

# THE SEA RANCH AUDIO WALKING TOUR: ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE, INTENTIONS

Written and Narrated by Donlyn Lyndon

## SEGMENT A: Sea Walk Drive, Sea Ranch Lodge, Bihler Point and views of Condominium One



*A The Sea Ranch Lodge entry*

**We begin this walk in front of the Sea Ranch Lodge.** The Sea Ranch Store, which is now incorporated into the Lodge, and the small Marker building by the Highway, along with Condominium One (nearby) and the Hedgerow Demonstration Houses (across the large meadow to the north) were the first buildings built at The Sea Ranch, beginning in 1964.

These buildings initiated a plan for ten miles of coast that had been devised by Lawrence Halprin for Oceanic Properties, a development company whose Vice President, Al Boeke, was the first to imagine these former ranching and timber lands as a planned second home community.

Al Boeke hired Lawrence Halprin, already known as one of the premier landscape architects in the country, to assemble a team that could envision and give form to a new kind of relationship between buildings and landscape, one that would give special shapes to the place which

*(Visit The Sea Ranch Association [www.tsra.org](http://www.tsra.org) for downloadable files)*

closely aligned with its natural forces and would serve a community of people who were dedicated to being within a place of severe but majestic natural beauty.

The team he assembled included a geographer, civil engineers (Brelje & Race), sales and marketing people, legal counsel and two architectural firms: Joseph Esherick and Associates, who designed the Store, Marker Building and the Hedgerow Houses, and our firm, MLTW consisting of Charles Moore, myself, William Turnbull and Richard Whitaker, designers of Condominium One.

**Let's look first at the Store and Post Office, now incorporated into the Lodge, by going to the south end of the building and standing in or near the small set of parking spaces there.**



*A1 The Sea Ranch Store with Logo*

The Store, **A1**, when it was first built, was only the first segment of the building that is now the Sea Ranch Lodge. It included the nice deep porch and entry, the bank of PO Boxes, and the stretch of high wall above them. Everything that you see spreading beyond that first block was a later expansion to accommodate the Lodge – everything fronted by that long porch and the buildings beyond. The Store at the

outset was very modest, meeting local needs: mail, milk, butter, eggs and few sundries...and of course (it was meant to be far sighted) a few glorious white sweatshirts emblazoned across their fronts with The Sea Ranch logo in black (not pastel, not tiny).

That logo, even bigger, is also boldly placed high on the wall above the porch and on the wall farther towards the Lodge and on the Marker building by the highway. Let's examine this logo for a minute – it says a lot that is important about The Sea Ranch. There is, of course, the readily perceived rams head, recalling the sheep (and their tenders) who were the previous inhabitants of this ranch. Then, on second look, there are the spiraling conch shells, echoing the sea. But there is more; there is the very distinct formal discipline that makes these somewhat abstracted forms unique and memorable. This is not a wispy nostalgic evocation of the former coast, but a bold, one might even say tough, emblem of awareness in the landscape. The logo, designed by the very talented San Francisco graphic artist Barbara Stauffacher Solomon and integrated with the architecture, embodies the commitment to making The Sea Ranch a place characterized by clear, direct design that would not be bound by conventional expectations – innovative design uniquely suited to this place.

The Store building, like the others first built, shows this. It is built with materials from the surrounding area: lumber, shingles and siding from nearby mills, the turned round wooden post extracted from a log, doors framed with clear Douglas Fir. The roof is not a conventional gable, but pitches in a single slope down into the wind, deflecting wind up and away from the entry, which in turn is tucked (along with the then small number of post office boxes) into the building form, protected from the prevailing winds from the north and storms from the south. The forms are unencumbered by traditional details...no unnecessary moldings or cornices or overhangs. The building is proud of being what it is – not a semblance of something else.

As you look down the face of the building that is now the Lodge, you can see that the same ideas held when it was built several years later.

**We'll come back to that, but first let's walk over towards the Marker building to the south and take a position on the roughly triangular slope just above where Sea Walk Drive turns to become the entry to the Lodge.** (Take care to stay on the uphill side of the road, as cars frequently pass, and the commons below the road are reserved for use by Sea Ranch Members and their guests.)

