

“Living Lightly on the Land”



The Sea Ranch, Fernhill at Point Dume, and the Preservation of California's Coastline

History of the Designed Landscape – Final Presentation

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Introduction

This document analyzes the architectural, environmental, and emotional connections between The Sea Ranch—a 10-mile coastal community in Sonoma County—and Fernhill at Point Dume in Malibu, California. While The Sea Ranch represents a unified vision for community living, Point Dume developed more organically, shaped by individual efforts. The following sections will compare these locations, emphasizing the influence of The Sea Ranch’s innovative approach on the lifestyle at Point Dume.

Life at Fernhill

Situated away from the bluff on Point Dume, Fernhill occupies a modest lot among the grand estates of Malibu. Hidden behind a weathered cedar fence and surrounded by lush Star Jasmine and Honeysuckle vines, the property is made up of several simple dwellings: the former tool shed transformed into the River Rock House where we lived, the main house, and neighboring cottages. These homes cluster around shared spaces, including a greenhouse, a garden with raised beds (*image1*), an open lawn, and a spacious wooden deck. Community life at Fernhill centered on these common areas, with days spent gardening with Jennifer and our lab Bodie, visiting Little Dume Beach, or wandering the paths of the Point Dume Preserve looking for migrating whales. (see “Life at Fernhill and Point Dume” on the following page).

Parallels in Development

Although The Sea Ranch and Point Dume differ in their methods of development, they share several underlying principles that have shaped their respective communities, including preservation of the land, community living (in the case of Fernhill in particular), and shared access to the coast.

This section provides an overview of how the core tenets and innovative design strategies established by the original Sea Ranch community influenced the lifestyle and community formation at Point Dume. By examining these parallels, the analysis reveals how an intentional, landscape-focused planning philosophy echoes in a place that evolved through more organic means.



Image 1: Fernhill Property, Dave Elder, 1994

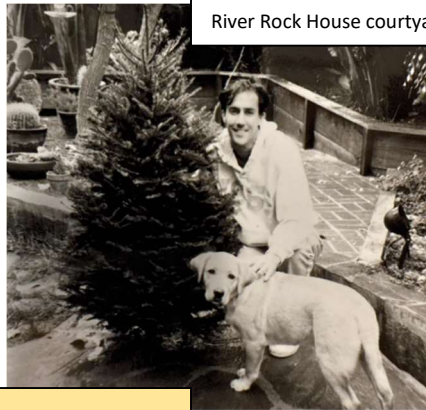
Totem pole “folly” protects the community raised beds at Fernhill

