

In a Californian Way : This is not a house

First Day

First impressions are sustaining, especially when they are received without any objective filtering. Finding the site was an adventure: no signage, not sure it was the correct location, unsure if I was trespassing, and entranced by the beauty and serenity of the place. Farm lands all around; ascending terrain and a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean.



The elements of the landscape were simple: Crop fields, dirt roads, ponds, boundary trees, and the ocean. The shoreline was not visible, only the endless body of the Pacific. The layering of these elements created a depth and rhythm to the property: field to pond, pond to field, then field to ocean. This layering, coupled with the mass of the water - produced a visual gravity on the site, which all impressions were referenced from.



The stillness of the lands settled in. Not a sound, just the ocean. A hawk was circling around, unaffected by my presence - hunting its territory. A great blue Heron scavenged for food at the edge of the large pond. The croaks of the frogs, randomly filled between the pulse of the ocean. This place was alive!



In our initial meeting, Rick and Mary's ambitions for the property were conveyed in an unusual mix of, extraordinary size and environmental sensitivity. The complications of the public approval process for construction on the Californian Coast are lengthy and full of public opinion. In essence, whatever is built must not interfere with the scenic beauty of the coastline. Invisibility - or not at all! Time was short, so we agreed to meet the next day at the site.

When Rick arrived, I was prepared to listen again to their ambitions. He greeted me with, "Simply stunning isn't it." Obviously, he had spent many hours on the site, as he articulately described where the buildings should be built. It was still hard to comprehend the magnitude of the construction on the land. The fundamental planning criteria, and program for the development was still a string of words. All that was for-sure was... it would be large and it must not be seen.

Images from the First Day

What is this project? The complex was not to be a house, or a hotel, but rather a retreat. It was truly a philanthropic family endeavor. It is to serve the family in the greatest definition of the word, the generation tree. It needed to care for the continuous family cycle: from the infant to teenager, to adulthood, to family again, and to the elderly. Provisions for guests were also required with accommodations as provided to any family member. To serve this diversity, and fluctuating quantity of family and visitors, the private quarters would be similar to a hotel: one and two bedroom suites with a sitting area, bathing, and no kitchens.

The private quarters were to be prudently small in order to encourage social interaction and outdoor recreation. After all, if one was there, it was for a retreat!

The social portions of the complex were to revolve around the kitchen, dining and hall. The dining space needed to be comfortable for 6 and 40. Similar to a hotel, the hall was to be provided in lieu of a living room. The hall would provide seating for up to 40 persons broken down into areas of 6 to 8 persons, comfortable for conversations. Filling this hall was to be the hearth, and its fire.

For entertainment (other than the coast of California): a theater seating 20, tennis court, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, table tennis, exercise room and a video parlor, were to be provided.

As Rick would be in California approximately one week in every month on business, the complex needed to provide for his lodging; which did not necessarily have to be in the main building. While he was there, office space would be necessary, along with conferencing facilities for up to 20 persons. The purpose of these accommodations was to service corporate retreat functions of the various corporate boards he served on.

I can remember being overwhelmed by the explanation of the project, even though it was actually the second time I heard it. The description kept coming.

And another thing exclaimed Rick! “We expect to have some visitor who will be traveling the coast; they will be pulling their travel trailers. We should provide three camping spaces, which need to accommodate RVs or trailers with lengths up to 30 feet. Also, we are horse people and would like a barn, and covered arena for about 6 horses.”

So in addition to everything else, was the request for campgrounds and equestrian facilities. Remember, none of this was allowed to be seen!

“Now when I am not here, some one needs to take care of the property and farm the lands, so a Caretakers Residence needs to be provided. It needs to be large enough for a family of four, otherwise we will have trouble keeping good-help.”

Rick is a very passionate person and all of this information was delivered with great clarity and vigor. Afterwards he asks, “So, what do you think?” I was speechless and thankful that I spent an hour on the site alone. The time allowed me created a reservoir of impressions to which these details of the project could be associated with. It was all so grand!, smart... and simple.

