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## Document (1)

1. [A Tale of Two Cities: Lessons from Two Coasts](#)

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## *A Tale of Two Cities: Lessons from Two Coasts*

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**Section:** OBSERVATIONS; Vol. 184, No. 3; Pg. 23

**Length:** 628 words

**Byline:** Reviewed by Peter Katz; Peter Katz is the author of *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*.

### **Body**

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Parallel Utopias: The Quest for Community, The Sea Ranch, California; Seaside, Florida, by Richard Sexton. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1995, 168 pages, \$ 50.

At first glance, *Parallel Utopias* looks as if it might be yet another style book, like the many glossy volumes that try to encapsulate the look of places from Ireland to India. But after reading it, one realizes this book is a much more ambitious effort. It compares *two* communities -- Sea Ranch, California, and Seaside, Florida -- that have become touchstones for new-town planning in *two* different eras. In so doing, author and photographer Richard Sexton wants us to understand each place as more than just a collection of houses.

The lavish photographs make a compelling visual argument for both places as ideal communities. But after reading Sexton's three essays and those of sociologist Ray Oldenburg and architect William Turnbull, I'm left wondering whether both, or just one of the places in *Parallel Utopias* has succeeded in its "quest for community," the challenge grandly posed in the book's subtitle.

As a resident of San Francisco, I've grown accustomed to hearing criticism that Sea Ranch "isn't what it used to be." Invariably the gripe is about overbuilding. During a recent visit, I was relieved to see that Sea Ranch, which was masterplanned by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin in the 1960s, looked better than these comments would have suggested. But I was struck by a criticism noted in *Parallel Utopias* -- that Sea Ranch is dependent on the automobile. Says Sexton of Sea Ranch, "distances are great and all practical errands require a car." As a result, the development did not convey much of an outward sense of community.

Another problem with Sea Ranch relates to the expectations of those who have purchased homes in the development. Sea Ranch was marketed as a place where one can live surrounded by nature. Yet with the passage of time, residents are increasingly surrounded by other nearby homes. The sense of privacy that was promised to the first buyers is diminished with each new home that is built. This seems an inevitable consequence of a design ideology that can only work at unit densities far lower than those of Sea Ranch.

Seaside, started some 20 years later, follows a different design ethos. Patterned after traditional small towns, Seaside's buildings assert themselves by shaping the public space of the streets and squares they face. Seaside is a place that seems to improve as it reaches full build-out. The few unbuilt lots that remain between homes read like missing teeth -- gaps in the urban fabric. That is one reason why the town requires construction of a home to start

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within **two** years of the sale of a lot. Beyond its "look," Seaside seems to function like a real small town (albeit an upscale one), with everything reachable on foot.

Much has been written over the years about both Sea Ranch and Seaside: the philosophies that shaped them, the affluence of their residents, and the difficulty of applying the **lessons** of such second-home communities to year-round ones. Parallel Utopias captures much of that discussion. As such, the book is a welcome addition to the larger debate about community design now taking place.

But it's hard to reach a conclusion regarding the value of these projects as models for emulation based solely on what Sexton provides us. The Sea Ranch, for all of its beauty, fails in my estimation as a true community because of the ideas about planning and architecture that prevailed when it was started. Seaside, on the other hand, is the product of an era that is just now coming to appreciate the connection between physical design and the making of true community.

URL: <http://www.archrecord.com>

## Graphic

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Table, Photograph: **Two** Photographs: Like most houses at Sea Ranch, the Teel House (below), designed by Jeffrey Teel, tries to nestle into the landscape, while Little Sand Pine Lodge in Seaside (bottom), by Richard Gibbs and Randy Harelson, addresses the public realm of the street.

## Classification

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