Life at Fernhill and Point Dume - 1994

Path from River Rock House to greenhouse at Fernhill



River Rock House courtyard at Fernhill with Bodie



Little Dume – South facing view

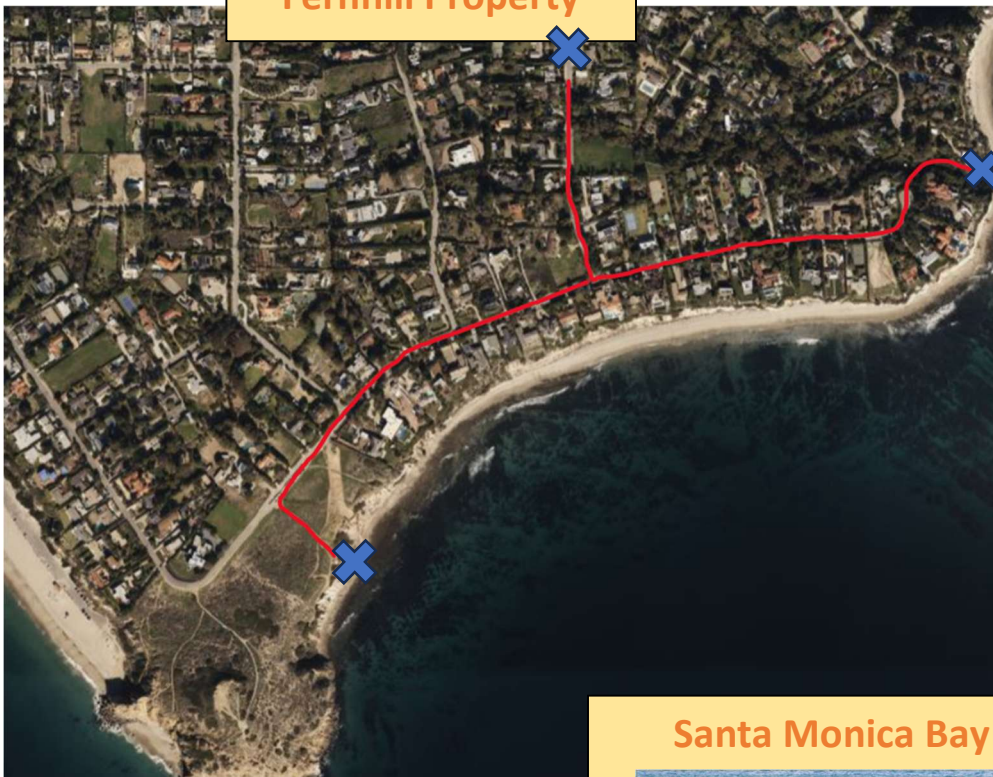


Little Dume Beach



Gathering at Little Dume Beach

Fernhill Property



Santa Monica Bay

Point Dume Preserve



South-facing view from Point Dume

Gray whale migration



Images of Life at Fernhill on Point Dume reflect the community, open space, and land preservation concepts that were enshrined by The Sea Ranch. The red line shows the streets and paths from Fernhill to Little Dume Beach and Point Dume Preserve

The Sea Ranch - Origins

The Sea Ranch, located along the Sonoma County coast in Northern California, was conceived in the early 1960s as an experiment in environmentally sensitive development. Reflecting the social and political mores of the era, The Sea Ranch epitomized the rejection of the burgeoning post-war era housing seen in places like the San Fernando Valley in Southern California and Levittown in Pennsylvania and New York (*image 2*). Architect and planner Al Boeke, working with developer Oceanic Properties and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, envisioned a community that blended with the rugged landscape rather than dominating it or covering it with a blanket of homes. Boeke brought together a



Image 2: Aerial photograph of Levittown, New York, c.1950.

team of other visionary architects as well, including Charles Moore, and Joseph Esherick whose designs emphasized natural materials, low profiles, and structures that blended with the surrounding meadows, cliffs, and forests. An example would include the requirement that houses have wood siding that would gray with age, further disappearing into the natural environment.

The first cluster of condominiums, completed in 1965, became a model of “living lightly on the land”, as Sea Ranch was certainly influenced by Halprin’s ecological planning, which prioritized 3 concepts: open space, shared landscapes, and protection of coastal access.

Where Levittown spread without end, Sea Ranch sought harmony with the land

These three concepts are best seen not in the architecture, but in the overall site plan itself. Establishing large setbacks and even placing the homes behind the existing hedgerow left large swaths of open, wild land between the cliff and the homes (*images 3&4*). These are referred to as meadows, serving as habitat for native plants and wildlife, and as natural movement corridors. Maintaining this open buffer between homes and the cliffs protects biodiversity, keeps the land more ecologically intact, and ensures that everyone...residents, visitors, and even motorists on the highway could experience the natural setting rolling out toward the Pacific.

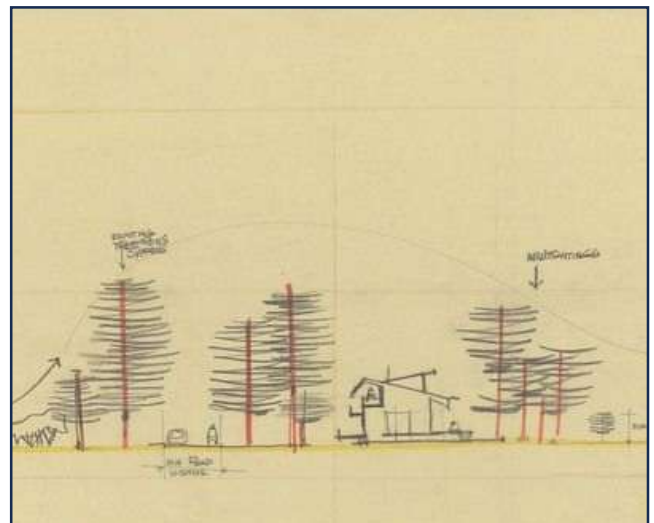


Image3: Lawrence Halprin, Sea Ranch sketch, c.1962. UC Berkeley EDA.

