

Lawrence Halprin's Sea Ranch Scores

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In 1963, Hawai'i-based real estate developer Oceanic Properties purchased the 5,000-acre Rancho del Mar or Ohlson sheep ranch, sited on the Northern California coast, and began planning a new second-home community under the guidance of Oceanic vice president Al Boeke, who had trained as an architect. To create a master plan for "The Sea Ranch," Boeke hired landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, who engaged an interdisciplinary team of advisors, including Berkeley-trained geographer Richard Reynolds, to study soil conditions, the velocity and direction of the winds, and uses of the site.¹ Halprin produced three guiding documents: a "Locational Score" for the site, an "Ecoscore" that mapped geological time and human impact on the site, and a conventional master plan.² A regionalist approach and cultural geographic principles informed Halprin's work for the Sea Ranch. The "Locational Score" and its companion "Ecoscore" define the Northern Californian coastal region—the interface where the ocean meets the mountains—and plan for its exploitation in ecological terms, a vision that appropriated Indigenous cultures and naturalized colonial settlement on the site.

In the Sea Ranch scores and plan, Halprin tested ideas on *place* as a generator of design that holistically integrated natural and built form, expressing both.³ The "Locational Score" takes the form of a hybrid perspective and plan view and uses symbols, color, and graphic devices to locate the major elements of the existing landscape: ten miles of Northern California coast south of Gualala; steep hillsides covered with coniferous forests on their inland faces; the Gualala River; wind-swept, grassy meadows; and cypress hedgerows that crossed the meadows (**fig. 1**). The proposed development is indicated with arrows pointing to significant

Lawrence Halprin's "Ecoscore" conceived of the Sea Ranch as a place where settlers could live like primitive people who inhabited a landscape without destroying it. This scenario creates a false equivalence between the people in the region and the Sea Ranchers, bestowing "innocence" on the settlers building their second homes and absolving them of complicity in settler colonial violence while arrogating native histories.

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elements, eyes for locations relating to views, and text directing the placement of houses: “keep houses back of trees,” “keep coast open,” cluster all houses on ocean terrace,” and “keep meadows open as commons.” The score proposed to preserve the unbuilt meadows and placed house sites near existing cypress hedgerows and in the forest with the intent of preserving the natural beauty of the site while “living lightly on the land” and creating an ecological village.⁴ The changes that settler habitation had made on the site (i.e., logging the forest to create meadows, planting cypress hedgerows to protect sheep herds, farm buildings, and the state highway) were incorporated into the “Locational Score” as if they were intrinsic features of the cultural landscape. Yet the Indigenous Pomo people and Russian, Spanish, Mexican, and American settlers had already altered the land in their successive habitation, extractive activities, and sustained colonization.⁵



Fig. 1. Lawrence Halprin & Associates, The Sea Ranch Locational Score. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Lawrence Halprin Collection.

Halprin expressed his concept of ecology based on “living lightly on the land,” which he attributed to the Indigenous Pomo people, in his “Ecoscore” for the site, which tracks natural and human forces on the site over time and on a geological scale (**fig. 2**). Halprin asserted that the logarithmic time scale that he represented on the “Ecoscore” demonstrated simultaneously the insignificance of human occupation of the land before 1962, when development began at the Sea Ranch, and the continuing potential of humans to control and create the landscape.⁶ He recognized that the land bore the impact of settler cultural practices (e.g., meadows, windrows, erosion), even as he naturalized these

effects within an organic form.⁷ Halprin saw the Sea Ranch as a place “where wild nature and human habitation could interact in the kind of intense symbiosis where ecology could allow people to become part of the ecosystem.”⁸ He derived concepts of ecology and ecosystems as represented in the “Ecoscore” from various sources; one central influence was geographer Carl Sauer’s theory of cultural landscape and geography, which Richard Reynolds introduced into Sea Ranch planning.⁹

