

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

Written and Narrated by Donlyn Lyndon

SEGMENT C: Sea Ranch Meadow, the Esherick House, Brigantine Hedgerow, Moonraker Recreation Center and back to the edge of Black Point Prairie

This segment of the tour is on private Sea Ranch Trails reserved for Association members, their guests, Sea Ranch Lodge guests, and visitors accompanied by docents. Visitors who are not guests or accompanied by a docent may choose to proceed to the beginning of Segment D of the Tour which continues on public trails. Begin Segment D at the ranch gate located near **D1H**.

Begin Segment C on the private Sea Ranch Trails at Trail Post #1 (beyond the Black Point Beach access stairs).

From Sea Ranch Trail Post 1, the sign noting the beginning of the private Sea Ranch Trails, you can see how these buildings of simple shape become houses that offer unique experiences, **C1**.



C1 Esherick Hedgerow Houses seen near the Sea Ranch Trail Post #1

Set low in the land, their living room windows peer out across the tops of the grasses of the meadow and on to the sea; on the ocean side bays project out to gather views that can come in closer to the body. While on the southern, garden side, sliding doors gather sun into the

(Visit The Sea Ranch Association www.tsra.org for downloadable files)

spaces of the house as they open to nurtured and protected spaces outdoors.

Of equal or even greater significance is the arrangement of houses within the meadow. The shape of the meadow they look out upon has come to be termed "iconic" Sea Ranch Meadow, as it was the arrangement that Halprin saw as the model for larger planning layouts to follow. Houses followed the hedgerows on either side, and the center was left to the grasses for all to enjoy. No houses were built along the ocean front of the meadow, where conventional wisdom would have placed highly coveted "ocean front lots." Instead, all the houses have outlook across the meadow to the ocean and its sky reflections, sunsets and storms. Later in Segment C of the walk we will view down this meadow to get a sense of what it promised.

TSRA Members, guests and those accompanied by docents may proceed along The Sea Ranch Bluff Trail out into the meadow, passing between several of the hedgerow houses and the bluff. Out of respect for privacy, please stay on the designated trail.

Past the upended log marker and near the first wooden plank bridge, stop a moment to pay attention to the stream below and trace its flow back towards the smallest of the hedgerow houses, which is also the one farthest out since the approach to it crosses over that stream.



C2 Joseph Esherick's own house, among the Hedgerow Houses facing Sea Ranch Meadow

This house **C2** was Joseph Esherick's own, and it is a marvel of quiet ingenuity. With only an 875 square foot print it has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and living, cooking and eating spaces — all skillfully arranged on several levels within its compact volume. From the meadow you can discern, by its brick flue, that the fireplace is placed on the meadow wall and that the simple volume of the house rises up from that wall with a small segment protruding out from the side, which tops a glass enclosed entry just next to the point where the stream passes next to the house and another small plank bridge forms the approach. To one side of the chimney, long windows barely skimming the tops of the grass reveal that its construction is set partly into the ground so that the rooms have a profound sense of being part of the meadow. Windows on the perpendicular wall are proportioned more like a picture as they look back across the face of neighboring houses to the silhouette of Black Point.

On the lowest, south-facing side of the house, **C3H**, which you cannot see from the trail, there are sliding glass doors that open directly to terrace at the side of the stream.



C3H View from the south, private side, of the Esherick house entry

©Jim Alinder

The higher segments of the walls on the south have tall narrow windows on their edges so light can wash along the walls to illuminate the rooms. Over the entry porch are small and narrow slit windows at the corner, one vertical, one horizontal — the better to see framed glimpses of the sea, meadow and sky from the sleeping loft above the kitchen. In their proportions these windows pre-figured the miniature vertical and horizontal panoramics so favored now by users of digital cameras.

The Esherick House, like others in the row, is clad with wood shingles; both walls and roof are here, while among other homes some were

covered by sod roofs, others in shingles. Some underlayment materials for sod roofs proved after a couple of decades to be unreliable, and those roofs were replaced in most cases by impervious materials; the wood shingle roofs were replaced more recently with composition shingles as required by subsequent Sonoma County fire code rulings. But the variations in roof slope remain, lower pitch for those that were sod, higher pitch for those that had been covered with wood shingles. These variations in slope cause the low roofs to rise above the meadow in shifting planes, akin to the irregular surfaces of the grassy meadow before them.