An early sketch of the Sea Ranch by Lawrence Halprin depicting how the land, wind, and sea would dictate the design

The Sea Ranch - Site Plans and Enlargements

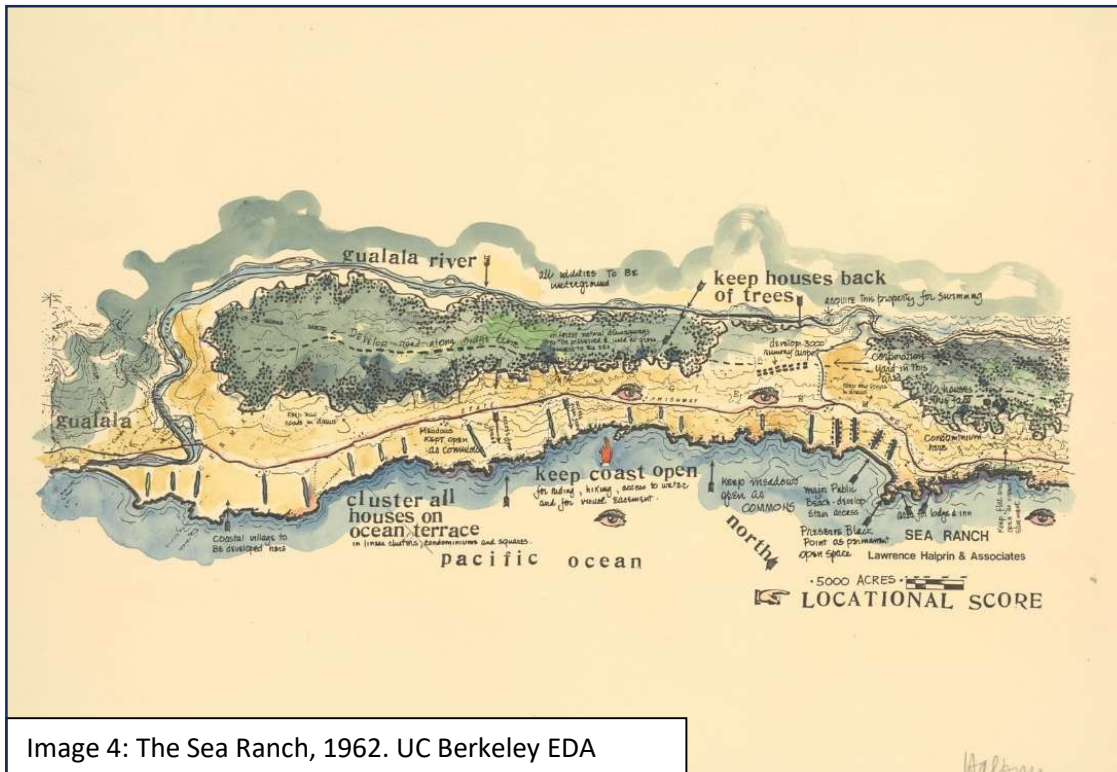


Image 4: The Sea Ranch, 1962. UC Berkeley EDA

This early drawing reveals a vision of a community that is inextricably enmeshed with the land, whose architecture is dictated by the wind, the meadows, and ocean.

Enlargement 1: Condominium Master Plan

Condominiums were considered by the founders to be space-saving “clusters” of homes and were created to consolidate the overall footprint of homes on the coastal bluff, thereby protecting views and open space. The image below calls out all the condominium buildings at The Sea Ranch, while the following section dives into the iconic “Condominium 1”