Carl Sauer was the leading figure of the Berkeley School of Human Geography and an advocate for cultural landscape as the foundation of geography, in opposition to the then-dominant regionalist approach espoused by the Midwestern School and exemplified by Richard Hartshorn’s theories. Sauer saw regional geography as the comparative morphology of cultural landscapes, by which he meant the process of placing individual landscapes in relation to other landscapes.¹⁰ Sauer defined the cultural landscape as a combination of the natural and human-made elements that comprise a place, stating: “Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.”¹¹ According to Sauer, geography is concerned primarily with the human record on the landscape—the forms and works that humans have fashioned from the natural landscape. From nature, culture shapes a changing entity resulting in harmony between human habitation and the landscape into which it blends.¹² His theory of cultural landscape was grounded in examining and explaining what he assumed were deep, organic connections between premodern cultures and the land.¹³ Sauer took an anti-modern position that valorized rural and Indigenous people and their landscapes and conferred on geography a heroic role in documenting these places as a counter to homogenizing modernity.¹⁴ He equated Native and settler histories within the operation of “culture” that creates a place, thereby naturalizing colonial settlement together with Indigenous inhabitation. Preserving ways of life endangered by industrial modernity was one of geography’s central tasks, a salvage mission that contributed to the broader project of what Sauer called “culture history” that expressed the cultural landscape in terms of “humanity living in some sort of state of grace,” which meant living “ecologically in balance.”¹⁵ Halprin’s formulation of the Sea Ranch development as a place “where ecology could allow people to become part of the ecosystem” echoes Sauer’s primitivist, depoliticized valorization of Indigenous ways of inhabiting the land. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang characterize such an equivalence of Native and settler as “a set of evasions, or settler moves to innocence,”

that relieve the settler of guilt over the dislocation and disappearance of the Indigenous people who live on the land.¹⁶ In Sauer's and Halprin's conception of the Indigenous, the release of settler complicity remains abstract since natives belong to history and their effacement requires no adjustment of the settler present. As Dolores Hayden notes in her study of place, settler colonialism was the underlying assumption of cultural landscape studies in the United States, which analyzed rural, preindustrial landscapes and ecology but avoided issues of political contestation.¹⁷

The spiral form of the "Ecoscore" approximates Native epistemologies that Halprin referenced in *The RSVP Cycles*, his work on scores and the creative process.¹⁸ He likened scores to Indigenous attempts to control the future through symbolization, such as cave paintings that insured good hunting. In illustrating this principle, he used a Hopi petroglyph from San Cristobal that includes the spiral form replicated in the "Ecoscore."¹⁹ Elsewhere in *The RSVP Cycles*, he referenced spiral forms such as Navajo sandpaintings of "The Endless Snake," as exemplifying scores for "primitive rituals."²⁰ One of the bands in the spiral "Ecoscore" traces the presence of "aboriginal" people, including the Costanoan Tribe, the former name given to the Indigenous Ohlone people who lived in the area south of the Sea Ranch site.²¹ The "Ecoscore" contains no reference to the Kashaya Pomo people who lived on the Sea Ranch site before and after settlers colonized the land.

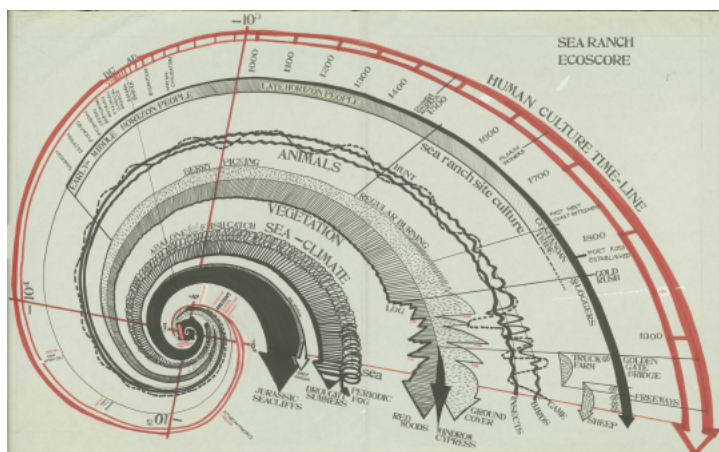


Fig. 2. Lawrence Halprin, The Sea Ranch Ecoscore. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Lawrence Halprin Collection (014).

In *The RSVP Cycles*, Halprin acknowledged that the Kashaya Pomo people remained in the region, living on their nearby Rancheria, and that they had had significant

influence on his concepts for the site.²² Adhering to Sauer's model, Halprin and his colleagues studied Kashaya Pomo culture and their roundhouses, valorizing them for what he called their "spiritual relationship to the land" and their cultural practices, particularly dances in which his wife Anna Halprin, who was non-native and a professional dancer, participated.²³ His team also investigated Native American tree-thinning and burning practices as a forestry system that could bring light and air into natural habitats, a technique that Reynolds had studied as a graduate student and that was used in the Sea Ranch's forested areas.²⁴ Despite his interactions with the Kashaya Pomo and his debt to their practices, Halprin referred to "wild nature" on the Sea Ranch site, thereby effacing the Indigenous techniques of managing and altering that landscape that informed his own plans for the land. Settler colonialism and the removal of the Kashaya Pomo to a Rancheria on marginal land eradicated precisely this way of life.²⁵