Before you, are double lines of Monterey Cypress trees paralleling either side of the private drive that descends the slope, **A2**. It's important to recognize that all these trees were planted after the first buildings were constructed.



*A2 Sea Walk Drive Hedgerows*

They are the type of trees planted in close packed rows by ranchers in the early nineteenth century to make hedgerows (sometimes called "treerows") in the great long meadows along the whole ten miles of coast that became The Sea Ranch. Planted to mitigate the wind sweeping down the coast and to divide the fields into manageable intervals, they have been called Signature Hedgerows since their size, linear geometry and pacing at intervals are a distinguishing feature of this landscape.

These two rows were planted in the late sixties, to calm winds for Condominium sites and to separate them and the related commons properties from the Lodge and its expansion. In this case their north side forms the boundary between Sea Ranch Commons land, restricted to use by Sea Ranch members and their guests, and Lodge properties, where trails are open to the public. Looking north you can see another row of trees that was planted at the far side of the Lodge parking lot,

protecting it from winds across the remnants of Black Point Prairie. The rows of pine trees along the highway to the east were also a part of that plan sequestering the Lodge and its parking from the highway and the hills above.

**Moving to stand near the large tree here by the highway fence, A3**, it's possible to understand more about the conditions of the land as development of The Sea Ranch began.



*A3 View uphill from tree near the Highway 1*

Look east up the slope and imagine that there are no trees in sight – none, here or anywhere around these lower terraces.

This will give you a sense of the open, grazed, undulating meadows that then formed the site for Condominium One and the Store as the historical photograph shows, **A4H**, with long hedgerows farther north, pacing along the coastal prairie into the distance.



*A4H Aerial view of Bihler Point, Condominium One, the Sea Ranch Store and Marker Building (date circa 1967) Photo by Lisa Trumpler*

The subsequent hedgerow nearby and another row of trees, some planted, some naturally seeded, have enclosed a meadow on the commons along Sea Walk Drive. In the half century since they were planted, they have grown to a height and thickness that largely obscures the ocean and the buildings that front it, **A5**.



*A5 Sea Walk Meadow*

The Commons Landscape Committee, which is preparing management plans for the Commons (nearly half of the total area of The Sea Ranch), has called for modifications to these trees that will provide more sense of the ocean setting for this important entry drive along Sea Walk Meadow and of the clustered forms of Condominium One, which is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Condominium Two, a later construction with sod-roofed garage excavated into the hill, is farther to the left.



*A6 Sea Ranch Lodge porch and extension*

**Returning now to the front of the Lodge**, it is evident that the larger buildings have been developed in accord with the architecture of the Store, photo **A6**.

The Lodge structures, built several years later, extend seamlessly from the original building, their walls and the deck and porch made in the same way, but extending all across the front of the larger building. The deck and an accompanying wall extend still farther as they connect with the adjacent structure, housing guest rooms of the Lodge.

**Moving on to the broad welcoming reach of the Lodge porch**, we may step inside through its bank of wood-framed glass french doors to the lobby, connecting back to the store and out to the well-formed space of the Fireside Room, a few steps below. Directly ahead, the approach to the dining room descends steps that parallel the slope of the land, to the bar and solarium, with the main eating space projecting out into the extensive view under a spacious roof, itself sloping down towards bands of windows surveying the coast.

**Returning to the porch and heading north**, you come first to a large redwood board fence creating an enclosure that keeps the guest room cars in a compound out of sight.

**The Lodge rooms themselves, A7**, are arranged in mostly two story blocks assembled to enclose, with the fence walls of the car court, a wind-sequestered garden court. These buildings too are made very directly. Their ornament, if you will, being the arrangement of recessed entries, stairs and high windows, letting in light to the rooms behind, and the care and imagination with which they've been placed to retain privacy while capturing light.



*A7 Sea Ranch Lodge bedroom wings*

**The most dramatic point in this whole complex is the opening in the linkage between the two buildings** housing the Lodge common rooms on the south and the stacked guest bedrooms on the right, **A8**.



