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The Choreography of Place and Time

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One notion I have found helpful in understanding dwelling and outgoing is the choreography of place, or the exploration of the connections between the body and physical place, as experienced in time.

The Place of Houses speaks of the need to “center” oneself in order to successfully connect outward to one’s community. This parallels a concept common to many dance traditions: the dancer must learn to experience a physical, gravitational and emotional center in order to confidently project physical and psychic expression.

When we designed a house for ourselves at Sea Ranch, studying the choreography of place, particularly patterns of movement and centering, helped us understand the multiplicity of interactions latent among the site, building and inhabitants.

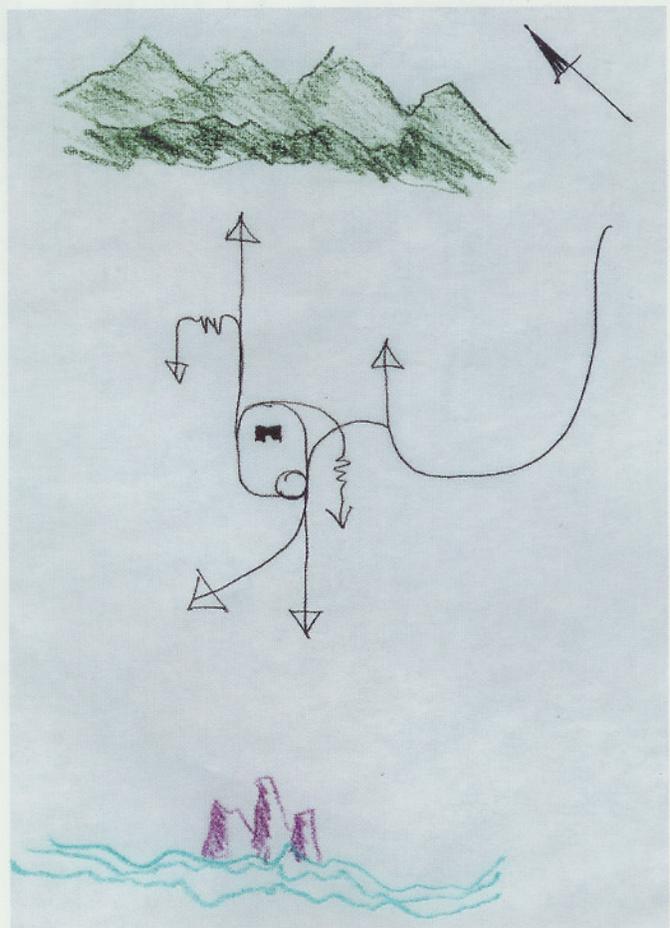
Sea Ranch was laid out with the principle that houses would be pushed up against hedgerows. We chose a meadow site with a borrowed view (over a neighbor’s setback) of the ocean and an irresistible view of some extraordinary rocks—but without a hedgerow. What became important was a pattern of relationships: how the series of lots and houses forms a sequence that relates to the hedgerows on the opposite side of the meadow; to the general topography of cliff, flatland and mountain; to the water, sun and wind.

We organized the house to connect to the mountains to the north and the ocean to the south; we composed the east and west elevations to frame views and light while screening neighbors. All of the rooms revolve around the center of the hearth, while habitable bays, experienced as intimate retreats in contrast to the larger scales of place and movement, heighten the awareness of the edge between house and landscape.

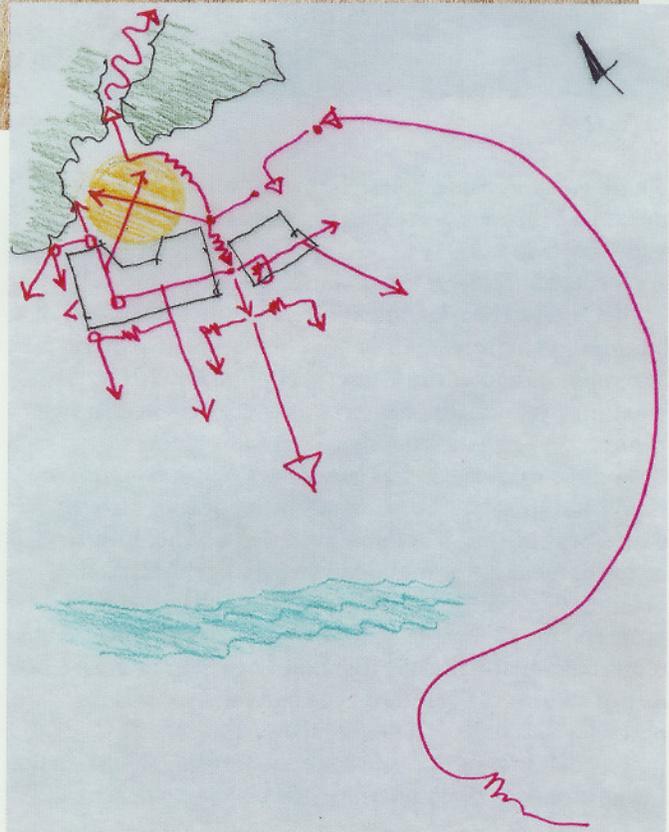
One means of discovering and rediscovering places is spending time in them, experiencing them with your body and sketching them. Even though the house is finished, I still make drawings to record ideas about the choreography of the place—mapping the sequence of arriving, parking, turning, coming down the boardwalk, discovering ocean views. One diagram suggests sequencing the arrival with pirouettes because you’re always moving in one direction, then turning around to face another view. Every time you enter a room you make a reverse turn, and you enter a bay that occupies a diagonal view.

The experience of land and building is enhanced by an awareness of our movement through and occupation of space and time. Our dialogue with place begins with a sense of center and extends to the dynamic engagements of the land and the elements. As the house evolves, a complex dance is established between the landscape, what we

build, and all of the inhabitants. It’s a dynamic dance, about change and movement, discovering and rediscovering.



Yudell-Beebe House, Sea Ranch. Choreography diagram.
Graphic by Buzz Yudell.



The Baas-Walrod House, at the Sea Ranch, is sited transverse to a downslope that connects a wooded rise with the distant ocean. Arriving at the house, one's movement spirals from the entry drive through a thick "servant" wall and then to a portal between house and studio. The portal intersects the east-west axis of the house, which is composed as an enfilade of spaces—on the south side, a porch enfronts the ocean, and on the north side, large bays complete an implied apsidal space shaped by the nearby redwoods. Thus the house draws the visitor in, creating a sense of center, and extends one's movement outwards again in a dynamic engagement of the land and the elements.

Baas-Walrod House, Sea Ranch. Photograph by Kim Zwarts.

Baas-Walrod House, choreography diagram. Graphic by Buzz Yudell.