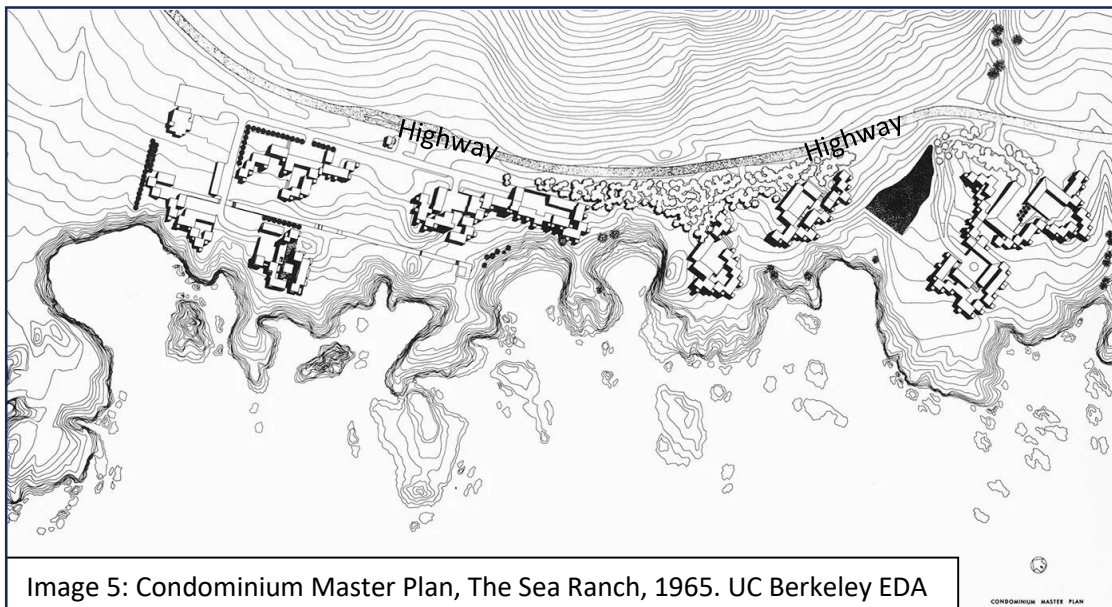


Image 5: Condominium Master Plan, The Sea Ranch, 1965. UC Berkeley EDA

Condominium Master Plan showing the layout of condominiums at the Sea Ranch. Homes and cabins are intended to remain Northeast of the highway

Enlargement 2: Condominium 1 - Innovation in Community Living

The Condominium 1 building was designed to set the standard for what a structure on the Sea Ranch could be (*image 6*). Further, they were intended to encourage communal living. Lawrence Halprin, who lived on a kibbutz for a portion of his life was quoted as saying; “In a sense it’s a collective, it’s very similar to when you were in a kibbutz”.

Very few builders or architects had built condominiums before, making this yet another groundbreaking milestone for The Sea Ranch. The concept was to cluster units together, rather than filling the entire cliffside with individual homes. Like other structures to follow on the property, it was the environment that informed the geometry and the design of Condominium 1. Where one building may have cutouts added to take advantage of the view, another might have a tower made taller to block the wind (*image 7*). The plantings and even the contours of the property fell right in line with this philosophy, wherein the original hedgerow along the cliff was expanded and more densely planted to block the wind, and the dirt that was dug out for the pool was used to create large grassy berms for the same reason.

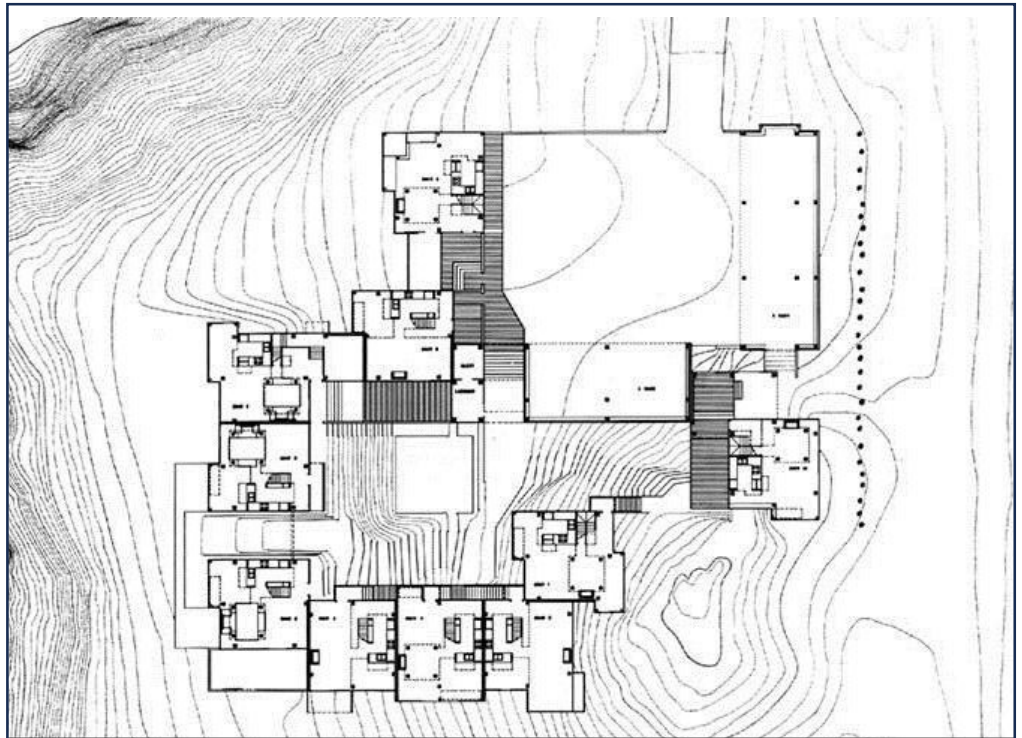


Image 6: Condominium 1 floor plan, The Sea Ranch, 1965. UC Berkeley EDA

Site plan drawing of Condominium 1, where all units have ocean views, and center around a communal square, evoking, in the words of Lawrence Halprin, “the feeling of a kibbutz”