*A8 Passage through Lodge court wall*

The wall that connects them is also made with redwood boards and penetrated by a framed opening. The opening is large enough to shape a stunning view, intimate enough to seem like friendly personal passage through which only a few people pass at one time. Passing through the wall is akin to entering another world (an "Alice entering Wonderland" moment). With wind in your face, the open, wild grassy meadow and the scope of the ocean is before you, leaving the trimmed, planted and wind protected forecourt of the Lodge behind.

Once it was more so: with time the foreground has collected well-frequented Adirondack chairs and ramps that provide outdoor barrier free access for the solarium and bar. The point remains: it takes only a

few steps out towards Bihler Point to realize a different world than the one you left behind in the car or in the rooms of the Lodge.

**Now follow the path all the way out to Bihler Point.** Take care, the land is rough with rocks and recesses, and on days of strong winds it seems perilously close to the edge of the cove. But it's a spectacular point, from which you can see far down the coast in both directions. It is also a storied landscape as it was once clustered with buildings, developed as an off-loading site for lumber and goods brought up from the cove on cables. To learn more of its early history, look to the vertical post on the north side of the point holding Historic Marker **HM 1-25** and its keyed information.

**Moving towards the south, but remaining well back from the cliff, there is a comprehensive view of Condominium One, A9.**



*A9 Condominium One from the north (Bihler Point)*

From here you can see that its great roofs, pitched up from the sea, follow a continuous plane as they wrap around a courtyard and finally end at two towers that break from the dominant slope like rocks projecting from the meadow. The encompassing roof, you will note, holds a scattered set of large square skylights, dropping light into each

of the 10 units of housing that make up the Condominium. The wood-sided walls wrap continuously around a complex form, varied with bays, insets and projections. It has been characterized as a “wooden rock” or as similar to the irregular cliffs fronting the cove. It bears such similes not because it was made to imitate its surroundings, but because, like them it responds to the specifics of site and the forces of nature so present in the place. The walls, when they fold or recede, are following the search for a particular view to the cove or horizon or to accommodate a configuration that offers more outlook for rooms deeper inside the complex.

The whole complex follows the slope of the land, keeping close to the inherent form of the place. The rows of units bound within its walls enfold the car court and a larger common entry and meeting courtyard, **A10H**, where the land slopes through within the surrounding inhabited forms.



*A10H Condominium One entry and meeting courtyard © Jim Alinder*

Were it possible to see the other side of Condominium One, which it is not because it's restricted property, you would find that its south

facing walls are much more open to the sun and in varied ways, as shown in the view of Condominium One from the south. Photo **A11H** was taken by Jim Alinder for our book: The Sea Ranch: Fifty Years of Architecture, Landscape, Place and Community on the Northern California Coast.

