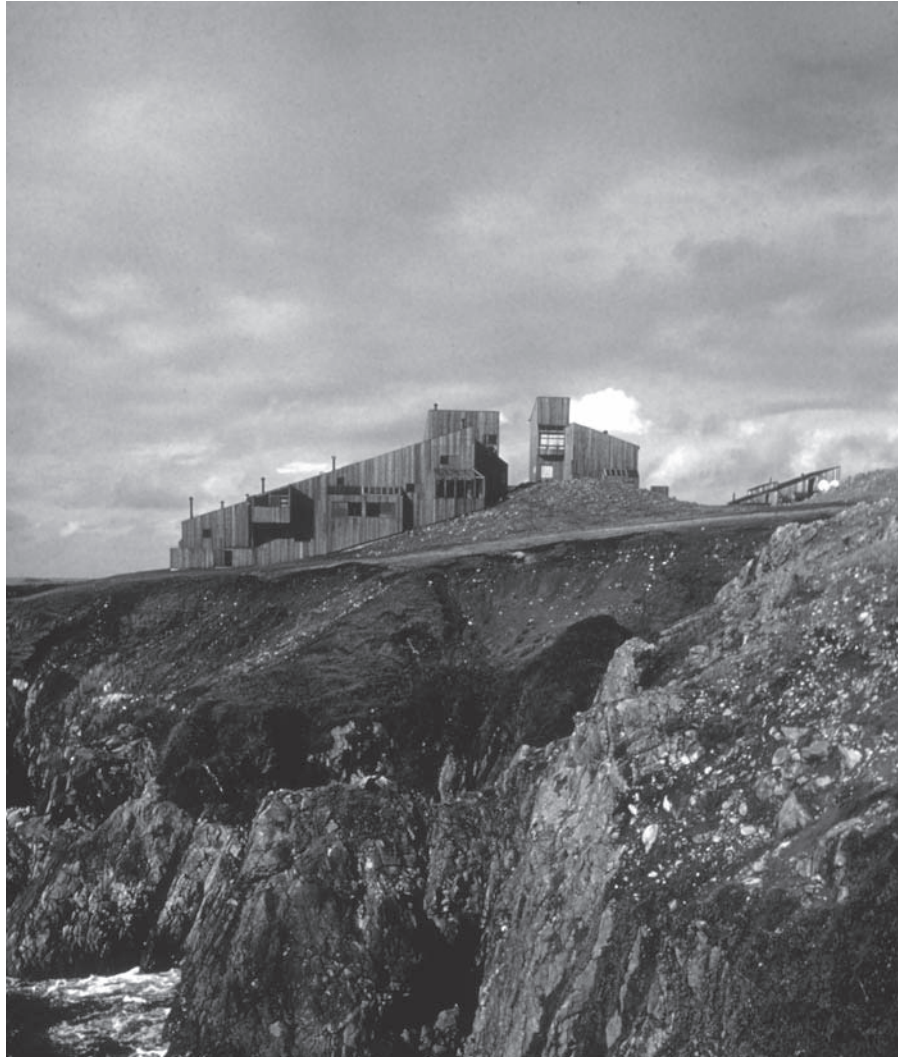


These Forum pages were produced under an agreement between *Places/Design History* Foundation and the American Institute of Architects. They report on the AIA Committee on Design's May 2005 Conference and Visit to Northern California. Ronnette Riley, FAIA, served as overall AIA CoD Chair in 2005. Dale Linden Turner and Donlyn Lyndon were 2005 CoD Conference Co-Chairs.

The 2006 AIA Committee on Design Conference, "The Architecture of Sustainability," will be held May 4-7, 2006, at the National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, WV. It will explore the impact of sustainability on both the art of architecture and the science of building. Is sustainable design an oxymoron? What has been the impact of sustainable design on the world? What is the relationship between sustainability and form-making? What lies ahead for our profession, and what are our responsibilities as influencers of the built environment? We will examine the process of integrated design and how it makes better buildings.

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Serial Colonizations, Succession Landscapes, and the California Problem



With its allusion to ballroom dancing, or perhaps to sporting competition, the title of our conference, "Design Where Place Takes the Lead," grew more meaningful on our weekend ramble through the varied terrain of Napa and Sonoma—even as its basic proposition became less obvious. Billed in advance as a design-oriented survey of "buildings that take their cue from the natural landscape," our actual explorations could more instructively have been seen as grounded in three distinctly

non-natural landscapes, all of which display signs of ongoing and often radical redefinition.

It gradually became clear that "design" and "place" were only a part of the story, and that the concept of a "natural landscape" needed clarification. As we careened happily from town to vineyard to seacoast and back, the nuanced interactions of time and place—the *dynamics* of landscape change—made for at least as compelling an object of contemplation as the subject matter first advertised.



The New Eden

Several initial speakers helped expand our sense of the dimensions of architectural activity in California. One of Donlyn Lyndon’s elegant definitions—“Place: a space that can be remembered”—slipped the important issue of time into the mix. His characterization of the California winery as a Europhilic cultural reference also reminded us of the narrative potential of borrowed landscapes.

Stanford Anderson pursued the idea of reference into architectural design. In particular, he found the authority of Hermann Muthesius in MLTW’s “unpretentious” condominium building at the Sea Ranch, which offered “a sure foundation for a new aesthetic culture,” in a way he found absent in Michael Graves’s

Previous: Sea Ranch Condominium One. A new/old way of seeing. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon.

Top: Agricultural colonization. The Quintessa Winery. Photo by Les Wallach.

“overtly” Neoclassicizing winery for Clos Pegase).¹ Anderson’s images of cataclysmic alterations in the layout and look of Shanghai also suggested a new speed record for landscape change.

