



THE REAL RANCH

My first visit to Don and Sharon Fraser's Alder Creek Ranch was sixteen years ago when I went to pick up a McNabb puppy Don had agreed to find for me. I had driven through the property many times and occasionally stopped to visit, but today I was going for another reason. I have long been enthused with the ways in which buildings add to or subtract from their setting and I thought Alder Creek Ranch might have some positive lessons in this regard.

As I descended the driveway off Highway One I was deeply moved by what I saw. Here was as wonderful an architectural setting as one could ask for. But why was I experiencing this for the first time? The eight buildings with their working hands quality reached well beyond my best architectural efforts at The Sea Ranch. It was perfectly clear to me that these were buildings of great integrity, unpretentious beauty, and as artful as they were utilitarian.

Individually and collectively the buildings possess a sense of belonging with the landscape, perhaps as though Mother Nature had sown some building seeds. Alder Creek Ranch's house, garage, barn, and other outbuildings are arranged in a row angling out from a wind protecting ridge which is banded with dense coastal shrubbery along its lower half. The house, at the point of intersection, faces south and is obviously the heart of this partnership between ranch and nature.

This house is the symbolic steward of the accompanying landscape. No longer original, it now has a roof of new composition shingles and most of the painted board siding has been covered with cedar shingles. Still, the progression from house to covered porches, to open decks, to lawns defined by picket fences and hedges, to pastures and outbuildings, to the meadows and ridges beyond creates a richness of transition (from man-built to nature-created) that is rare in today's construction efforts.

Fruit and other exotic trees, shrubs, roses and so forth stand shoulder to shoulder with native willows and cypress in a landscape that would now seem somehow

incomplete should one group exist without the other. The continuity of nature remains unviolated and commingling takes place much like an accent or emphasis in the organic scheme of things. The man-made is not subservient, not solicitous – simply pragmatic and appropriate.

My observations of this site are not just another vote of praise for indigenous buildings but rather an homage to such buildings' sometimes awesome ability to become a sympathetic and often inspiring part of the natural landscape. These compositions are not the work of sensitive architects or land artists. They were built by ranchers armed with intuition about the natural world, common sense, traditional know-how and straightforward, genuine needs.

Seldom concerned with architectural fashion, these buildings are able to incorporate those ideas and systems that work best; the aesthetics seem able to take care of themselves. The real ranch outperforms all contemporary coastal architecture in just about any comparison: land relationship, integrity, form, economy of effort and cost, and sense of belonging.

How can this be? Of course a direct comparison today is not entirely fair. The real ranch has advantages: half a century or more of weathering, large landholdings, diversity of scale and function, and no building agencies to satisfy. Significant advantages, yes. But not sufficient to explain the onslaught of vapid buildings we see rising mercilessly around us.

Our subdivision houses from Fort Bragg to Bodega Bay fall short even on their own terms. The idea that shed roofs and weathered wood will bring harmony does not reach deeply enough. Ignorance and even not caring have become earmarks of the construction and design industry. Over time we have developed contemporary clichés for architecture and the rote use of shed roofs and weathered wood, for example, do not solve the problems faced by placing a building onto a site and into the setting.

The coast is being populated with a recent surge of immigrants from places as diverse as New York and Bloomington, Chicago and San Jose. These newcomers bring something of these places (and fantasy of a dream house) with them, regardless of the coastal landscape and lifestyle. Consequently, their buildings do not necessarily have anything to do with their settings.

Also, when Alder Creek Ranch was built, there were fewer material options. Today, we can deal with environmental and technical problems through endless systems, devices and facsimiles. So, we are faced with a lack of a unified regional character and a lack of agreement on the intentions on how buildings relate to one another and to the landscape.

Following the status quo is a prudent route for developers. If a developer takes risks and takes his time, he increases his chances of being bushwhacked. The Sea Ranch versus the California Coastal Commission is a good example. Architects are underpaid

and have families to feed. After trying for awhile most are worn down, then give up and perhaps lose their heartfelt instincts. They are worn down by all the complex pressures of bureaucracy, limited funds, and business.

It would be encouraging if all architects began a project thinking holistically – that is about site and scope. But it takes a great deal of time and commitment to develop projects in this manner. In the office, most end up working on what they have in front of them, trying to get the windows aligned and the façade reasonably proportioned. To simplify the task most designs are only considered within the context of the property lines (or worse, only to the drip lines), rather than as far as the eye sees. The result is all too often another bit of affront to the overall town or landscape.

Design committees and other review agencies are just as shortsighted and can usually be pacified with a few facade changes to give the "box" a "look" of interest. So much for professionalism, so much for design review. And the owner seldom notices, either he or she has more pressing concerns, is not visually oriented, or has become conditioned to mediocrity.

Too few producing architects have perceptible commitment to, or concern for, the overall landscape; more often than not the same is true of their buildings. Buildings are an inevitable expression and record of man's values, attitudes, and beliefs. The best architecture, I believe, comes from a love of architecture, which incorporates an inherent love of life and the natural world. A love of the land and what humans can do in concert with it, not in spite of it, is the starting point for buildings that are truly interesting and in tune with nature. The land then never loses its presence in sight of the buildings and the buildings take their place on the land accordingly.

Planners, developers, architects, and owners' lack of respect for the larger community and landscape fabric has resulted in the recent proliferation of design review committees. In theory the design review process assures the individual owner that certain values and standards will be maintained community wide. Usually, these are philosophical as well as visual.

However, design committees find it difficult to mix the two and usually limit themselves to reviewing projects in terms of their exterior appointments, perpetuating too much concern with exteriors and not enough with intentions and physical relationships. The results are buildings that are "skin deep." Buildings that add to the pervasive, para-suburban character of most new rural developments – despite well intended design committee restrictions, philosophies, reviews, rejections and re-reviews.

Some of these buildings superficially fit preconceived notions of building in harmony with nature and community, but because they lack commitment to nature and community, they lack a convincing sense of belonging. Despite the weathered boards and conforming roof slopes, if creators don't embrace the land, neither will their buildings. Alder Creek Ranch has a sense of belonging because there is little we could change without losing something. It's just right the way it is.

Our country has an incomparable heritage of vigorous, nature conscious, contextual landmarks: H.H. Richardson's New England stone buildings; Louis Sullivan's Midwestern urban masterpieces; and Frank Lloyd Wright's inspired works nationwide. These were architects who loved America. They expressed the sovereignty of the individual while remaining responsible to the larger social and physical context. They found inspiration in America's natural heritage rather than the classicism of Mother Europe.

But not since the death of Wright has there been a major American architect who has professed and upheld these values. Advances in technology and mass media have given us more choices than we know what to do with. Architectural magazines publish anything noteworthy with little or no judgment as to its value as appropriate architecture. Architects, like the members of any other profession, follow the leaders as observed in print, and the public is pulled along behind.

So, how does one do right in a culture as diverse, as dynamic, and as fickle as ours? I believe the best architecture is site and people sensitive, often self-inspired, and the outgrowth of a long and committed effort. When land is considered merely a commodity, and buildings essentially place holders, the relationship between them approaches the inconsequential. If our goal is to live the richest, fullest lives possible, then architects should assume leadership and uphold our most meaningful values and aspirations.

There may be few compelling reasons other than aesthetics to visually blend buildings into the landscape, but there is every reason to love our land, respect it, and understand and nurture the human relationship to it. Architecture should not be mere surface manipulation, not the packaging of a box, but a synthesis and expression of humans' interaction with each other and the natural world.