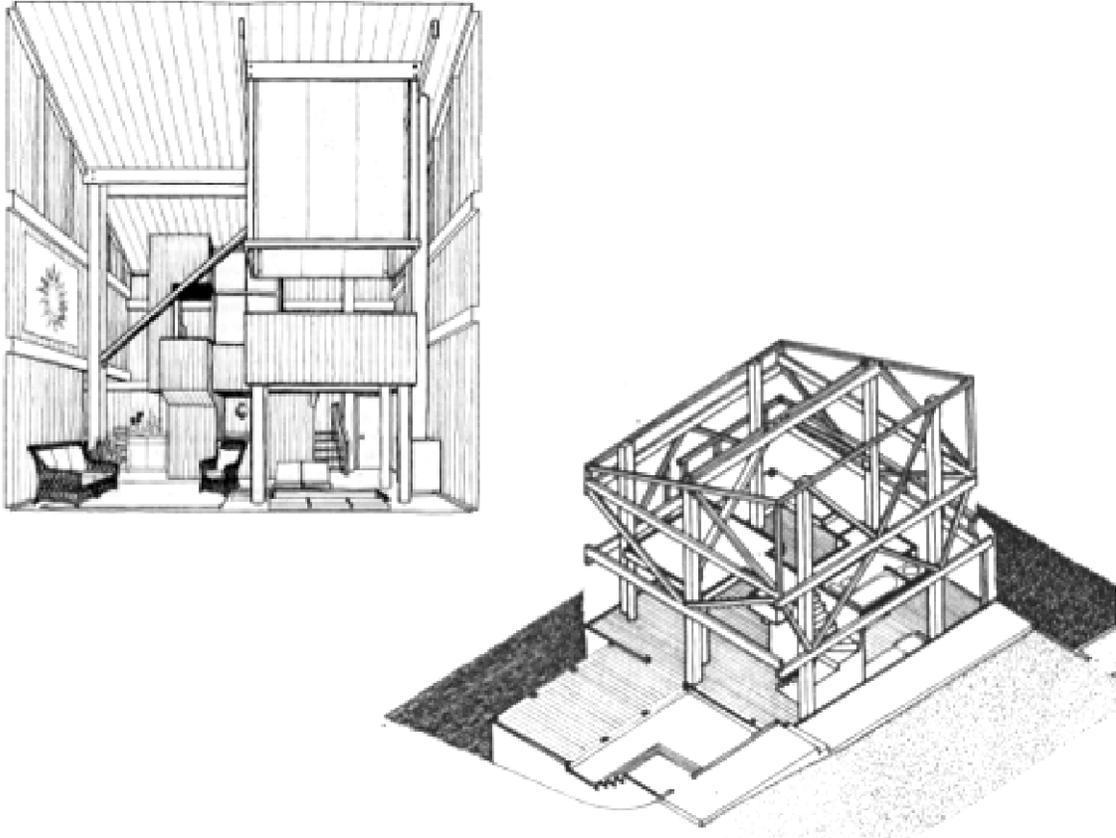


*A11H South face of Condominium One*

*© Jim Alinder*

Each unit inside has a different way of relating to the outdoors – through small private courts, and bays, through a broad reach of windows, a greenhouse or balcony, each according to the position of living spaces inside, all supplemented by syncopated small windows for ventilation or specific outlook.

Most of the units inside include four-posted structures, “aediculas” in architectural parlance, that hold bedrooms aloft in the upper spaces, under the skylights. These private interiors may be seen in many publications. This drawing **A12H** shows the four-posted structure within the exposed structural frame of one of the Condominium units.



*A12H Condominium One framing and interior drawings*

To understand the Condominium properly another photograph **A13H** that shows the view of the Condominium from the edge of the Lodge properties shows several important characteristics: sheds surround a courtyard to sequester owner's cars, and above them can be seen a bedroom tower that marks the Condominium's place in the landscape. To the right, is the side of one of the ocean front Condominium units, roof pitched down into the wind, with wide redwood vertical boards that make up its walls (walls that are mostly closed to the coastal winds from the north west) and close-fitting bay windows that project out towards the adjacent cove.



*A13H Condominium One from north, showing car court and tower*

*It's essential to note that were you at this location, these are private quarters and that only Condominium owners and their guests may enter the court or approach the building. Trespass beyond the posted signs without permission is neither considerate, nor allowed.*

**Now turn back towards the buildings of the Lodge.**

**A14.** You will note that there are some similarities between these structures and Condominium One.



*A14 Ocean face of the Sea Ranch Lodge*

The Lodge buildings are also big in the landscape, yet they are stretched out across it. They also have differentiated edges designed to provide differing experiences inside; the lodging building on the left is furrowed with two story bay windows projecting towards the ocean but arranged in stacks. The public rooms of the Lodge are on the right: restaurant and bar, kitchen and some administrative and service spaces. They are clearly developed with simpler design moves, reflecting the larger spaces inside and settling on the ground with a greater sense of assurance.

These buildings are different from the Condominium structure, yet they have clearly been adapted to their sites and uses with similar materials and intent, allowing the set to be understood as compatible components of one larger place.

**This completes the first segment of the Audio Tour.**

**Return now to the area in front of the Lodge (on the ocean side), where the trail out to Bihler Point meets the main trail that heads north along the coast (towards the Black Point Beach access stairs). There, Segment B will begin.**