I didn't bother to bring it up, but I did have a favorite part of the site. It was the walk along the top of the large pond. With your back to this restrained body of water, the slope of the dam dropped suddenly, and the vista opened to the end-

less Pacific. It was impossible not to experience the energy of the pond and the infinity of the ocean. I felt as if I could float from my feet; suspended between the gravitational pull of the two bodies of water.



On the Edge of the Pond

It was even more wonderful to consider, that this tremendous energy, came from the both nature and a man-made object. The large pond did not exist 25 years

ago. It was built by the farmers as a retention pond to feed the croplands in the time of heavy drought. Now it is the source of life to the animals on the site. It had tremendous gravity! I thought..."How the Pond influenced the character site, is exactly what the buildings needed to do!"

The path along the top of the dam was - an edge. Like the ragged shoreline is an edge to the Pacific; the walk along the top of the dam, is an edge to the infinite vistas of it. These edges, which occurred elsewhere, were fundamental to the experience of the property. "Edges", describe this place.

This was an exceptional client, with a profound vision! As we departed the site he said to me, "I want this project to be the greatest accomplishment of my life!"

This was the first day!

Still listening

Over the next few days, our conversations continued via email. Their requests for a compound - which is not a house, and fits into the Californian landscape - was the subject matter. So we discussed: energy and water conservation, photovoltaic technology, solar orientation, storm protection, recycled and natural materials, and digging the structures into the earth (to take advantage of its thermal lag with the seasons of the year). All of this seemed to fit with their naturalist expectations of the project.



Large Pond to Pacific Ocean

The deeper we dug in, the more unique the requests became.! Mary begins, "Oh, the gardens - we would like the garden area to be terraced and beautifully landscaped; plan for some type of water features, naturalist if possible, and adequate habitat - for the lizard."

This one definitely caught me off guard. "Lizards? Is there something else I'm not aware of?" She continues, "There is a particular type of lizard that lives in the area; It eats ticks. We want to make sure that it finds a home here. This will keep Lyme disease in-check. In the Midwest there is no such lizard and Lyme disease is a problem."

"Have we mentioned the California Room?", adds Mary.

Now I 'm a native Californian (born and raised in the Bay Area) and have never heard this term. With fear and trepidation, I convey my background and politely ask for a definition. "You know! An outdoor room with screens where you do most your living during the summer." They were speaking of the Californian influence of outdoor living as professed by Sunset Magazine and the residential architecture of William Wurster in the mid 1940's.

This was the turning point for me! I had found a soul mate in a client. For years, no ten years - actually for my entire professional career - I have been reminding my clients that California is one of the most benign climates in the country, and outdoor living is good for you. When this is mentioned, some of them actually realize that they have forgotten... it is an option! This tremendous cultural loss is a subject unto its self. Yet, as witnessed by these Midwesterners request to be Californian, it is apparent that outdoor living remains an iconic impression of our western lifestyle. I really paused after this one. Never was I so aware of my pride in being a Californian.

It was absolutely delightful to listen to Rick and Mary paint a picture of this place to be. Their vision had developed over a long period of time, and I was just catching up. Their words were clear, and painted in a distinct pallet and tonality. One more quire was needed; had they ever been to a place like this?



Taliesin West

So the question was asked. "Not really, however we keep thinking of two particular places that are somewhat similar: The Ahwahnee Lodge in the Yosemite, and Frank Lloyd Wright's summer retreat in Arizona - Taliesin West." Now, both of these places are located within exceptionally beautiful natural environments, which was the similarity to this project.

Understanding the horizontal nature of their site, the Ahwahnee Lodge would not be an appropriate reference as it, and its natural environment, is vertically dominated. The horizontal condition of the desert and Taliesin West was most similar to their property on the Californian Coast.

" And we like Japanese!", added Mary.

"O.K ... O.K., good."

Within a few days, they had communicated their values through their descriptions of retreat: recreation, family and environmental aesthetic. All of which unveiled a particular tao; a new manifestation and meaning of estate - the 22 Century Californian Villa.



Ahwahnee Lodge

When You Look...