Finally, Mitchell Schwartz’s dazzling romp through the serial “colonizations” of California sketched the powerful impact of each new, imported order as an outpost of one already established somewhere else.

In Schwartz’s view, efforts like the superimposition of a street grid on the hills of San Francisco, which resulted in its altogether novel landscape, can be seen to display the colonizers’ distaste for a scene as first encountered. He also noted the emergence of conservation and environmental concerns in the late nineteenth century, and how they paralleled the rise of Arts and Crafts design and the Modern Movement in architecture. The convergence of new expectations with new streams of thought was to set for architects and landscape architects in the New Eden of California

the intellectual and artistic problem of producing a new architecture—one with sufficient regional environmental and tectonic resonance to stake a claim of vernacular legitimacy.

Schwartz’s examples of this investigation ranged broadly from a heightened naturalism in nineteenth-century architecture, like Joseph Worcester’s mystical design for the Swedenborgian church in San Francisco; to mid-century ideas like Lawrence Halprin’s description of the high-speed roadway as landscape viewfinder; to Charles Moore’s 1960s analyses of the evocative power and civic role of theme parks like Disneyland and the importance of roadside building as epitomized by the Brobdingnagian stonework of the Madonna Inn.

Changes of Nature

Schwartz’s formulation of change so complete that it erases memory would echo through the weekend as we viewed three transformations for which ancient precedents must surely exist: ranchland (*rus*) into vineyard; cattle town (*urbs*) into chic weekend destination; and delicately designed cottages carefully scattered along open meadow landscapes (*urbs rustica*) but now being overpowered by clusters of closely yarded, ur-suburban hulks.

With these shifts in mind, it was interesting to imagine how things used to look and operate, and to try to discern whether some landscapes respond better than others to our contemporary engines of economics and taste. One wonders whether an index for comparing relative capacities of different landscapes to accommodate such change could be usefully established.

At the Sea Ranch, where forests were replaced by grazing land well before the current development began, the ecology of natural succession

regimes has again surfaced, helpfully offering its sequence of disturbance, invasion, withdrawal, equilibrium, disturbance... new equilibrium, etc., as a kind of environmental analogy. Nature, oblivious to the duration of time passing and spared perceptions of good and bad, seems to accept entropy nonjudgmentally. But for many observers of a sequence of differing built environments, messy transitional periods seem directionless, uncomfortable, and generally unappealing.

The architect's eye finds particular value in formal clarity and the allotment of sufficient mass to support it. In this view, at least two of the three landscapes we visited seemed improved by recent colonizations. The beautifully patterned massing of row after row of Russian River grapevines can flow across our vision with a purposeful elegance that no scrubby grassland will ever have. And the fully commercialized, consistently formed fronts of gentrified shopping streets around the central square of Healdsburg work their small-scale urbanizing miracle better than the vacant fronts that line the main streets of many American towns that remain farming towns. In both cases the colonizers' intent is to simplify and concentrate imagery, limit vernacular exceptions, and redirect production.

At the Sea Ranch, as Donlyn Lyndon's and Jim Alinder's beautiful new book makes clear, the formal ecology is different.² While linear formalisms and other patterns can be cited in support of original communal intentions, the increasing of building mass, density, and volumetric consistency that work so well in vineyards and towns runs counter, in this most thoughtfully planned of colonizations, to original intentions. Then there are the remarkably different buildings.

The Sea Ranch Condominium

rises up in a singular way, like a fortress against the sea, compact and spacious at the same time, muscular as ever and gentle, still transmitting its powerful (unfulfilled) signal of a new/old way of seeing and of getting along with people and the earth. It is the intellectual anchor of the place, and all the houses still take power from its presence. Working within a clearly defined vocabulary of construction, the thoroughly conforming houses at the Sea Ranch seem to have been encouraged to be exceptional.

But in its further reaches, the Sea Ranch has begun to show signs of the long, slow value shift that is reshaping much of America. At the 1996 Committee on Design meeting in New Orleans, landscape historian Delores Hayden noted succinctly that in much of America the dream of the ideal community has been replaced by the dream of the ideal house.³

Despite all the thinking that went into producing the truly experimental landscape of the Sea Ranch, we now observe that ordinary real estate expectations and the apparently irresistible allure of the clearly defined private domain are combining to thwart its brilliant attempt at cracking the old California problem.

An Appraisal

If it can be said that even in the New Eden the communal dream has been interrupted, our weekend conference also gave ample evidence that progressive, broadly thoughtful design energies continue at work there. These are on display in new houses at the Sea Ranch like the anomalous rectilinear composition of the Yudell-Beebe House, and in the sensibly cool elegance of the Healdsburg Hotel—a kind of urban villa where we were so very happy to stay. At the Stryker and Dominus wineries the industrial

mechanics of winemaking are deftly accommodated in different ways—one regionally inspired, the other minimalist—that heighten our sense of the vineyard as mythical garden.

The California tradition of design inquiry goes on, observant of the changing landscape. The old dream of a California architecture—and perhaps of a “new aesthetic culture,” as Dr. Muthesius might have it—continues to be dreamed.

Notes

1. See, for example, Hermann Muthesius, *Style—Architecture and Building—Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and Its Present Condition*, Stanford Anderson, intro. and trans. (Santa Monica, CA: J. Paul Getty Trust Publications, 1994).
2. Donlyn Lyndon and Jim Alinder, *The Sea Ranch* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).
3. Paraphrasing from “Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space,” Delores Hayden's talk at the 1996 COD meeting in New Orleans.

Barton Phelps, FAIA, is principal of Barton Phelps & Associates, Architects and Planners, in Los Angeles, and is a former Chair of the AIA Committee on Design. His 1996 CoD symposium series, *Changing American Landscapes: The View from the River*, explored the valley of the Mississippi River.