Look now across the meadow, to the house at the ocean end of the opposite hedgerow. It was also designed by Joseph Esherick (his last) and his firm Esherick Homsey, Dodge and Davis. He worked with the same vocabulary of forms and materials, here pitching the roofs back up towards the hedgerow that was already providing wind deflection. The volumes are angled slightly one from the others, to adjust to the site and views across the bluffs back to Black Point. These volumes with some glass links between them also form a courtyard that becomes an extension of the spaces inside. The house takes its place easily and naturally within the landscape, a claim hard to make for several of the houses farther along the Brigantine Hedgerow, which forms the other side of the meadow. This house and a few others I'll mention later, are oriented to the hedgerow so they become easily a part of the larger figure of architecture and landscape together.

Members continuing on the Bluff Trail across the meadow, first reach a stand of bluff cypress. There are many such bluff top cypress clusters along the coast planted both to stabilize the cliffs and to offer intermittent windshelter to hikers on the trail. Many, like this one, form tunnels of tangled branches that are quite amazing and a rich source of habitat.

To the right, just as the trail passes into the bluff cypress, is a closer view of the house **C4** we described before, edging a view back up Sea Ranch Meadow to the slopes and forest beyond.



C4 House designed by Joseph Esherick, edging the north side of Sea Ranch Meadow

Proceeding on through the Cypress, past Brigantine Hedgerow, and out beyond the two houses nearby, Members may see the next meadows, C5.



C5 Meadows and point beyond Brigantine Reach

The nearest meadow has lines of houses following the hedgerow on the far side, one aberrant cluster in the center and a strong path of willows and riparian foliage reaching down through the meadow from the forested slopes above. Out on the bluff point of the next meadow beyond is one of the very few houses at The Sea Ranch that are set out beyond the coastal Bluff Trail. This one stands in pyramidal form settling down on a promontory of its own. When it was first built in 1968, it was more like the indented landforms of the coast, with a large open deck facing south and wrapped against strong winds by the enclosed rooms around it. The deck was later itself enclosed with walls and roof of glass that diminish the particularity of the place, although perhaps offering more predictable comforts. The original house was designed in 1968 by Gerald McCue then a colleague on the faculty at Berkeley.

Behind you, on the north face of the Brigantine Hedgerow is the latest house that I have designed, **C6**, completed in 2014.



C6 Houses along north side of Brigantine Hedgerow; house on the right by Donlyn Lyndon with Frank Architects

Moving back to the Brigantine Reach Hedgerow (TSR Trail Post 3), proceed up the path between the tall Monterey Cypress trunks, photo C7.



C7 Cypress trunks of Brigantine Hedgerow path

This is one of the few signature hedgerows that have a Sea Ranch Trail running up through the line of trees, a very special experience of being between these very tall columns as you move up the trail. You will note that to the south of the path there is large open space between

these trees and the road and that it has rows of young saplings paralleling the old rows of trees. These were planted in 2013 as part of a program of renewing the Signature Hedgerows as they near the end of their natural life. In time they will grow to a height that can replace the original trees. Overtime, as they age further and decline, the elder trees will be removed. This program of rehabilitation and work in the meadow and forest called for in the Fuels Management Plan are two of the most significant programs of landscape maintenance continually managed by The Sea Ranch Association.

The hedgerow trail encounters two small roads, which cross through the trees to provide access for clusters of houses facing the northern meadow.

At TSR Trail Post 3A turn into Bowsprit Close. From here you can now see the willow riparian beyond, and the spaces nearby formed by secondary cypress growth, as well as the house noted earlier that I have designed, **C8**, with two wings of rooms forming an enclosure made with the trees. A many-windowed tower at their intersection gathers sun into the heart of the house at all times of day, and solar panels on the roof provide electricity.



C8 Bowsprit House (Donlyn Lyndon and Frank Architects)

Continue up the trail to its end or move out along Brigantine Reach to the intersection with Moonraker Road. Here you will see to the north, the Moonraker Recreation Center, **C9**.