The development of an architectural concept takes time, and must be malleable, otherwise it will not survive the volatile design process. They can take weeks or months to develop. As for this environmental villa, it was hard to say. In order to allow the concept gestation period, to take place, we set out to see what we could see. From the macro to the micro; we studied the site and surroundings. The concept began to take shape.



From a macro standpoint, the most critical planning issue to evaluate was the potential visibility of the built structure from public roads and lands. We needed to understand how to make the project invisible. This took a few weeks. In the end we found only one location where the buildings could be seen; through a small void in the tree line along Highway One. This gap equated to a 2 to 3 second condition of visibility at a speed of sixty miles an hour. This was so. only for semi trucks, which sit much higher off the ground than cars do. Never-the-less, this potential viewing needed to be blocked.



In detail, the natural conditions were studied: from wild life, plant life to geology. We wanted to assimilate the environment; not really knowing what we were looking for, just looking!

These days on the site were warmed by sun of early fall. The sunsets were stunning, and the reflections of the red sky from the large pond doubled the phenomenon. Rick had mentioned this condition and made it clear that he wanted to situate the buildings to capture this unique effect.



After sunset the numbing veil of darkness over came me. Black - not a spec of light. An absolutely uncomfortable feeling; as powerful as the light-of-day.

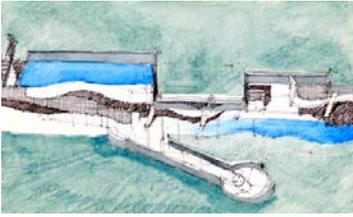
What would it be like to live here every day? Over the next few months this question was answered.

Catching Up

Being a Californian, one typically has a developed relationship with the Sierra Nevada's, Yosemite, the Pacific Coast and other notable State and Regional Parks. This makes a Californian - mature. The common chaparral environment described by the rolling grass hills, found in the coastal and inland ranges rarely makes the list of Naturalist's destinations. As Californians, we take them for granted. When was the last time you took notice, after all these green and golden brown hills gave birth the term, "The Golden State". Still to this day, I find them irresistible, especially in the winter. Not because they are green, but for the long winter shadows which accentuate their graceful shapes. One could rest your head on the comfort of these pillowed hills.



Californian Hills



Welschmeyer, House and Hill #1



Richard Diebenkorn



Welschmeyer, Series One

Years ago, the beauty of these hills reached out and touched me in an architectural way. The question of composition, and the chaparral environment occupied my thoughts. These hills provide a wealth of sculptural information found in: line, shape, depth and rhythm. Is it possible - to integrate architectonic shapes within this natural environment? Rick and Mary's project brought back these thoughts, as fresh as when they first appeared.

Not many things make my eyes tear; the list is short. When I first walk into a baseball stadium, when there is only half of my mexican lunch left, and when Richard Diebenkorn passed away. One day I happened upon the Berkeley Art Museum and tucked in the small niche of the rotating gallery where these three paintings. I gasped! - and watched them; one at a time, two at a time and all at once.

Who was this great communicator? I had to know. "He had already traveled my road of curiosity. He has seen the compositional wealth and is using it!" Immersed in Diebenkorn's work, I began to consider these compositional thoughts myself through painting. My first work was called Series One. These studies included experiments in: line, form, field, shape, texture, rhythm and color; all influenced by each other. Improvisation!

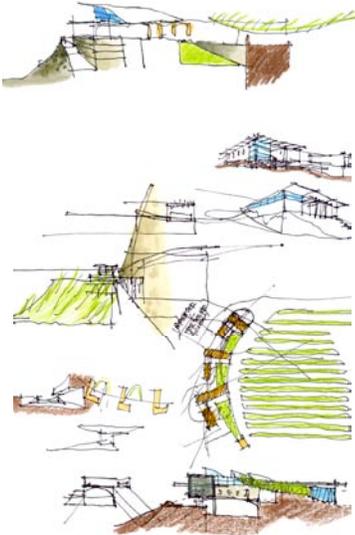
One influences the other; line to form, color to shape, repetition produces line, texture has a color, field contains shape, line bounds the field, texture is a line, fields define the line, shape becomes rhythm...