Halprin conceived of the Sea Ranch as a model for the Sierra-coastal region, "a prototype of how man could plan development *with* nature rather than ignore her!"²⁶ The gendered references to "man" and "nature" echo Sauer's theory of the region as the unity or harmony of human culture and nature and normalize the modernist epistemologies captured in the "Ecoscore."²⁷ Halprin portrayed the Sea Ranch as a site of unspoiled beauty preserved by master planning that was informed by thoughtful attention to the climate, geography, and vernacular architecture of the region. His "Ecoscore" conceived of the Sea Ranch as a place where settlers could live like primitive people who inhabited a landscape without destroying it.²⁸ This scenario creates a false equivalence between the Indigenous people who lived in the region and the Sea Ranchers, bestowing "innocence" on the settlers planning the development and building their second homes and absolving them of complicity in settler colonial violence.²⁹ Halprin's vision of the Sea Ranch region as a cultural landscape depends on the arrogation of native histories, giving settlers the illusion of "living lightly on the land" like the absent natives.³⁰

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- 1 "Ecological Architecture: Planning the Organic Environment," *Progressive Architecture* 47, no. 5 (May 1966): 120. [↑](#)
- 2 Kathleen John-Alder has written a detailed account of the "Ecoscore" and its roots in cultural geography, cybernetics, ecology, and other then-contemporary theories. See: Kathleen John-Alder, "Processing natural time: Lawrence Halprin and the Sea Ranch ecoscore," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 34, no. 1 (January 2014): 52–70. [↑](#)
- 3 Lawrence Halprin, *The Sea Ranch—Diary of an Idea* (Berkeley, CA: Spacemaker Press, 2002), 11–12. [↑](#)
- 4 The southern half of the site was developed under these principles, but the northern half was platted with conventional, suburban lots. Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 56–57. [↑](#)
- 5 Kent G. Lightfoot and Sara L. Gonzales, *Metini Village: An Archaeological study of sustained colonialism in Northern California* (Berkeley, CA: eScholarship, 2018). [↑](#)
- 6 Lawrence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (New York: Braziller, 1970), 123. [↑](#)
- 7 Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 124. [↑](#)
- 8 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 17. [↑](#)
- 9 John-Alder, "Processing natural time." [↑](#)
- 10 Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape" (1925) in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 344. [↑](#)
- 11 Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," 343. [↑](#)
- 12 Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," 343. [↑](#)
- 13 Nicolas Howe, "Landscape versus Region, Part I," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Human Geography*, eds. John A. Agnew and James S. Duncan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 117. [↑](#)
- 14 Howe, "Landscape versus Region, Part I," 120, 124. [↑](#)
- 15 Carl Sauer, "Letter to Landscape [on Past and Present American Culture]" (1960) quoted in Howe, 116. [↑](#)
- 16 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (January 2012): 3. [↑](#)
- 17 Dolores Hayden, "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, eds. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 113. [↑](#)
- 18 RSVP stands for Resources, Scores, Valuation, Performance. Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 2. [↑](#)
- 19 Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 5. [↑](#)
- 20 Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 29. [↑](#)
- 21 "On the Terms Costanoan, Ohlone, Ramaytush, and Yelamu," *Association of Ramaytush Ohlone*, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.ramaytush.org/terminology.html>. [↑](#)
- 22 "Pomo Indians still lived in the hills, continuing their tribal customs, weaving their magnificent baskets, and focusing their spiritual and community life in their roundhouses." Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 123. See also: Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). [↑](#)
- 23 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 20. In a 1983 interview, Halprin described how he and Anna Halprin often went to Kashaya where Anna became an honorary dancer. See: "The Sea

Ranch as an Intentional Community: An Interview with Lawrence Halprin by Bill Platt," *Ridge Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1983). [↑](#)

24 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 23; John-Alder, "Processing natural time," 57; Richard Dwan Reynolds, *Effect of Natural Fires and Aboriginal Burning Upon the Forests of the Central Sierra Nevada* (master's thesis, The University of California, Berkeley, 1959). [↑](#)

25 Otis Parrish, "The First People," *Fort Ross Conservancy*, 1998, accessed 30 July 2021, <https://www.fortross.org/history/kashaya>. [↑](#)

26 Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles*, 117. [↑](#)

27 See: Anna Godlewska and Neil Smith, eds., *Geography and Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994). [↑](#)

28 "The Sea Ranch as an Intentional Community." Halprin referred to Sea Ranch residents as "settlers." See: Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 55. [↑](#)

29 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," 3. [↑](#)

30 Halprin, *The Sea Ranch*, 56–57. [↑](#)