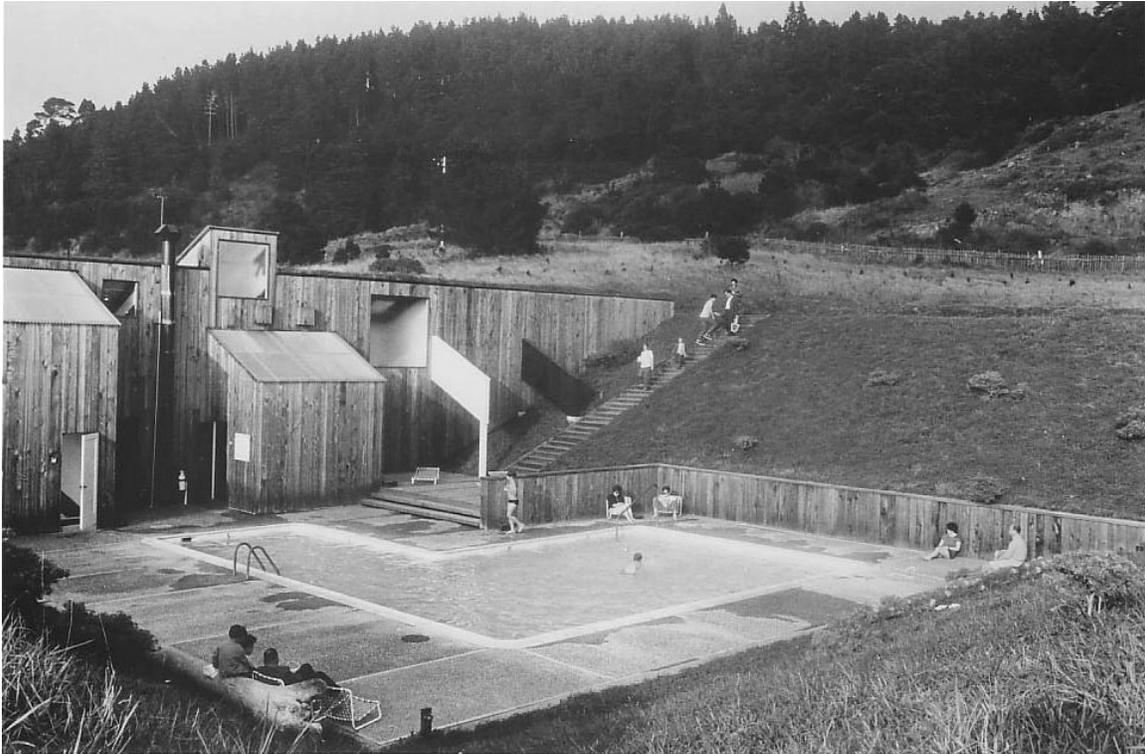
C9 Moonraker Recreation Center (MLTW & Larry Halprin)

Or, actually you won't see much of it, only some earth berms (or mounds), some parking, a bike rack and picnic table, and some ill-considered fences. If you look closely you'll see a small piece of building rising behind the mounds and a window showing a white wall with a red arrow pointing to the sun.

You won't see more because the swimming pool and tennis courts are recessed behind the earth berms so that they will become integrated with the land rather than set upon it. (It's another early MLTW work collaborating with Larry Halprin as landscape architect.)

The berms of earth form two rectangular enclosures that enfold the small swimming pool and the tennis court, out of sight and protected from the wind. More accurately, the pool is surrounded on three sides

by berms and on the fourth, windiest side, by a high wooden wall, **C10H**, that runs straight across the opening intersecting with the land.



C10H Swimming pool at Moonraker Recreation Center Photo by Lisa Trumpler

The entrance to this complex (for Sea Ranch Association Members and their guests) is on the north side, through a wooden sliding door painted white. It's another passage into a transformed world, usually the lapping sounds of swimmers immersed in a sparkling pool or the prospect of sunbathing within a quiet wind-free space, surrounded by banks of grass. The tall redwood wall through which you have come has wood clad buttresses (originally painted black and white) and sheds projecting from its surface roofed with corrugated plastic, which house the men's and women's changing rooms.

That previously mentioned red arrow showing on the wall through the one window (high so as not to display the changing taking place inside) is a glimmer of what happens inside, in a further transformation.