The only condition that stops this weaving consort, is time. But the duration of time is not a constant. Time is - as influenced by the elements - as the elements are influenced by each other. My interests were to experience time in an environmental sense and render images - of a natural occurrence. A valuable lesson learned.

As Rick and Mary had long been considering this dream of theirs, I was able to catch up with them by reviewing these studies from the past. There was common ground! The environmental expectations of this project demanded a similar improvisational approach to the beauty of this place.

A Natural Occurrence

The experiences of the site were to be preserved for everyone who visits this retreat villa. The buildings must subordinate to this need. They must affect the site in the same manner as the large pond - as if they were always there. With these convictions, the task of envisioning began; the concept took shape. Many sketches were initiated recalling these experiences, and all alluded to architectural form. With a subjective mind, the images were allowed to appear - unrestrained by objectivity. The building concepts took shape within the elements of

*Concept Sketches**Clay Model Studies*

the landscape experience: edges, vistas, water, crop fields, dirt roads, ponds, boundary trees, and the ocean. As a group, these sketches remained visual notes, which guided the rest of the design process.

If the experiences of this landscape were preserved, the buildings would simply not exist. If the buildings improvised with the landscape as the painting experiments in Series One, the buildings would not exist. To accomplish this fusion of the man-made and natural ... “Neither dominates; as if they did not exist, just the experience.”

With these visual and written records, the concept took shape. It was malleable and capable of surviving the design process.

First Cut

The general arrangement of the buildings would rim the bank above the large pond in a series of terraced building groups. The building shapes would be in an “L” configuration providing windbreaks to the garden spaces, formed between them. The long leg of the “L” shape would face (in a southerly direction) capturing the warmth of the sun. The spaces between the buildings would also incorporate the recreational functions of this retreat villa, including the tennis court.

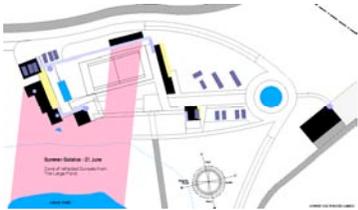
The interrelationship between, the-land-and-the-building was first tested in sculptural form. It was important to see if the reshaping of the land for the buildings - could preserve the edge of the bank. The grading of the site required the formation of the new entry (south of the buildings) and must be accomplished with the soil removed for the foundations. These studies were done in clay model form, and confirmed the approach of building-to-landscape.

Mapping

Rick and Mary's method of reviewing the progress of the work was a little unorthodox. Even though we had established an email communications link for text and drawings; without notice they would be standing in the doorway of the office. Always pleased to see them, we would scramble to collect the work. On this very important meeting, I distinctly remember Rick's, under the breath, comment when he first saw the clay model, “The gestalt is good!”

In that meeting, the mappings of the site were presented, which illustrated the general configuration of the entire development: from land management issues to building locations, to view, and solar orientations. The mappings were necessary to provide a sense of order to the site; and Rick was right, it was the gestalt or Tao that was crucial. Everything they had asked for had a place - and a pur-

pose for being where it was. The interrelationships were strong and the work began to take on a-life-of-its-own.



Schematic Design Plans and Maps

This presentation prompted discussion again of their program, which was always in the state of flux. Energetically, they discovered where all the components and rooms of the Retreat where, either by finding them, or asking where they would occur. It was a moment of discovery. Once it was clear, many preferences for rearrangements arose, but by the end of the day, the concept had been communicated and remained malleable to the change.

The mappings also laid out the experiential code of the project:

1. The entry road would remain minimally marked from the highway with no apparent improvements other than an agricultural gate. The gravel paving would remain. Perhaps the entry sequence would be enhanced by the plantings of a willow grove on both sides of the drive.
2. As one ascends the site, only the barn / arena will be seen, and only the upper portions of it. The large pond is not visible until one reaches the top of the new drive at the roundabout.
3. At the roundabout, the complex of building unfolds. The backside of the arena is open to view, and if any one is riding, they will be seen. The campgrounds are to the east and parking is on the west. This is where all visitors arrive. Once out of the car, the rest is a walk. Purposefully, the main residence is in plain sight, however the method of getting there is not clear. Visitors are on their own adventure. Two options around the caretakers residence: one onto the path edge of the upper bank, or straight up negotiating the rocked landscape that obscures the other trail. In both cases the final destination is obvious but, has none of the familiar markings of a house. After all this is a retreat. Very much like arriving in Yosemite, when Half Dome is in view you know you are there.

