

Location
4,000 acres along the Sonoma County

Population
1,300 people (permanent residents)

Client
Oceanic Properties

Designers
Lawrence Halprin (master planner); Joseph Esherick (architect); and MLTW, the architectural firm of Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker

Design Period
1963 -1965 (planning and first structures) to the present



Sketch: Lawrence Halprin
The Sea Ranch is located along the rocky coast of northern Sonoma County



Photo: Lawrence Halprin Collection, the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania
The design of the buildings was influenced by the character of the coastal landscape



Photo: Lawrence Halprin Collection, the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania
Houses were placed between the natural hedgerows for wind protection and give ocean views



Photo: Lawrence Halprin Collection, the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania
Halprin spent much time studying the local ecology to design a community immersed in nature

THE SEA RANCH PLANNING PRECEDENT



History & Design

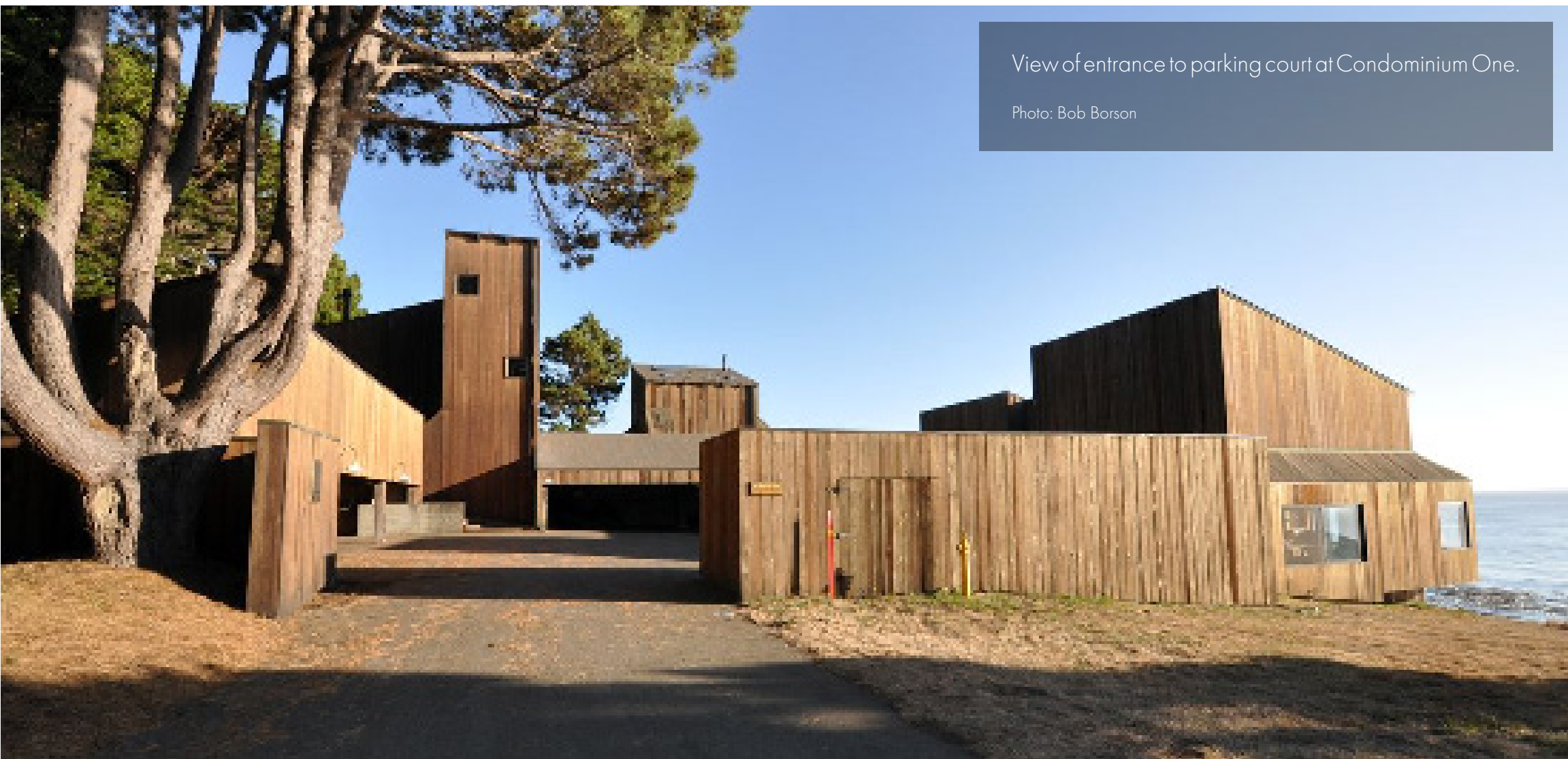
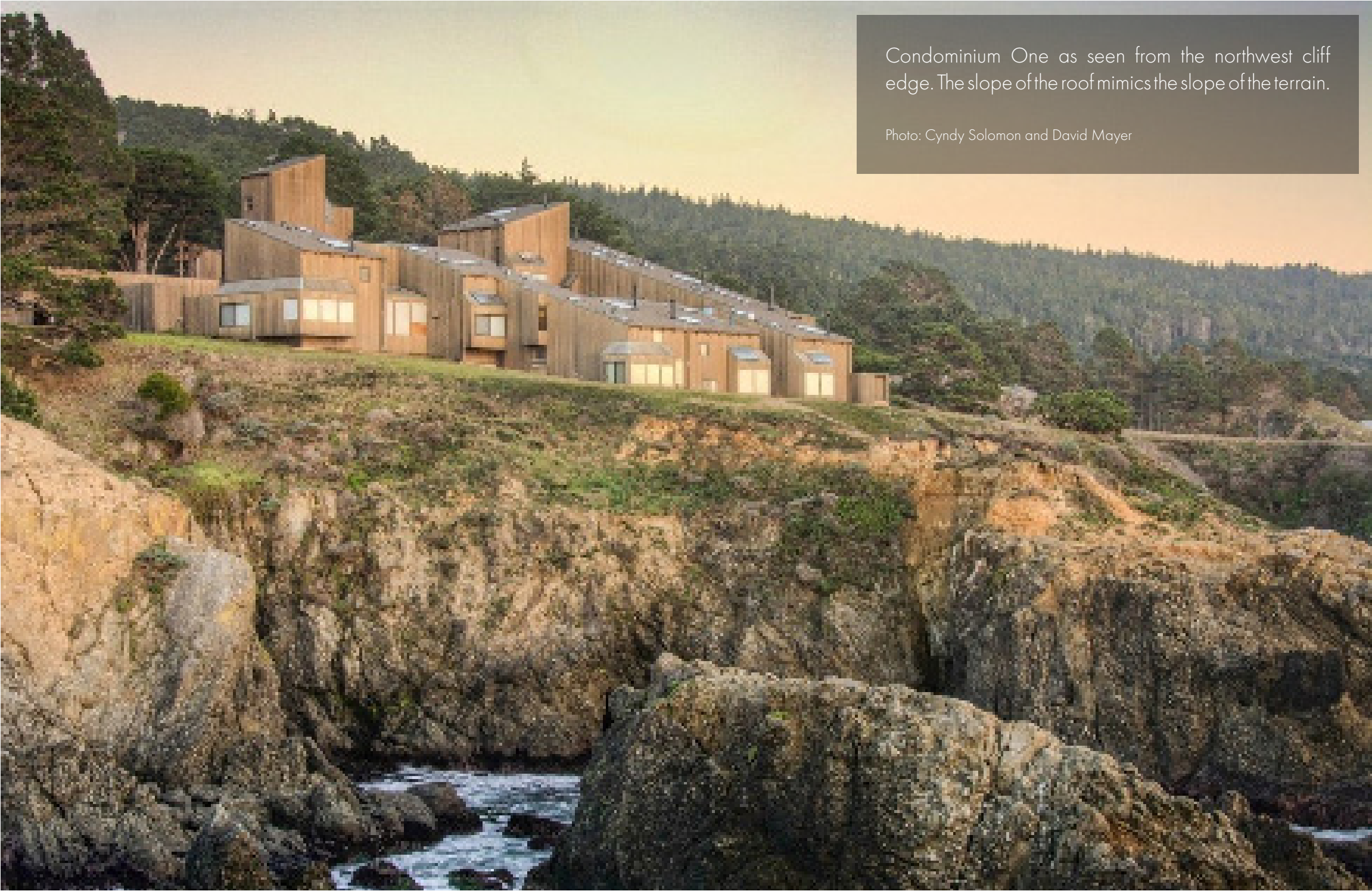
The Sea Ranch stretches along ten miles of the rugged north coast of Sonoma County, reaching from the cliff edges by the sea to the top of a forested ridge a mile or so inland. The terrain is defined by the inexorable slope of the land towards the sea – steep in the hills, more gentle in the coastal plain just above the cliffs.