Inside, **C11**, is primarily white, not surprising, and bright (which is surprising given the absence of windows, but of course there are the

translucent roofs above) and boldly colorful. Yes boldly: red walls with white circles, white walls with wide blue stripes and rose stripes, a spot of sun yellow ceiling. What is most surprising though is the way these shapes and colors are deployed. They make this tiny space expansive, with half-circles matched to align across spaces and forms thrusting and moving along the walls. These were the work of Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, the graphic designer of The Sea Ranch logo. She, Charles Moore and Bill Turnbull have invested this little building with extraordinary ingenuity and energy. These graphics were also widely noted and published as SuperGraphics, a term that came into extensive use in the 70's. Books that have been published on the genre credit this as the place where it began.



C11H Supergraphic in men's locker room at Moonraker Recreation Center
© Jim Alinder

Return on Moonraker Road to a position across from the road marker for Captain's Close. Note first the view down across the open Sea Ranch Meadow to the ocean and the houses ranged along its edges, **C12**.



C12 Sea Ranch Meadow seen from Moonraker Road

This is the outlook retained by the Sea Ranch Meadow layout, and it requires continuing care to keep it from filling in with brush or being blocked by trees.



C13 Binker Barn House on Sea Ranch Meadow (MLTW Moore/Turnbull)

The second house to the right, C13, is a slightly remodeled Binker Barn House, built in the early 70's by Matthew Sylvania, the builder for all the original buildings, including Condominium One, the Lodge, the Hedgerow Houses, Moonraker Recreation Center, and the barns and utility buildings built by Oceanic Properties.

This house was designed by Bill Turnbull of MLTW Moore/ Turnbull. It is a good example of this house type, which reaches back to vernacular forms and uses the barn-like structure to remarkably good effect. Note that the pitch of the gable roof is steeper than on many others and more in keeping with traditional forms. It gives a sharp discipline to the shape, and the bay windows and shed roof extensions that happen around all sides of the house, to capture outlook, provide porches, extra rooms or storage, always connect the central recognizable barn form back to the ground in ways that are particular to its site. There were seventeen of these "Binker Barns" (named after the realtor "Snap" Binker with whom Matt Sylvania partnered in their development) built on The Sea Ranch, and they always stand in place on their sites nicely.

The fourth house down the row, **C14**, is one that was designed by Obie Bowman, another of the early architects at The Sea Ranch.



C14 House by Obie Bowman on Sea Ranch Meadow

Bowman was first noted as the architect for The Sea Ranch Walk-in Cabins of 1972, farther up the coast and in the forest. They are wonderful small volumes set among the trees, with cars and parking places left on the hillside; no paving, cars or parking places are present among the cluster of small houses.

This house, from the late 70's, sits nicely along the hedgerow, helping to form the edge of Sea Ranch Meadow. Solar panels have been added, yet the big roof and large windows and deck speak clearly of its special place at The Sea Ranch along the side of an open meadow, capturing the southern sun both indoors and out, oriented to parallel the hedgerow behind.

Looking back up the meadow towards the forested hills, this is a good place to see where the forest comes down towards the meadow, C15.



C15 Forest edge and houses along upper reaches of Sea Ranch Meadow

Highway 1 at this point passes between the hillside forest and groups of trees that were either planted by Oceanic or took their place across the road by natural succession, most vigorously along streams descending through and into the meadow. Houses here either follow the slope of the land in consistent ways that are both logical and purposeful, usually paralleling the slope, or are clustered within trees that occupy the upper reaches of the meadows.

The largest of these houses, best viewed from Moonraker Road along the way to the intersection with Black Point Reach, **C16**, was also designed by Joseph Esherick & Associates, initially as a residence/office accessed off Highway 1.



C16 "Doctors' quarters" building by Joseph Esherick & Associates

It has served at various points as a doctor's office, the general manager's office and residence, and as a private home. Its large long roof sloping up towards the hills sits well in the landscape still and set the theme for houses in this section.

Continue along Moonraker Road to the area around the intersection with Black Point Reach. It is possible to gain a glimpse of the amount of engineering and drainage control with trenches and culverts near paved and graded roads that has been necessary to make these areas suitable and to maintain their effectiveness, even while retaining a commitment to minimum disturbance of the natural conditions as for example in photo **C17**.



C17 Drainage path by gate marking entry to Lodge properties and Black Point Hedgerow

Turning and looking down Black Point Reach, which runs parallel to the signature Black Point Hedgerow planted early in the twentieth century, you can appreciate the linear geometry which the hedgerow generated for this area and the houses that backed up to it.

This is the end of Segment C, and the gate marks the edge of the Sea Ranch Lodge Property where Segment D of the tour begins.