Reconciliation

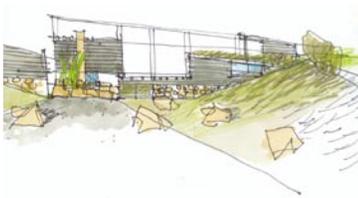
The most arduous task was about to occur, reconciling Rick and Mary's room count and program needs within the square footage that they expected. Now, they had completed their studies on this subject, and expected the project to be about 10,000 s.f. This is always one of the most difficult explanations that an architect has to make. Projects are always much bigger than a client estimates, because inevitably: mechanical, electrical, circulation, and other sundry spaces are never considered.

For many months the plans for the project developed; with a constant shift in room adjacencies. Plans represent the finite accounting of any building, and are

always labored over! Throughout all this change, the concept guided these analytical decisions. At one point the concept had a major influence over the analytical plan. Like the shape of the trees in the area influenced by the constant force of a wind, the plan of the main building was bent at its weak-spot, in the direction of the offshore breeze. This had a profound impact on the sculpture of the building and provided the visual evidence of wind's force on the structure. This sculptural revision to the main building also satisfied the proper sequence of space between the hall and the kitchen / dining area.

In the end, a visual record of the planning process existed. The buildings remained as planned, however the organization of rooms within them and the actual size of the project changed tremendously.

This is not a house



At the onset of the project we were all thinking of the Ahawahnee Lodge in Yosemite. From an architectonic standpoint, this beautiful structure, did not support our endeavors. However, the experience of Yosemite was very similar to the improvisational experiences we were mapping during this site planning process.



Half Dome

As Californians, we are all familiar with iconic view into the Yosemite Valley. This vista point is breathtaking! It reveals the Valley and the compositional presence of Half Dome. Once you leave this point on the trail, this view, is not witnessed again. Many experiences are contained in the decent, and when the arrival is made, one's perspective again is entirely changed. The Valley floor is much different than this iconic view had presented. Every nuance of ones changing location in the Valley reveals another astonishing creation of nature. Half Dome never looks the same, but it is recognized.



View to Yosemite Valley

This sequence of discovery is experienced in many different ways. It is a sculptural experience which has no single point of reference. It has no front door.

This was also our planning intent and is how we expected this californian villa to be experienced.

This is not a house, it has no front door.

Space and Tactility

The approach to the buildings, as environmental sculpture, presented images foreign to a house but similar to nature. The images were unexpected, but exactly what Rick and Mary anticipated. They wanted to know more. "What is the Interior like, any idea of materials, have we captured the views we were expecting," asked Rick.

*Interior Sketch in the Atrium**Model**Aerial*

So we began to study and design the interior spaces. The material choices became apparent and the project was on to another level of definition. I do remember, on that first day at the site with Rick, he said “Every detail should be considered including: a name, monogram, place settings, towels and furnishings.”

We were getting closer.

Qualitative Impression

As a piece of environmental sculpture, it was more appropriate to continue the design process by physically modeling it. The detailed development of the plans implied great opportunities, in architectural form, which could be enhanced and articulated. It was important not to over emphasize any particular elevation, as the complex of building was permeable from all directions. This combination of sketch, model and photo gave us the best impression of the qualitative aspects of the project concepts and implemented design strategies. The sense-of-place was becoming very clear. We were all astonished.

Regardless

It was April, 2001. As part of the times, this project became a victim of the .com-bust. There was no shielding it from the falling economy. After some considerations of reducing the scope of construction, the project was shelved. Eliminating anything from it, was not an option to Rick and Mary. We had created the place they were expecting. In the end, this special place - regardless of it's fate - was accomplished in a californian way.

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2003 - 2005