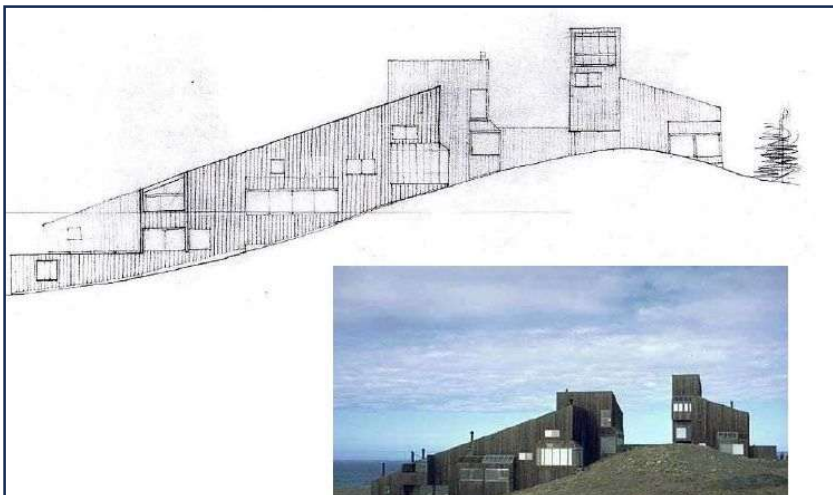


Image 7: Condominium 1 sketch and photograph, The Sea Ranch, 1965. Courtesy UC Berkeley Environmental Design Archives.

Condominium 1 Elevations: Joseph Esherik’s vision became a blueprint for living with the sea. Even units at the back of the Condominium building took advantage of the slope and elevated design to capture the views

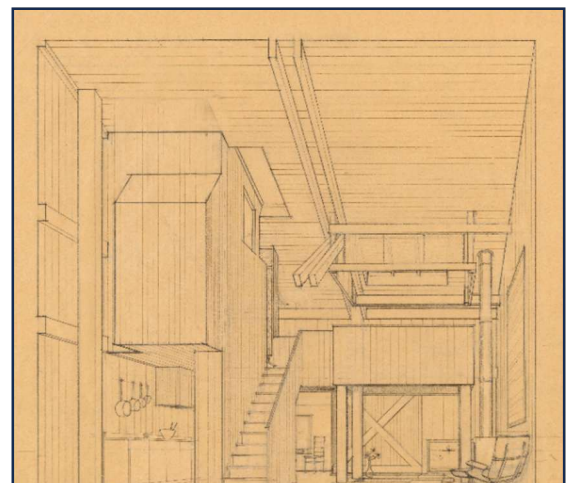


Image 8: Condominium 1 interior sketch, The Sea Ranch, 1965. UC Berkeley

Interior Sketch: While the collective had a uniform “barn-like” look, each unit was individually designed to reflect the tastes of the resident

SITE DETAIL - SPECIFIC FEATURE

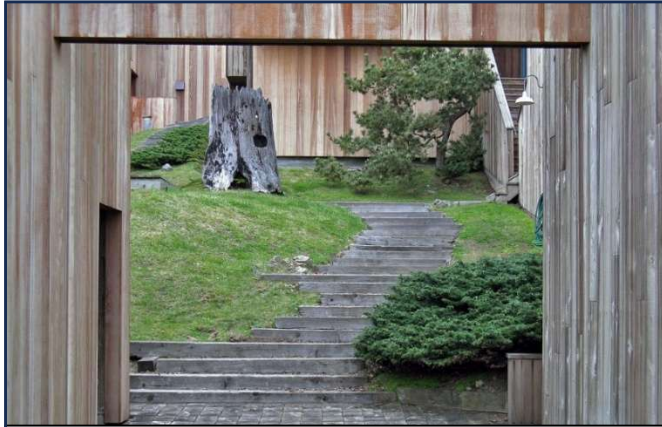


Image 9: Landscape detail, The Sea Ranch, c.1965.
Courtesy UC Berkeley Environmental Design

There is a natural simplicity that The Sea Ranch evokes. This image of an offset, rustic wooden staircase that disappears into the landscape was seemingly quite deliberate, but presents as an almost natural occurrence. The use of an old tree stump blurs the line between art and nature, and acts as perfect balance to the Juniper bush in the forefront.