In 1963 the land was mostly inhabited, marked by hedgerows, grassland, rock outcroppings, rustic fences, and the occasional barn, when it was sold to Oceanic Properties, a development company. Their original intention was to build a complete new town. But the site's remote location led them to develop the project as a second-home, vacation community.

The master plan was developed by Larry Halprin, the landscape architect. The premise was to relate the placement of the buildings to the grand scope of the landscape – its folds, slope, vegetation, and the geometry of the hedgerows and fences. The idea was that the new buildings would become a part of the landscape, but not necessarily subsumed into it. In addition, the new houses would be clustered together leaving half the land open and under common ownership.

In 1964 three demonstration projects were built: a store and a group of houses by Joseph Esherick and a ten-unit condominium project, Condominium One by MLTW. These first experiments established the basic parameters of a design vocabulary that would ultimately become standardized throughout The Sea Ranch: shed roofs with no eaves to deflect the wind, vertical redwood siding, and large punched windows. As the project progressed, the design elements broadened to include different height limits depending on location (whether close to or far away from the water); cars screened from view; no reflective surfaces or bright colors, and so on.

Regulations on the landscaping elements are stricter: no lawns, formal gardens, or masses of flowers with “conspicuous blooming performance.” These restrictions again were to ensure that the natural landscape was minimally disrupted.



Condominium One

This complex is actually a group of ten residences and was the first residential building erected at The Sea Ranch, with construction beginning in 1964. The individual units, each following a generally similar, multistory cubic design, are arranged informally around an open courtyard that gives access to them. The stepped plan and section – the units follow the shallow slope of the coastal plain up a small knoll – allow each unit to have unspoiled views of the ocean.

The complex is not treated as a collection of differentiated units, but instead as a unity with an all-encompassing sloping roof, broken in parts, that matches the slope of the site. Bay windows, other projections, and indentations modulate the building edge, which is clad in vertical board siding and allowed to weather naturally, the thing reads as a whole.

Writing in The Sea Ranch, the architect Donlyn Lyndon notes that the overall volume of the complex “is like a large, rectilinear landform, a wooden escarpment with edges that move back and forth like the boundaries of a cove.”

Inserted into the tower on the inside of the individual unit is what Charles Moore called an “aedicule,” which means “little temple” in Latin. It is a tower within a tower, a freestanding set of tiny platforms used as bedrooms, with the highest one accessed by ladders. See unit diagram at bottom middle.



Unit Diagrams

