

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

AIA Committee on Design -- Design Where Place Takes the Lead [Forum]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80n7p2bk>

Journal

Places, 17(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Lyndon, Donlyn

Publication Date

2005-10-01

Peer reviewed

The American
Institute of Architects
Committee on Design



Place as the first consideration in architecture was the theme of the AIA Committee on Design in its Spring 2005 Conference. The conference took place in Northern California venues where the topic could be examined in three different ways: in the design for a building bordering an historic square; in the Napa Valley, where winemakers are eager to establish their place in a region of note; and at The Sea Ranch, where forty years of development have drawn on a specific conception of place.

Archetypal Urbanity

The starting point for the event was the town of Healdsburg, where conferees stayed in the Healdsburg Hotel, recently designed by David Baker and Partners. This structure neatly completes the fourth side of a beautifully scaled and thickly landscaped central square, the principal

Stryker Sonoma Winery; photo by Gisela C. Hollis.

feature of a town laid out in the 1860s. With its lobbies and courtyards accessed principally from a side street, the building manages both to establish a place of its own and contribute handsomely to the life of this important public space.

The Healdsburg square is memorable in part because its close room-like dimensions, coherent scale, and intensity of use make it seem completely defined and inhabited. People likely to be encountered there also range across economic strata, from the patrons of high-end restaurants and shops, to itinerant workers seeking a day's employment, to families or clusters of singles enjoying its lush shade. Such urbanity becomes even more poignant as you walk the few blocks to its neighboring (and neighborly) residential streets. Small plots here hold a variety of wooden houses (mostly from the nineteenth and early twentieth century), carefully embellished with craftsman details and

landscape interventions by generations of homeowners.

This whole appealingly tight arrangement extends only a short distance in either direction, though, as more wide-spreading, road-tracking, placeless patterns stretch out into the surrounding landscape.

Of Artifice and Vineyards

On the second day, conference participants ventured forth to a series of wineries, each of which has attempted to forge a place of its own with regard to the defining agricultural product of the region. The approaches were different, to be sure, but all were oriented toward making a connection with their respective landscapes and with the vineyards around them.

The Clos Pegase winery by Michael Graves played its cards most vigorously, transforming the confluence of vineyards, surmountable hill, caves, and cavernous stuccoed processing areas into a complex of



axes, courtyards and stately vegetation. Clos Pegase provides a dignified setting for art patronage, social gatherings, wine tastings, and other events. Its imposing cubic gate is washed in Tuscan red, embellished with a great symbolic column, and set on axis with a totemic oak tree. Such overt artifice, however, struck a note participants found, most... well... “artificial.”

Rigorous artifice of another sort characterized the Dominus Winery by Herzog and de Meuron. From the road, it appears a simple gray mass of stone penetrated by two great openings. As one approaches, vivid green rows of vine border an access road that continues through one opening toward a vanishing point in the foothills beyond. There are no courts or comforting enclosures, as its heat-modifying gabion walls envelop only a long rectangular structure which houses wine production, storage and administration space. These steel-caged baskets of basaltic rock are

packed to varying degrees of density: the more compact absorb heat and hold it away from the wine-making and -storing processes below; the more loosely packed upper tiers allow dappled light into the administration floor, with its elegantly spare glass-walled offices.

Of artifice, of course, there is plenty here; but it has been placed in the service of reductive essentialism, well rooted in purpose, and settled in place according to the geometry of the valley and its parallel strands of vine.

At the Quintessa Winery by Walker Warner Architects, the embodiment of place was different still. Conferees initially surveyed it from a ring of bales on the top of its characterizing hill. Here the talk was of establishing a *domaine*, with diverse soils and nurturing conditions, and with farm buildings and guest quarters dispersed around the site according to favorable locations.

This estate is loosely focused by

a great stone wall arcing around a hollow in the land and supporting the shallow climb of a road used to deliver grapes to a concrete plaza/platform at its apex. The platform is used intensely during harvesting, when it serves as a central place from which to feed grapes down into the processing, fermenting and storage equipment below. A steel and glass tasting, sales and administration building is centered along the back of the curve. It tucks against the hill above deep caves, and opens out over the platform, with its grape-chute caps that serve as quiet reminders of harvest-time frenzy.