Impact on Coastal Development and Point Dume

The Sea Ranch's democratic ideals faced legal challenges over public shoreline access. Ultimately, the California Coastal Alliance secured public access rights through Proposition 20 in 1972, setting a precedent for the entire state. Without The Sea Ranch's example, earlier plans for developments like the Malibu Riviera, (image 10) might have altered the character and lifestyle at Point Dume.

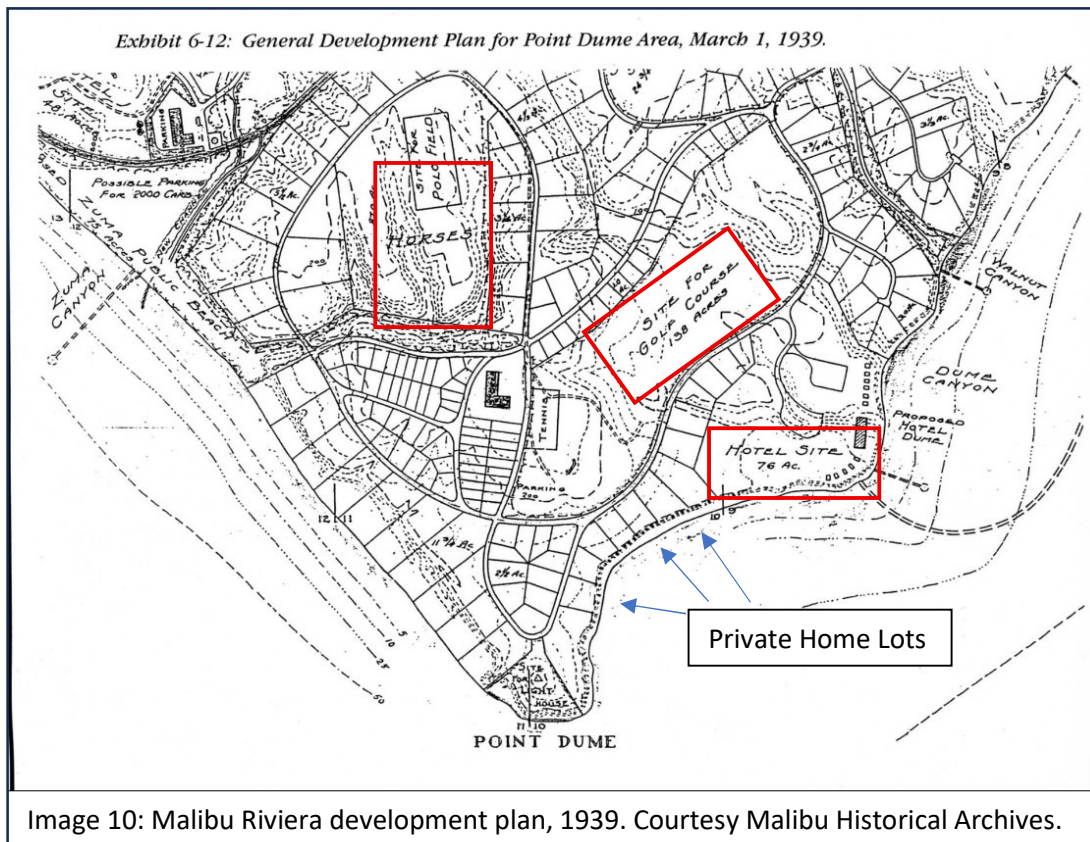


Image 10: Malibu Riviera development plan, 1939. Courtesy Malibu Historical Archives.

The plans for Malibu Riviera and others like it remained an idea on paper. Its hotels, fairways, and private cliffs were undone by the wisdom and legislation born at The Sea Ranch, leaving the Point Dume Nature Preserve to remain wild, open, and accessible

Aerial Views of the Sea Ranch and Point Dume Today

Aerial view of The Sea Ranch, c. 2010. UC Berkeley Environmental Design Archives



The Sea Ranch, famously wild, open, and it set the stage for a beautiful and accessible coastal California



Aerial view of Point Dume, Malibu. Courtesy California State Parks

Point Dume, preserved bluffs in the foreground spared from resort development, ensuring beach access is available to all, and all attributable to The Sea Ranch

References & Image Credits

References

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