More modestly, but with engagingly elegant simplicity, the Stryker Sonoma Winery has stretched out its intersecting barn forms adjacent to a terraced passage overlooking the vineyards of the Alexander Valley. The passage is artfully engulfed in light steel trellises and wood slats. At one end, the winery’s austere protective walls dissolve in a glassy pavilion which faces north up the valley. Meanwhile, inside, stairs and openings look back into the darkness of the vat and storage areas.

This winery’s steel, wood, concrete and stone—all shapely—nevertheless quietly defer to the orderly, fertile vineyards as the essence of the place.

The wine culture segment of the program also included stops at the Napa Museum, by Fernau and Hartman, a sprightly building made with manufactured materials and designed to overlook an instructive layout of landscape and cultivation types (unfortunately been curtailed by

Top Left: Clos Pegase Winery; photo by Kit Leeger.

Bottom Left: Hedgerow House, Joseph Esherick Associates; photo by Steven K. Alspaugh.

Top Right: Dominus Winery; photo by Les Wallach.

Bottom Right: Brugler House, Obie Bowman; photo by Kit Reeder.

lack of funding), and at Coppia, the ambitiously named American Center for Wine Food and the Arts, designed by the Polshek Partnership.

Sea Ranch: Founding Vision

To reach The Sea Ranch, site for the third day's tours, involved crossing to the coast alongside vineyards, hillside grazing lands studded with oaks, shaggy redwood and conifer forests sprinkled with cabins, and small-scale vacation settlements along the course of the Russian River.

The Sea Ranch occupies ten miles of dramatic coastal land developed by Oceanic Properties. It is now nearing build-out, with 1,800 dwelling units complete and 600 yet to go. The planning, begun by Lawrence Halprin in 1963, has been widely praised as an early and telling example of an ecological approach. The plan was based on multiple factors, including soil, climate and vegetation studies, and was conceived in three dimensions—fitting roads, development sites, and architectural forms closely to the structure of the land itself.

For many architects the words “Sea Ranch” call to mind Condominium One by MLTW (Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker) and the Hedgerow Houses by Joseph Esherick. These were the first buildings constructed, in 1965, and were widely published thereafter.¹ They, and The Sea Ranch Store, also designed by Esherick & Associates, were intended to establish an architectural vocabulary attuned to the conditions of the site—using landscape and building form to mitigate the winds sweeping off the ocean and capture welcome warmth from the sun, while settling into the contours of the coastal shelf, with its existing weathered houses and heavy-timbered barns.

Condominium One, which was

to have been the first of four such structures clustered around four outcroppings on an exposed bluff, was famously described by an early admirer as a “wooden rock.” It rises almost like another outcropping, and its roof includes an unbroken plane, nearly paralleling the slope of the land, that sweeps up from a low edge fronting the Pacific to a pair of towers at the crest. The plan consists of ten units and two large parking sheds, disposed around two courts—one for cars, and one enfolding the slope and providing shelter from the wind.

The building's walls are of timber planks, surfaced with redwood boards that have weathered naturally (and severely) in the sun and wind. Windows are relatively spare, with dark aluminum frames set in the walls without visible trim; skylights are frequent. The whole is big in conception, with long wall surfaces cragged with bays and projections that echo nearby ocean bluffs, even as they signal intimate human presence.

Each Condominium unit is specific in plan and volume, adapting to its position in the complex, under the roof and touching the land. Inside each unit, light filters down from skylights through sculpted room elements and heavy-timber framing. At significant points bays project beyond the main volume to allow inhabitants to perch on the edge of the outdoors or garner special views.

Unlike the Condominium, which vigorously claimed its hold on a barren point of land, the Hedgerow Houses were sited to merge with the first of a regiment of existing “hedgerows” that marched across the open coastal meadows. These rows of tall cypress trees had been planted 75 years ago to break the insistent winds from the north. The master plan developed by Halprin ranged house



sites along them, to create cove-like commonly held meadows and leave the oceanfront open for all to share.

The Hedgerow demonstration houses were set down low into the wind with single-slope shingle or sod roofs rising persistently toward the south to throw the wind over pockets of sunny calm. Fences and planting extended their forms, harboring places of shelter for outside seating and gardens. The recurrent low, sloping roofs of these houses, and their staggered siting, created a vivid sense of the dominant forces of the landscape and of a shared response to place.

Ironically, these two sets of buildings, widely heralded as exemplars, are now seldom in public view. The Hedgerow Houses have now merged so successfully with the vegetation that they are mostly noted by the cognoscenti. The Condominium is shielded by an additional hedgerow planted to its north, and pines that have grown up behind it.



Sea Ranch: Successive Development

The rest of the day at The Sea Ranch was spent visiting various houses and common facilities that have been developed in the forty years since its inception. These included the original, startlingly innovative, yet tiny, Moonraker Recreation Center, by Moore, Turnbull and Halprin—the first of the Association’s facilities (1966). Its swimming pool and tennis court are snuggled down into the land behind earth berms and a chambered wall. The narrow interior spaces, containing two sets of locker rooms, showers and saunas on multiple levels, are expanded by an array of full-wall optical graphics designed by Barbara Stauffacher and deemed, often, to be the birthplace of “Supergraphics.”

After lunch seminars, the tour was broken into groups, with each visiting five selected houses, walking through a section of meadows or along the coast, and driving through a larger segment of the development. Houses

visited ranged in date from 1967 to 2005 and included later designs by the original Sea Ranch architects and Dmitri Vedensky, Obie Bowman, Turnbull Griffin Haesloop, and Buzz Yudell. These houses embodied differing interpretations of the original intention, some working closely with the original vocabulary, some incorporating new forms and relationships to their sites. All take their place in an extended landscape that includes many houses that quietly play their supporting role in the natural environment, a number that nervously seek a “Sea Ranch Style,” and some that appear to take their cues only from suburban market imagery.

The sessions ended in a meeting with members of The Sea Ranch Design Committee, including Richard Whitaker and George Homsey.² They recounted the challenges of retaining a sense for the place in the face of a demand for ever-larger houses, the diminishing availability of good-quality wood products, evolving requirements of effective landscape management, genuine threats of wildfire and wind damage, and quarrelsome litigation over design process.

While the strengths of the original planning remain evident, The Sea Ranch, in many of its parts, has lost its sense of adventure, and the landscape of succession threatens to become one of diminished expectations, short on fresh understandings of the place. Nevertheless, the large area of land (50 percent) dedicated to commons, a network of trails, and the facilities and access roads held in Association ownership, coupled with the Design Review process and the still-resident ambition to “live lightly with the land,” offer enduring prospects for the essence of its character.

Where Place Takes the Lead

Whereas the clarity of form in Healdsburg has paired with a prosperity that revivifies its hold on the place, the artful crafting of distinct identities in the wine-making region has been more elusive—individual places become submerged in a landscape of authentic production that is frequently fronted by marketing pretensions. The Sea Ranch, whatever its disappointments, has formed ten miles of the California coast into a place that refers both to the power of the natural landscape and to the patterns of stewardship that have given distinct character to its development.

Notes

1. The Sea Ranch Condominium One was subsequently selected for the AIA’s Twenty-Five Year Award, and has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places.
2. An important aspect of The Sea Ranch over the years is that those who initiated it have continued to be involved in various ways. Al Boeke, the architect-vice president who conceived and managed the early process, has returned as a respected elder; Lawrence Halprin has a house and studio there and has conducted workshops for the Association membership on a ten-year cycle; and others have served on the Design Committee and/or continued to design houses, including places of their own, that re-examine the mandates of the place.

Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA, is Editor of *Places* and Eva Li Professor of Architecture Emeritus at UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design.

Opposite: Courtyard at Sea Ranch Condominium One, MLTW; photo by Kit Reeder.

Top: House cluster, Donlyn Lyndon; photo by Arlene Tunney.

Bottom: Yudell Beebe House, Buzz Yudell; photo by Kit Reeder.